

penumbra

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Chillers & Thrillers

Interview with
Laurel Hightower

Plus work by

SJ Townend • Jordan Hirsch •
Addison Smith • Gerri Leen •
Shikhar Dixit • Sydnie
Beaupré • Eva Papasoulioti •
Tim Hildebrandt • AD Ross •
Irina (Tall) Novikova • Deborah
L. Davitt • Ashley Abigail
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Stevens • Goran Lowie • R.
Mac Jones • Olivia Payne •
Michelle Muenzler • Kristin
Cragg • Elizabeth Broadbent •
Chinedu Gospel • E.E. King

Green World Reflection by Carl Scharwath

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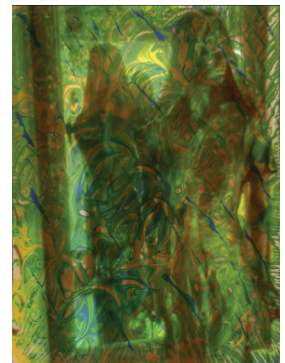
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cover: Green World Reflection
by Carl Scharwath

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Ah yes, an editorial where I play a game of imagination, find it has been coopted for evil, and basically don't talk about what's in the magazine at all. Or maybe I do? In a broad, philosophical way?

* * *

Game shows. So, so many game shows, and I've been watching them for, well, reasons. It sometimes seems, along with so-called "reality" television, that all we do is watch other people play often quite contrived games—not sports, but variations on quizzes mixed with some kind of "other" device, such as trying to get across a bridge by lighting the correct boxes (*The Bridge*, in the UK) or trying to amass the most territory by beating others in rapid-fire identification of images (*The Floor*, in the US), or even mixing the backstabbing (or what some might try to prettify as "strategizing") of reality shows with quizzing (hearken back to *The Weakest Link*, although shows like *The Traitors* and *The Apprentice* are similar). And most of these seem like they're teaching us one thing, underneath it all: competition is king. And there can be only one winner.

What I fear is that they merely reinforce/help create the divisive world in which we currently reside. They're fun, you do learn things, but the selling point is too often the beating of others, the winning of the game by destroying your opponents, becoming the only winner. This is especially reflected in American society, where it seems nearly everything is based on being Number One—even academics, where we are ranked according to grades and sorted into valedictorian and the rest.

However, there are in fact game shows that encourage (gasp) cooperation, and I don't mean "we're cooperating to build a prize pot after

which we will viciously attack one another until only one of us remains" kinds of "cooperation." For instance, the British show *The Crystal Maze* was built on teams of players cooperating to solve puzzles and other mysteries in order to "win." *The Bridge*, mentioned above, features teams of players working as a team to find enough correct answers to work their way across the game floor and reach the other side (although they each cross the bridge on their own, they do not work against one another). In these shows, it's you against the game itself—not you against everyone else in the room. It's you (p), not you (s).

How refreshing it would be (to me, anyway) if there were more shows that developed such teamwork and also didn't set up the "us vs them" dynamic that is so prevalent in our world, especially in the West. But here's where such hope-filled dreams run up against certain realities. I mean, I know that people in the real world do work together in teams, although it is often in a corporate environment, where the corporation is "us" and everyone outside is "them," leading to wonderful developments that are simultaneously unavailable to outsiders or ridiculously expensive; or in sports, where again there's a team, yes, but it's a sort of collective individual that works against others, and ultimately there is only one winner. And I'm aware that at times entire countries pull together and work as one for sometimes valiant, sometimes questionable goals, although there is nearly always coercion and propaganda that goes into such collective action, and there is still always that "other" out there to work against. And I do realize that it may be impossible to set up a dynamic where there is only some kind of fairy-tale teamwork without something to work against (even in the game shows I enjoy, it could be said the teams work against the show itself), humans being who they are. And, finally, where it begins to really fall

apart, I do know that for a team to work together, someone has to decide what that direction is, and sometimes that choice is made in horrible and dehumanizing ways—we do not all believe in the same ideals, the same ultimate goals, and often these are indeed antithetical and antihuman and require a fight. If an again-President Turnip tells us all to work together to build an electrified wall around America, to destroy abortion clinics, and to build him a palace made of gold toilets, I will not be a good little worker ant.

But if we worked toward working together in some way, rather than trying to best one another in constant battle, literally or figuratively ... would not at least tempering some of the divisiveness help?

Truthfully, I do not know. As with so many other ideas, “tempering divisiveness” has been used by the Far Right to mean “make everyone do what we want them to do, and make them stop fighting for Black

Lives and others, make them stop fighting against fossil fuels, make them bow down to us.” In the UK, some politicians have used such ideas to bring in rules against protest, calling protesters any number of vile names in order to get the police to forcefully put a stop to any of what they see as defiance. And this kind of thing is not what I mean at all by learning teamwork or working together. So it is possible that what I am trying to say will remain in my imagination, locked away by the difficulty of finding words that cannot be coopted or misunderstood. But I will keep trying.

And trying is sometimes all we can do.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric

Chillers and Thrillers

But don't leave out the romance

an interview with Laurel Hightower

by Jeff Georgeson

LAUREL HIGHTOWER HAS BEEN A FAN OF HORROR since she was a child—since kindergarten, or thereabouts—but by middle school had decided that writing wasn't for her, being a “really insecure source of income.” The lure of it, however, has obviously won her back to the dark side: She's the author of two novels, several novellas, and many short stories. Her latest novel, *Silent Key*, combines horror and detective fiction into an amazing story and world, and we spoke about it at length for this issue's interview, along with how she eventually became a published writer, working and writing and raising a son, and even romance.

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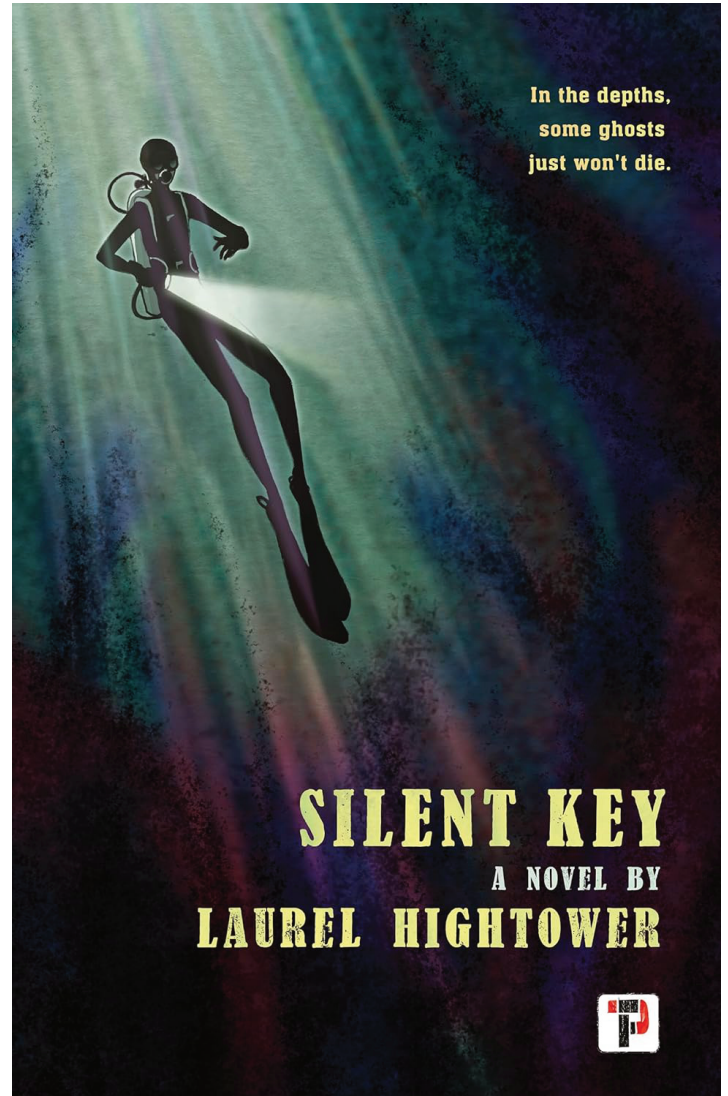
I really liked Silent Key.

Thank you.

That was the first novel of yours that I've read. I've read some of your short stories, and I enjoyed those as well. But Silent Key just ... looked really interesting. And it was.

I'm really glad to hear that.

So I think you said somewhere that it was different than some of the other novels you've written, or maybe different from your short stories





PICTURED: Laurel Hightower

as well. In what way?

Well, so it's very different from probably what I'm best known for, if I'm known at all, is my novellas *Crossroads* and *Below*, and some of my short stories, you know, depending on how people prefer to access their fiction. But the novellas and the short stories tend to be kind of thematic, not always intentionally. It's not like "I shall write about this theme today." It's more kind of this, you know, one road, one path, like, OK, this is what I wanna express. It's not going to be completely to the point. It's gonna be telling a story, but there's gonna be this sort of side expression of something here. *Crossroads*, it was a lot about maternal sacrifice and what you'll do for your kids and parental cycles

of how you interact with your own parents and those sorts of things, and it was pretty "here to there." And *Below* was kind of the same way as far as we're dealing with some elements of how you lose yourself in marriage and how you regain, you know, and some feminist aspects of things and how danger occurs for women in circumstances that it doesn't for men, but then also how we're treated a certain way over it, and about sort of trusting your internal voices. And then my short stories do tend to, I mean, they're certainly not all deeply thought out. Sometimes they're just like, yeah, I want to write about something creepy or gross or whatever. But a lot of them have that sort of inadvertent and sometimes totally intentional feminist undertone to them, feminine and feminist.

I was actually thinking I'd noticed there's sort of, not really a theme of justice, exactly. But there's some of that kind of thing. Like in your short story "Every Woman Knows This." And I guess also in "Though Your Heart Is Breaking."

Yeah, there's pain. I don't always have the same type of ending with the things that I write, but yeah, with those two in particular, it is a sense of justice after having experienced something. You can't make it completely right, and a lot of times you can't find justice in the avenues which in a more organized society you'd be able to. And so a lot of that is about finding that strength or finding that justice either within yourself or, more often, by accessing the people that are around you, the people that you share experiences with or pain or even just empathy. I find it hard, and I wrote one and submitted it recently that I had ended it one way and I was like, that is just so bleak I can't even deal with it. I've gotta add just a little bit of a punch there at the end. I can't leave it quite like that, even if that's sometimes how life turns out.

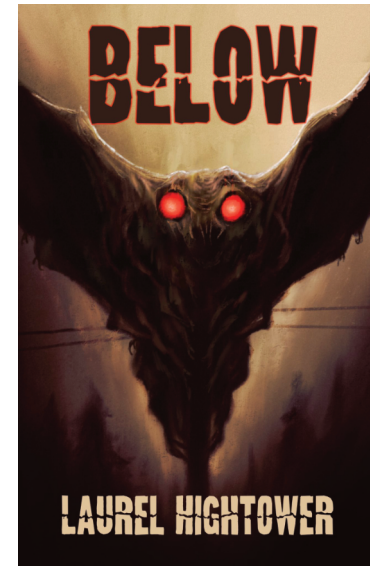
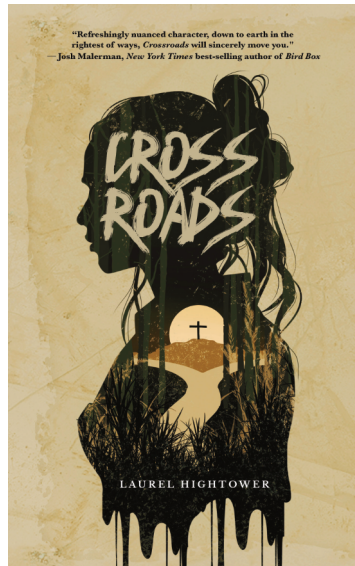
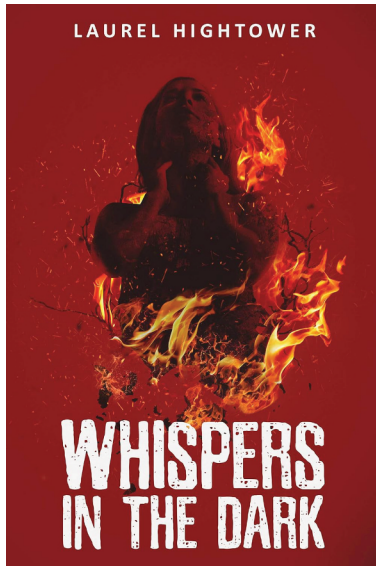
So how did Silent Key develop?

So that is part of the thing, too. That's my second novel. My first one is *Whispers in the Dark*, and that was my debut publication, period. I had had no short stories, no novellas, no anything. *Whispers in the Dark* came out in 2018, and it took me at least 11 years to write. I don't

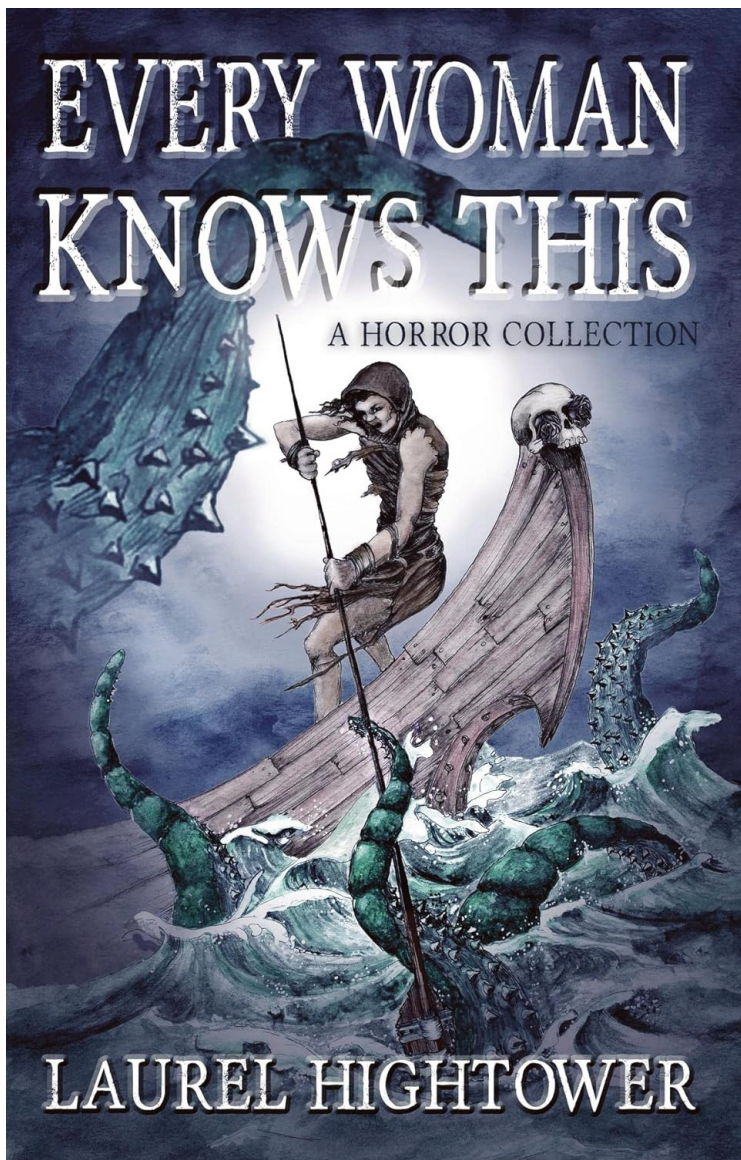
think I really started keeping track exactly. It was eternal. It went through so many iterations. A lot of that had to do with being new at it, and wandering in different directions and not knowing that I really needed to plot very carefully, you know, keep track of things. I just went off on so many meandering tactics. And then *Silent Key* I started writing as soon as I had submitted *Whispers in the Dark* to my agent, because I was like, I'm not just gonna sit here. So I wrote *Silent Key*, and it's similar to *Whispers in the Dark*, in the same vein that it's a longer narrative. You've got a lot more time to be involved with the characters to build these relationships, these character arcs, and to weave in a whole lot of elements that I wanted to include. I was like, oh, that's gross. Let's do that! And also, oh, that's creepy. Let's do that! But I think the big thing for me with my novels is just how much time I get to spend with the characters.

It's been kind of funny because I feel like *Silent Key* is finding its au-

dience. I feel like the people that love it tend to really love it, and that's great because it really was something that, during that period, while I was writing it and some other stuff within that universe, it was kind of a hard time in my life, and that was a great thing to be able to just delve back into a world that I could create and control and characters that I could just sort of hang out with. And so I've really appreciated it. It's part of why I decided I wanted to publish it anyway. This was a great escape for me, and that's what I would love to give people. I don't necessarily look to be particularly transgressive. I mostly want to entertain. I want to provide a fun distraction. And if possible, I really love for people to connect emotionally with things, mostly so that they feel seen. You know, there's this weird feeling of isolation with a lot of things that we go through, whether good or bad, and I know how I feel when I read something, we're like, "Oh my God, this guy gets it," or "This chick has been here." So with *Silent Key*, it was very much about including some stuff with the characters, about some grief and rela-



PICTURED: Covers of *Whisper in the Dark* and novellas *Crossroads* and *Below*



PICTURED: *Every Woman Knows This*, a collection of short stories including the title story and “Though Your Heart Is Breaking”

tionships and stuff like that, but I just really wanted to spend time with them, and I love romance. In a shorter work it's hard to really get to delve into that, because sometimes people feel like it overwhelms the storyline. If it's a novella, you know, I have constantly been told to get the romance out of my stories, but I love romance.

Yeah. Well, that's something that people do. They have maybe not the full blown romance all the time, but it's a part of human existence.

Yeah, yeah. And in a lot of different ways, however people experience it. So I just really had fun with that. But I am well aware that it's so much a 180 from the stuff that I usually write.

Did you say that Silent Key is part of a whole world that you're putting other novels or short stories into?

Yes. So it took a really long time for *Silent Key* to get from conception to publication. The first draft of it was 200,000 words, and so I did a lot of edits and rewrites and things like that, and kept whittling it down some, and then finally, my fabulous media manager, Ryan Lewis, read through it. And he was like, OK ... everyone would just say, “It's long. You gotta do something.” I'm like, “But what?” And he was able to say this should be the midpoint, and you need it to be under X amount of words, and just rewrite it. And so I did. And then that was kind of the version I was able to send to Flame Tree, in to Don D'Auria, and that he liked. But yeah, I think the first version actually didn't take me an absurd amount of time to do because that was what I wanted to be doing all the time. And when I finished that, my at-the-time literary agent was still working on shopping *Whispers in the Dark*, and so I was like, well, I'm gonna start another one. And then I was like, but I don't wanna leave these guys. So I wrote a sequel and then I wrote another sequel, and then I've got half of a fourth manuscript and then outlines and little chapters for probably at least three or four more.

I don't know what I'm gonna do with them, because part of it is seeing how does this one go? Is this anything anybody wants to experience more of? But it's also one of those things that I wrote so much for my-

self. At the time of my life that that this was going on, what was so hard about it is I, and I've talked about this with *Crossroads*, I had a really, really hard time getting pregnant with my son. It took us three years, and that's the kind of circumstance that really your world gets very small and it gets harder and harder. You just kind of put yourself in this little box of trying not to experience a lot of the disappointments and the pain. And that [writing] was my happy place. I would just come home and just delve right into this manuscript and hang out with my little imaginary friends. And so by the time I was writing the third one, I was like, no one's ever gonna read this. So I can do whatever I want with it.

Well, the characters, they're very deftly realized.

Thank you.

And Silent Key leads or seems to be leading you into a potential next story, and I can totally see these characters continuing on and doing their own stuff and ... In a way, it's almost like if you have the right characters, they sort of come alive on their own and kind of tell you what they're doing.

Yeah, definitely. And I have at times had to remind myself, you are the writer, you're allowed to decide this doesn't make sense from a plot standpoint, you know. [laughs]

They [the characters in *Silent Key*] didn't always start at the iteration that they are now. Dimi was pretty well realized. You know, he was so much fun to write. But Eric Morgan was initially just a regular guy who gets involved with them. But then, you know, I have really huge social anxiety that I've been able to work through quite a bit, but to me I was like no, actually I think this guy lives in the desert because he can't stand being around people, and sort of developing this idea of isolation in different ways, the way that the different characters are isolated either by their upbringing, by their personality, by what they've gone through, and I am really big on the concept of found family, so I really love just sort of weaving them in. As I continued with this series,

I was bringing in other characters from the town. The sheriff ends up playing a much bigger role. And his family come into it, and you just have a chance to kind of expand on this town and make it this sort of weird little place where creepy, haunted things keep happening, you know, so, yeah, that's been just a lot of fun, to have the freedom to just kind of do that.

It's so weird. That one lived in my head and in my heart for so long, and I would revisit the manuscript at times and had it loaded on my Kindle. And sometimes if I just really wanted a comfort read, I'd be like, I'm gonna go revisit my friends. You know? So then it was so weird to put it out there. And be like, oh, no, no. Someone's actually read the story.

Other people are saying things about my characters.

Wait, how did you guys meet? [laughs]

Are you working on other novels or more short stories or novellas or ...

All of the above at all times.

I kind of thought as I was saying it, I'm probably just saying everything you're doing!

Yeah, yeah, I am. It's one of those lovely things. It doesn't always work this way, and sometimes you definitely do run into sort of a creative burnout. You know, like I had a couple of heavy deadlines last year that I just was really struggling with, and when I got done and I hit send on the last one, I really sat there and was like, I think I'm done writing. I think I've said what I need to say. And then, I slept that night and I was like "Ohh OK, actually I was just really tired." I needed some time for the intake to watch some movies, to read some stuff. But yeah, I have what started as a novella, but has kind of expanded into a short novel coming out with *Ghoulish* in April, and that was one of the things I was working on last year. And then I have a novella that is on

submission right now. And then as far as what I'm working on ... with short stories anymore, I tend to mostly just do invites when I get them, and that just has to do with me way overscheduling myself. There's very rarely a time when I'm like, "I certainly have nothing to write right now. Perhaps I should try this experiment." So, it's good for me to be able to write to call sometimes or to comb through my little snippets of ideas and say, "Oh, I can merge this ...". So I'm working on one right now that I'm really enjoying. I have a novella plotted out that I really want to try to do this year, but it's, you know, going to be starting from scratch. And then I have a novel that is, I would say, significantly more along the thriller line than horror. I don't think it's going to end up being horror at all. My roots in reading and everything, while I definitely started with horror and that's always my first love, I'm a big crime reader fan. I love Ian Rankin's Rebus stories. And Reginald Hill and I love Louise Penny.

So that novel, I started it last year, but when I was like, OK, no, I really will write again, I sat down and was just reading through all my ideas and what I wanted to work on, and that is the one that's really been like, no, this is my turn. It's time. So once I get finished with this short story and some introductions that I owe, that is what I hope to be able to just curl up and really delve into. I feel like maybe novels take longer for me to get started on, not just because of the breadth of what you have to cover, but because I need to know who these characters are. I need to know who they are and what their motivations are and why I'm writing about them, you know? And so I've gotten to spend some more headspace with them and fleshing out what's going on there.

Is that how you develop characters, as you sort of, I guess for lack of a better word, hang out with them?

Yeah, I always wanna write authentically as far as characters go. I did a lot of acting when I was a teenager, so I try to employ those same like, OK, you know, let's get in this headspace. Let's try to react to something the way that they would based on their back story and what their motivations are and their age. That's another thing that I really

enjoy, is writing about characters my own age or a little bit older, or significantly older. And that's part of the romance aspect of it, too. This is a conversation I have with a good friend of mine who's also a writer, he always says anybody can fall in love. That's easy. It's easy to fall in love. What does romance look like when you continue it, when it stands up to marriage or long-term relationships, children, illnesses, debt, all those sorts of things that are hard on marriages and hard on people in general? I like exploring how that romance looks. When you've been together for a long time, when the aspects of your life have changed in ways that you couldn't possibly imagine. So I like exploring those kinds of things, and with characters who are in different phases of their life, too. They might be caring for aging parents while they're caring for children. You know, that kind of thing. And that's what's intriguing to me. With short stories and stuff, I do sometimes write younger folks, but sometimes I just feel like I'm not in that headspace anymore, just, you know, evidenced by the fact I just said "younger folks." Don't think I'll be fitting in with the kids.

Yeah, I used to work with kids. I was gonna be a teacher. I worked in a day treatment center where the kids went to school.

Oh yeah.

That was ages ago now, but at the time I felt a little more, you know, hip and with it, but not anymore. I think often what happens is people think they're writing their TV show or whatever from that point of view, and really it's from the point of view of somebody older looking back at it.

Yes, yes. And it's interesting, I have seen a couple of things, little comments in reviews ... I try to kind of stay away from reviews because I feel like reviews are very much a reader's space, but also, let's be honest, we're authors, we like to go check out and see what people are saying. Never, never respond, you know? But some people have said that Samantha, the daughter in *Silent Key*, doesn't really sound like a five-year-old. And you know that I get it, too. I feel like there are a lot of authors who can really [write like that], and I don't think I'd ever try to write

anything from a child's point of view, because I know that it would be me looking back, and I know that if it wasn't that, it would be me interpreting things through the lens of being the parent of a five- year-old.

Right.

This is gonna sound like some terrible humble brag, but my son is five and he has always been very verbose and had really very advanced vocabulary. So when I started reading those [comments] I was like “Oh, I kind of didn't think about this.” That sounds awful. It's like, oh, no, I couldn't dumb things down. But it's a legitimate complaint, you know, and quite possibly he would read that and be like, “That's not how kids talk, Mom. Like what are you even doing?”

Right.

But it also just sort of reiterates don't write from the point of view of the kid, don't write from the point of view of the teenager; you know, I'm not in that headspace. I think you're right. I think that's a really good way to look at it. It's not that point of view, it's the looking back point of view, the nostalgia aspect of things.

And in Silent Key, I feel like it's always from the point of view of the parent looking at how they're seeing their child act.

Yeah, yeah.

And then, she's a child with different experiences than just your average child as well, and I would think that could possibly make somebody not act just like a typical five-year-old.

Yeah, because the kind of not only paranormal experience she's had, but the unfortunate experiences of being put in the middle of her parents' marriage, of being made to keep secrets that are way, way above her, above her emotional maturity level.

How did you come to be a writer?



PICTURED: Cover of *The Day of the Door*, coming April 23, 2024, from Ghoulish Books

Well, I actually come from a writing family. So we were always big readers. I have one brother and one sister, and we were always writing little stories, usually very horrific, bloody, gory kind of things in, you know, like kindergarten. [laughs]

As five-year-olds you were writing horror stories!

Well, yeah, but maybe not five. I'm trying to remember, but it was pretty early because I remember there being a thing where my little sister—it couldn't have been more than like first or second grade—she got a note home from the teacher, she'd been telling these stories about, I think it was, Freddie from *Nightmare on Elm Street*. And so, I think my mom thought she was gonna be in trouble for it. But the teacher's like, well, no, no, no. We're having a lock in and we would like her to prepare a new story to read to us at that. It was generally—children are very bloodthirsty. So it wasn't just us. [laughs] ... There's the encouragement that you get in that aspect like, hey, this is the thing that you do, you know, this is a mindset that you have.

But for me, I actually looked at it, and I was like, wow, that looks like a really insecure source of income. Horrible. I'm not gonna do that. I'm going to go be an accountant or something. In middle school, I wrote a 115-page book or something. I'm sure it was godawful. ... But by the time I got to college, I was just like, nah, I'm just gonna read. And when you're in college, too, your head's very filled with the papers you have to write, and I was in paralegal school, so I was doing a whole lot of legal research and writing and I was working full time, so there just wasn't a whole lot of head space for that. But then towards the end of my program, I [didn't] have words in my head, and so I started writing things. But you know, you gotta lie to yourself. You're like, this is for me. No one's ever gonna read this. Literally no one ever. Then you kind of fall in love [with it] and you're like, what if it's good? And so, yeah, it just kind of developed from there. And spoiler, it was not good. [laughs] But you know everybody starts somewhere.

I know. I can remember the first things that I wrote were influenced by the fact that I was playing Dungeons and Dragons.

Oh yes. That's a great influence, though.

It is, but being a little overly literal, maybe, as a kid, I was trying to write a fantasy story but as though it were the D&D game, so you could almost see the dice being rolled as people did their combat turns and things like that. It was just like, oh, no, no, there's no flow here. At all.

But you know, I actually think that would do really well now. I think people would really lean into that as a choose your own adventure kind of a thing.

So did you end up going into the legal profession then?

I did, yes. Yeah. I am a paralegal. I have been at the same firm for 11 years now and I love my job. I definitely finally chose the right major, five colleges and God knows how many majors later, I really am in the right spot. I love legal work. I have this great mix of getting to do mostly litigation and then I also have an intellectual property attorney and he's brilliant, and he's got this just amazing mind. And as part of what you have to do when you write patent applications, you have to have this amazing capacity to understand things that you've never encountered before so that you can explain them in great detail, and he's wonderful at it. So I'm pretty sure with *Silent Key* I sat and picked his brain for two hours about stuff. Anyway, it's a very, very lucky place to be because it's not only really interesting work, but I happened to land in this firm with just great people where I have this headspace. The job that I worked before this, I had no headspace. I was so stressed for two years. I didn't write a word. And then when I got to my firm that I'm at now, I was able to sort of be like, ohh, OK, I'm no longer in survival mode, you know? And so I do that work, and I'm very lucky now too because during lockdown my son was only two years old. And we had no daycare. We didn't have any help. We were both working from home. Yeah, it was rough. But I also very much treasure the additional time I had with him. You know, it's kind of one of those double-edged swords, but it was amazing to have him with me that whole time. But I finally at some point just told my job I'm not logging in

until noon. See you then. I don't care if you pay me or not. I can't do it. I can't. And they were wonderful about that, you know. And then when we were coming back after lockdown, I was like, this whole half day thing, it's really working for me and I wanna keep doing it. Because I wanna actually have time to write now. And at first they kind of are like ... Well, you know what? OK, that's fine. And so every year at my review, they're like, you ready to come back full time? I'm like no! And you know, we just sort of move on. I'm immensely lucky in that I'm able to be part time now, which gives me a good block of time in the mornings to write, and also I have headspace when I get there. I still really love my work, and when I leave, I get to leave it there.

Do you end up writing most days? Is it in effect like a job?

Yes. It was less so until my son started kindergarten back in August. The other half of why I wanted to go part time is because I'd had this additional time with him and I was like, you know what, he's only gonna be this age once, and I'm not cut out to be a stay-at-home mom. I don't have that mindset, and I deeply admire people who do, because that, well, that is hard. You know, it's very hard. But I just never had enough time with him. So when I went back to work at the office and he went back to day care, I had it arranged where I would keep him with me till about 10 in the morning. So we would have this luxurious sleep-in every morning and then get to have a nice breakfast, hang out kind of thing. So once he started kindergarten in August, they don't let you just bring them when you feel like it.

The luxurious lie-in has disappeared!

Oh, it's so gone, and it's so funny because he has always, even when I was pregnant, he would sleep at my same schedule. Like I had friends be like "Oh, the baby wakes me up." I'm like, nope, he does not wake up until he hears the blender for the smoothie in the morning. Then he's like, "Oh breakfast!" Poor little dude had the worst time sleeping for the first three years. He had reflux and all this other stuff, but now, when we had to start getting up at 7:00 AM for kindergarten, he would drag out looking like a teenager. He's like, "What are we doing? No

one should see this time of day," and I'm like, I'm so with you.

Oh yeah, I'm with you on that. They're building houses all over this neighborhood, and they're building one from scratch next door, and they show up at like 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning. The other people around us, normal people, they're like, "Oh, well, I've been up for hours by then." And I'm like, oh, no, no, I've gone to bed at 2:00 in the morning. So no.

Do you ever just want to be like, wow, that's depressing for you. That's a wretched time of day to be up. [laughs] That is rough. I guess people have this expectation. You're supposed to be up by then, and I'm like, no, you shush. You can start making noise about 10, 10:30 maybe.

You say horror is sort of your first love. How did you end up there? Was it just because you were all bloodthirsty kids or ...?

It might be, but I actually feel like I read kind of everything I could get my hands on when I was younger and I would, like every kid, you start with the board books and the smaller stuff, and you build to chapter books and that kind of thing. But I feel like with horror, I know I was reading, like a lot of folks, those scary stories you tell in the dark by Alvin Schwartz and those just magnificently terrifying drawings and, you know, I was reading Goosebumps. I don't know that Goosebumps was around when I was really young. I can't remember when that started, but those sorts of things always gave me this sort of thrill that I was like, OK, that's what I wanna gravitate towards. I just remember being maybe 8, it's hard to remember, but I know that it was definitely elementary school and we went to the library a whole lot, and as you might imagine came out with huge stacks of books. I remember leaving the library at around dusk and it was fall because school had started back relatively recently. And there was this swirl of leaves. You know, this nice breeze that kind of tells you, oh, fall's really on the way, and I remember thinking we could decorate for Halloween when we get back if we want to, and then it was weird to have this sort of epiphany that like, wait, I can seek this. I can create this delicious little feeling of this season and of the spooky aspects of it. I can seek and

create that at all times. And that's just kind of how it's been since, you know, like I only ever wanted to watch horror movies. I know I read a whole bunch of other stuff too when I was a kid, a lot of mythology and also Sweet Valley High, all that kind of thing.

There's the romance part.

There is the romance part, but man, Jessica was awful. Poor Elizabeth putting up with that sister [laughs]. So it's almost like more of a vibe. I guess that I realized I could incorporate reading into it. And the media that I consumed into it. So yeah, I feel like I'm still just constantly one of the Halloween people and just always kind of seeking out that vibe whatever time of year it is.

I think that's cool! ... I was going to ask you what's next for you, but we've kind of covered some of that. Is there anything that we haven't really talked about that you'd like readers to know?

I guess sort of along the lines of what's next. It's such an interesting time to be in this profession, and that sort of goes along with whatever that old halfway blessing is, may you live in interesting times.

It seems like it's more ... interesting every day.

Yeah, probably more interesting than we always want, but there's so many different ways to approach publishing, and there's so many different ways to approach art and all this kind of thing. And I have really enjoyed being part of the indie horror scene. I remain very excited and energized by the smaller presses that I work with, and some of the ones that I haven't but that I very much admire their work and support their writers and things like that. And I just sort of feel like, for almost a long-term, overarching, incredibly arrogant goal, there's a big part of me that wants to be part of transforming ... of assisting in, obviously not on my own, but playing maybe a part in helping some of these presses reach more of a mid-list standing, because these are the presses that are taking the chances, and these are the presses that are giving voice to authors that otherwise you would never hear from. The

trad pub moves so slow, and they're very much at the mercy of—and it's a business model. They get it, but they're very much at the mercy of “We don't want to publish this book with this marginalized main character that you've written because we think people won't connect with it.”

Or “we just don't think the people in our audience will buy it.”

Yeah. And we're gonna be the arbiters of that. I think we all benefit, including trad publishers, when they're able to sort of look and see like, “Oh, that actually is selling on this scale. What can we do to maybe do that on a larger scale than what we're doing?” And we're seeing quite a resurgence of horror being more mainstream. You've got a lot of Paul Tremblay, you've got Josh Malerman who has just, man, he has been knocking down walls. And he's been just doing his thing, and getting to see this stuff, and I really appreciate whatever part I'm able to play in that as far as working with these smaller publishers, because I know the novellas that I've put out wouldn't have made it through a mainstream publisher, certainly not the iterations that they're in, and it's just a big privilege to be in, so I'm just sort of like, yay, indie horror for life, you know, it's a fun place to be.

Yeah, definitely. And I think the time we're in, the technology we have allows for more of that, or it feels like ... I mean, social media can be terrible, but it feels like there are more outlets for more authors to get at least some kind of exposure.

Yes. It levels it to an extent. It means that you really can [self-publish], and obviously not with a great amount of ease. I have not self-published anything, but I am well aware of how much work that takes. You know there is so much that goes into it, but there is something that's really amazing about it because some of the most fantastic work that I've read has been self-published by authors who were just tired of waiting to get their chance. And I love that, because otherwise, we would never have read their words. I would never have met some of these folks, or gotten these perspectives, which can be utterly mind blowing. One of my passions, which has been taught to me because I

am a cis het suburban white woman in the middle of the Midwest, so you know, it was not something I knew was a thing, but when I started meeting other authors they were like, “Hey, read diversely,” and I’m like, dude, you’re right, this is not on the shelves, you know? And that’s been one of the most eye-opening, most enriching experiences because I just always say we know each other best through our stories. And again, I’m a horror fiend. But knowing what scares someone else, I just feel like we can really see someone else’s struggles, but also just their life and folklore and history and all this kind of stuff. It’s a privilege and it’s ... you know, I was a reader before. I’m a writer, and I’ll probably be a reader long after. I’m a writer, so I’m just thrilled that there’s this much stuff out there and that we just constantly get new material.

* * *

Look for Laurel Hightower’s latest book, *The Day of the Door*, available for preorder at <https://ghoulish.rip/product/the-day-of-the-door/>. You can find *Silent Key*, *Crossroads*, and *Beyond* on Amazon. Laurel Hightower’s short stories can be found many places, for instance her collection *Every Woman Knows This*. You can find her on social media at twitter/X: @hightowerlaurel; Instagram: @laurelhightower; Bluesky: @laurelhightower.bsky.social; and TikTok: @laurelhightower, and on her website at <https://laurelhightower.com/>.

A Piece Missing

by SJ Townend

All six screaming monitors gathered like nestling owlets in the pocket of her apron fall silent as soon as she crosses the threshold. The distress of the baby had been hideous to hear, but the silence that follows—as the monitors return to a lowly crackle of static interference—feels asphyxiating. Back inside, she can no longer hear the baby. Her baby. Had it been her baby she had heard?

Up the stairs her feet carry her, as they have a thousand times before, along the hallway towards the furthest room, which is also the smallest. The door, like her front door, like all doors in her home that has become her house, a house, is stoppered open, wedged fully ajar, and the wind pushing in through the agape window makes ghosts of baby's breath from the delicate white net curtains.

She draws her arms tight around herself and rubs the sides of her bare arms with red-raw, muddy palms. The cot-bed—bar one of the paired baby monitors, which sits crackling gently with the static of lost promises on the centre of the small mattress—like the rest of the hollow room, lies empty. She does not notice how filthy her hands are, though, because her mind is on other things, in other places. She can't see the dirt, or perhaps she chooses not to.

Despite her chill, she can't pull down the window. *What if what I have lost wants to return?* she thinks.

Not here, she thinks. *Whatever I am looking for is not here. Perhaps the next room?*

She moves through all of the rooms, checks in all of the cupboards, searches and pries under stale bedding, under each dusty cushion.

Nada. The breeze continues to move in and out of the building like air through lungs and gives a dusting of goosebumps to her skin. She finds nothing. Nothing. Zilch.

The staircase groans as she makes her way down it to search the rooms on the ground floor. It is as if the house feels her sadness, her despair. *Why am I so sad, is this not what I wanted?* she thinks as she continues on her search and makes her way through to the last room she has not yet checked: the kitchen. She sees within a moment what she's searching for is not there. In her heart, she knows she will not find it there or maybe anywhere, especially not in the kitchen where cutlery and unsafe things are kept. What she does find there, though, is a mountain of dirty dishes. It appears all of her dishes have been used; they clutter the tabletop. The washing up seems endless in her home. Her house. A house.

She slides her finger over the smooth curve of a greasy plate and, on noticing the thick brown crescent of dirt under each of her fingernails, she lifts the plate up and decides now would be as good a time as any to wash it up. *My hands, at least, will benefit from the chore,* she thinks. On touching the plate, she forgets what she has been searching for, forgets why she is in the kitchen, has a feeling like the feeling one gets when one moves from one room to another in search of something, forgetting what it is they are searching for the moment they enter a different room.

She fills up the sink with warm, soapy suds. Dipping her sullied hands into it, pushing them deep below the surface until they can't be seen anymore, will provide some release, she hopes, and the porcelain does need to be cleaned.

No time like the present, she sighs, although she is not sure what time it is because the wall-mounted clock has been stuck for a long time. Its second hand clicks on beat like a metronome but never advances past twelve. It has been five-to-three for many days now. Perhaps a month. *A new battery*, she thinks. *Or maybe it is beyond repair. Sometimes, things do break beyond repair.* She says this aloud and hears herself saying it, but it does not sound like her voice. Was it a recording of her voice? *Was that a recording of my voice?* she thinks, and says the words aloud again to be sure. But she can't be sure of anything.

I might, she thinks, *be stuck here at the sink forever if the clock cannot be fixed.* The pile of plates to her side looms, seems to lengthen like shadows at dusk. She makes a start on it, and many ticks pass by as she soaks and scrubs and rinses the mound of dirty porcelain, but it never seems to deplete.

She rubs her tired eyes with a dry patch of a part of her arm just between the elbow and her wrist that she cannot for the life of her name, and on opening her eyes, she finds she is no longer at the helm of her own kitchen, taking pride in its appearance, its order, but is standing at a sink she does not recognise, washing dishes she has no memory of using.

The big hand is still stuck between two and three, the little hand on the eleven. The pattern on the splashback tiles seems familiar. *This must be home*, she thinks, the constants in the house giving her some reassurance.

In the translucent version of herself she catches in the sheen of the glass in the window above the kitchen sink, she thinks she sees a streak of bloodied dirt on her left cheek, or maybe on her right—she has never been very good at understanding reflections—so she soaks and wrings a clean cloth, which she lifts from a tub that she always keeps between the lines of the edge of the back of the sink and the glass window.

The windowsill, she thinks as she tries to recall how the mark may

have been made, *is made of the most beautiful tapestry of glazed tiles.* She dabs at the mark on her cheek and dabs again and rubs until it fades and then returns her focus to the dishes.

The largest plate is precariously balanced on the side of the mound of washing up, so she carefully pulls it free and places it into the water and finds a rhythm with the tick-tick passing of stationary time. Despite her efforts—the clean pile to her left does seem to grow slightly—the dirty pile to her right amplifies in magnitude. At least, she notices, her hands are becoming cleaner, free of grime. But her baby monitors still just crackle quietly, yielding no clues.

She lifts an oval serving dish on which perhaps a roast turkey had been presented, carved up into smaller morsels on, dispatched as brown slices onto myriad of smaller dining plates from. All from a meal perhaps reminiscent of happier times, yet it is a meal she does not remember cooking, or eating. She submerges it into the sink. As she pushes off grease and miniscule fibres of meat and buffs the centre of the dish, she exclaims and drops the dish down into the water again.

Fuck! she says, and gingerly lifts the plate back out and brings it closer to her tired eyes for examination.

There, within the markings of the fat settled and stained from an old burnt bird's carcass, she sees an imprint of a familiar face. She draws a deep breath and feels a rush of something not altogether awful nor altogether pleasant quicksilver through her veins. *It's him*, she thinks. *The husband.* She traces over the sticky, brown, fatty lines that swerve and bend and twist and straighten and portray the face of her husband. But it is not any face of her husband. It is not his sleeping face, his face full of laughter or sadness, his cross face he makes when he reprimands her for leaving the front door wide open when neither of them are inside; it is a face only she, she hopes, might recognise: his face at orgasm.

She smiles slightly as she realises this is the last time she remembers seeing his face, this face, it is the last clear memory she has of her hus-

band. They haven't made love in over a year. She tries to remember if she has seen him since then, since he came last, inside of her; she squeezes the base of her palm against her forehead in thought. He is still living in the house; this she knows because she has seen large leather shoes by the front door. Also, she can see his shed door right now, opened out towards the raised beds of their large garden as she looks through her own faint reflection, out towards the acre of land on which their house sits. *His shed, this is where he often is*, she recalls, *pottering, doing something with French beans*. And if he is not here, living with her, then *the shed door would not be open*, she thinks. *A keen gardener*, she recalls. *My husband is quite green-fingered. But when did I last study his face?*

In the image of him on the cream plate in her hands, she sees his eyes are closed. His head is tipped back, yet his chin is dropped towards his chest and his mouth is wide open. Like the door to the house, door to the shed, windows in each and every room, always waiting for something to return.

She rubs her eyes and, in the pop of a bubble, the image is gone. She feels she must have imagined it; it was such a strange sight to behold, so she moves on to the next dirty plate. *What a strange day*, she thinks. *What an odd vision*.

She works her way through a few more plates, trance-like, finding the repetition of the chore meditative. She looks down at another plate and this time does not feel as surprised to see another image. This time, it is less clear, but it is there: coiled spine, disproportionately large eyes, small nubs. She sees it clearly and when she scrubs harder, the image appears stronger. It is an embryo; no it is more advanced—a foetus.

She places the plate down in the suds and pulls it up again. This time, the foetus is swollen. It appears larger, more refined, as if a trimester has passed: clear limbs, a defined nose, an umbilical cord, where before she had seen just smears of sauce and gravy. She dips and lifts the plate and moves her sponge over the image, each stroke in time with the click of the stuck clock. The image mutates. It twists and spins

around, and there, on the foetus on the plate, is the face of a child. A baby. Her baby?

Its eyes too, like her husband's had been, are screwed closed. Its cheeks are high apples. Its mouth is pranged wide open. People used to tell her they could see his face in it, the baby. Her baby. Strangers would say they saw her husband's face, in the face of the baby. She has a clear memory—perhaps the only crisp memory she will have this day—of the baby: the shade of red its cheeks would turn, accompanied by the noise it would make when nothing she could do would settle it. Could it, could this, be her baby, this face on a foetus on a dirty dinner plate?

Her heart is confused. It is trying to beat in time with the stuck clock hand, but finds itself syncopated, faster, lost. Her own heart and the clock are the only sounds she can hear, because the baby monitors stashed tight in her apron pocket are screaming out with nothing but silence.

She dips the plate, fearful the baby's face may vanish, yet she is also keen to end this delusion. As she pulls it up and out of the suds again, she finds the face is gone—but a new image appears. She turns the plate like the steering wheel of a car angling a sharp series of crooks in the road until she finds its position. Until she can see what this time the plate wants to show her.

It is a tree, this time. Not a face, a willow tree. Drooping branches hang heavily to the right where its trunk has bowed slightly to the left. *I know this tree*, she thinks. She recognises this tree because it is the tree at the far end of her garden.

She drops the plate into the sink. A foam spray bursts up, the edges of which tickle white the work counter. Clasping the monitors tightly down in the deep pocket of her apron so they do not escape or smash, she runs back out of the house, down her front path, and around the back. She keeps on running past the shed, its door still ajar.

“Love, what's up?” she hears a tall, gaunt, shadow say as she hops and

steps and bounds over tumps of grass and scattered terracotta pots and spades and bundles of bamboo cane and sacks of fertiliser. It is a shadow that has thrown itself into the garden. She looks up and she knows this shape, this shape that is speaking, asking her if she is okay, calling her love, but she cannot see who, precisely, it is.

“I can’t stop,” she replies. She thinks she replies. Where its face should be, she sees the face she saw on the plate. Not the sex face—but the face of a screaming child. A crying baby: balled cheeks, red cheeks, tonsils, with watering eyes that won’t stop watering.

She hears again: “Love, what’s up?” but she sees the baby with its open maw, its face of eternal scream, superimposed where the face of the gaunt shadow that has given itself to the garden should be.

She ignores the tall shape with the gardening fork in its hand and picks up pace. She must get to the tree. It is as if the plate had spoken to her, had offered guidance in all the ways the expensive baby monitors she’d ordered six-fold, one for each room, had failed.

The tree.

The willow tree that bows to one side. Maybe by the tree she will find what she thinks she has been searching for, been keeping the windows open for. What she has lost. She drops to her knees as she reaches the tree and places her hands on the mound of earth piled up high underneath it. *Feels cold to the touch*, she thinks. *But there’s nothing here. Just dirt, a tree.*

It is a tree that has been here for longer than she has, much longer—and she feels like she has been here already for an immeasurable length of time. A tear rolls down her cheek, weaves a wonky path. It meanders towards her chin, itself unsure if it is being shed in relief or in sadness. The tear rolls off and shoots like an arrow on target straight down, as if drawn towards the mound of soil. In this moment, she has the urge to draw her own face closer to the heap. It is as if it is calling to her, this pile of earth that is stacked up under the willow tree.

Her lips are now kiss-close to the tip of the heap. *Should I?* she thinks, but she is doing what she is thinking of doing before she has had a chance to reason. Her tongue is probing into the mound, pressing against and into the mud, and her hands are scooping up more, in preparation for her mouth.

The hunger overriding her is unquenchable. She tries to satiate it with what is in front of her by filling her mouth with several scoopfuls of mud. She chews on small clumps of soil and handfuls of grass-topped turf. She masticates until something hard hits her molars: something familiar. Something that is not food, not nutritious, not what she thinks she is looking for cracks hard against grinding teeth. She plays with it with her tongue, cleans it, and then with thumb and finger, pulls it out: a small, flat, piece of porcelain.

She admires the smooth, found treasure in her muddied palm. This is not like any of the porcelain she has ever served food on in her home, her house, a house; it is like no dish or plate she has ever washed or stacked. This piece is white with bold, blue, shining lines; navy, hatched pictures. On this small piece, which is no larger than a large coin, she sees the edge of a blue willow tree.

The embossed blue branches she strokes with her fingertip, she admires, are not unlike—in shape and angle—the ones sheltering her from the autumnal sun now. She sits on folded knees and continues to search for more broken pieces of chinoiserie-patterned pottery in the dirt. With her tongue, she cleans each new piece she retrieves from the pile, greets each like a long-lost friend with her lips, and then arranges them to her side, on a patch of flattened grass.

Without the constant tick of the kitchen clock, she loses all awareness of time. She loses herself almost but not quite completely in what she is doing, even though she isn’t entirely sure why she is doing what she is doing. Her hands dig and scoop further, and she pulls out piece after piece and cleans each free from organic matter and humus and grub larvae and other things that dwell in the dirt with the tip of her tongue and the wetness of her saliva.

To her side, the shape of an old plate forms, and on it, she sees the story appear. This time, it is not a mirage, not her imagination, not anything she is unsure of, because this time, she recognises more than viscerally the story that appears. And she knows this story to be real.

As a child, her own mother would spout the tale of the blue willow plate. Of this, she can be sure. Childhood memories alone are set in the stone of her mind. *To be the child, she thinks, and not the mother makes for happier times.*

In the collection of smashed and worn fragments she gathers and assembles from the pile of mud, she sees the two lovers. She recalls her mother telling her the story of the blue willow plate whilst serving her sliced apple on a version of this broken treasure she continues to dig to unearth. One of the pair on the plate, the woman, is promised to another, to a man whom she does not love, so the original lovers elope, but they are caught. Due to their forbidden love, they are banished to a faraway island. But the Gods take pity on them and transform the lovers into a pair of swallows who fly free.

A similar plate telling the same tale now lies in pieces on the flattened grass, and is nearly complete, all apart from one small chunk. One small piece that she knows is where the image of the two swallows who face each other in a permanent state of amorous conjunction should sit is absent. The sight of the incomplete plate with its piece missing deeply disturbs her, so she digs. She digs deeper and deeper, and searches for this last piece, but she knows, deep within herself, in a place within herself into which she can't dig any deeper, she will never find it. The plate will remain fragmented, like her thoughts—if they are even her thoughts and not just the superimposed thoughts of the person writing this story as if it were about this woman when it may be about the author herself.

Her hands scoop down as she spits soil, small pebbles, and crushed snail shells from her mouth. She scoops until she strikes something hard and large with her fingertips. She clears the layers of sifted dirt as

much as she can and pulls up not one but two items, each of a similar size, to the surface. Her tears are coming hard and fast now, and each time she wipes her cheeks, more mud and dirt and a little blood from a selection of small cuts and scrapes her hands now have is smeared onto her face. She lays the two objects, body-like objects, side-by-side, and stares neither at them nor at anything else. She knows she has seen this before, this pair, but not in a dirty plate, nor in the blue willow story, nor in a dream. Or perhaps in a dream, if this, this real-life experience, is not in fact a dream.

On the left lies a clumsily stuffed skin-suit, once a baby. She probes the human sack with muddied tips and feels both sharp and smooth edges inside of it. She remembers: *yes, I emptied it of its pain, filled it with fragments of broken china.* To the right, almost identical, the mirror image—although she has never been very good at understanding reflection—is an old, porcelain doll caked in the mud in which it was buried. She turns the doll over so it is lying on its face and traces with a finger over where it has been broken and taped back up. *This one I filled with something crimson and wet, a material altogether softer. It holds the pain within it of the other, she remembers. And afterwards, they both slept so well.*

It is then she becomes more disturbed. She jumps up suddenly because all six baby monitors start to scream at once. The burst of grating cries sharp enough to cut the soupy air shocks her backwards.

She steadies herself and grabs the two lifeless bodies and places them back, deep down in a hole, the hole, their hole. Mud and grit and blue-white china pieces rooster-tail through the air as she rushes to fill the void back in. The constant wailing scratches like a fork on a plate, and it is only growing louder. She kicks back the top layer and runs back up the garden. Her baby is back. She can hear it screaming through all six of the monitors. Somewhere, everywhere in the house, something is screaming. Her baby must have found its way back into the house with each of its open rooms. Somehow. She can hear her baby on the monitors that are nestled in her apron pocket. Her baby. A baby. Had

she had a baby?

With each step forward, her hold on the truth slips. As she gains proximity to her home, the house, a house, she sees the tall shape leaning against the open-doored shed. It talks to her, susurrates something, but all she hears is the persistent, piercing scream of a child calling her.

She looks to the tall shape's face. *Perhaps I can try to read its lips*, she thinks, *perhaps it is speaking to me, trying to say something important, a clue*. But where nose, eyes, lips, and adult skin should sit, she sees instead the face of a porcelain doll with willow buds bursting out through every one of its orifices. White-green, cotton-soft buds push through china nostrils, poke out like caged prisoners' hands through

ear holes and rose bud lips. It is not who she thought it would be, the tall shape stood by the shed. But who did she think it was? Her memory draws a blank. There are no hints or images or shadows in the space of her mind. She runs faster back towards the house and runs through the wide-open front door.

All six screaming monitors gathered like nestling owlets in the pocket of her apron fall silent as soon as she crosses the threshold. The distress of the baby had been hideous to hear, but the silence that follows—as the monitors return to a lowly crackle of static interference—feels asphyxiating. Back inside, she can no longer hear the baby. Her baby. Had it been her baby she had heard?

Sisters

by Jordan Hirsch

The hands of my mother
have sinned. Pulling my hair
taut and slick into a perfect,

smooth updo, she plucks
four strands for herself. As
if I wouldn't notice part of me

missing. As if I don't know what
she does in the closet
while I'm asleep.

Making more of me. Trying to get it
right this time. Does she not think
me beautiful? Must she always

dwell on imperfection? In my dreams,
I hear my sisters calling, voices
that sound like mine

coming from the woods behind
our home. Does Mother not know
I put them there? That I, too, busy my hands—

long, skinny fingers just like hers—
while she sleeps? My sisters call—they're calling—
their voices tender. Mother's grows

harsher with each hair she plucks.
If I am to keep my crown
of beauty, I must still her hands.

I must not be replaced. Yes, I will still her hands.

And the light will break through
the mist as my sisters, broken
but like me, can come home.

Sightless

by Addison Smith

“Sightless are a strange thing,” Charlie said, smoke curling from his mouth. “They can’t think, see? The thoughts are in there, doing their work, the guy just isn’t aware of it.” He knocked a ringed knuckle against the top of his head, “No one home. You get it?”

Mike nodded and set his drink back on the wet ring on the table. “It’s a consciousness disconnect.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Sounds kind of nice, too. They process all this stuff in the background, absorbing it all like a freaking sponge. Then one day, they just wake up. Everything they learned, it’s all in there, ready to be used. I had one working my docks, you know, just like the rest. Worked with people from so many countries, when he woke up he spoke six languages. Went on to be some sort of ambassador or something.” He puffed the cigarette and waved it in a gesture of regret. “Shame, you know? He was a good worker. Long hours, no breaks. Can’t get much better.”

“You can stop them from waking up.” Mike watched the greasy man’s reaction. There was surprise there, and nervousness.

“You’ve been reading too many tabloids, kid. I’m not saying it’s not possible. Who am I to know, right? But who would do it? Have to be a monster.”

Yeah, Mike thought. You would.

“They say you can reverse it, too, once they’ve woken up. Trigger an epileptic seizure, and it flips the switch back.”

“Listen, buddy, I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t do that.” He scraped the cherry off his cigarette, into the plastic ashtray. “My guys are born that way. When they wake up, they’re free to go, and with a nice bit of cash to get them started.” He stood from his chair and took his leather coat from the orange vinyl back. “I worry about you, kid. Got bad ideas in your head. You got any legitimate business to discuss, I’m all ears. Otherwise, don’t waste my time.”

Mike stood and their eyes met. He saw fear in them--probably afraid he was some sort of cop or investigator. That fear might be enough to keep him from breaking Mike’s kneecaps in the alley.

There was fear, and something else. Too many glances at his feet.

“I’ll be in touch,” Mike said and grabbed his own coat. The barfront picture window dripped with rain, so he slipped the coat on and tipped an imaginary hat at the men who watched him from the corner. “You have a nice day,” he said, then walked through the door, out into the street.

The rain had been muted in the bar, even without the murmur of other patrons. It roared outside. He made his way around the block, avoiding any alleys on the chance fear wasn’t enough to save his knees, and got in his car.

Claire sat at the wheel, brown hair over soft shoulders. As the car shifted under his weight she asked, “You still sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah. Someone’s gotta teach him.”

She nodded and put the car in drive. As they pulled out into the street, she said, “Did he recognize you?”

“No. Not at all.” That still rankled him. There wasn’t a hint of recognition in the man’s eyes. They passed the docks and he stared at them, remembering twenty-four years of mindless work.

He’d been forgotten.

* * *

Mike stared up at the ceiling of their apartment, his breath returning to normal. “Have I ever told you about my first thought?”

Claire turned to face him, and he glanced over. The sheets draped over her bare shoulder, showing collarbone and smooth skin beneath. “Mhmm,” she said, “but tell me again. I like to hear it.”

He tried to match her smile, but knew his fell short. He put his hand behind her shoulder and pulled her close. “I was loading mystery boxes onto a ship, oblivious to the world. Just another one of Charlie’s tools. I saw you across the dock. I think I had been watching you for a while, even if I didn’t know why. You remember the seaweed we raked off the bottom? Well, my eyes lingered a little longer than they should have. Walked right into a pile of it. I had already snapped, I guess. A Sightless wouldn’t have done something like that. When I got up, I remember thinking--thinking for the very first time—‘I hope she didn’t see that.’

“Of course, everything changed then. I knew what I was, and what that single thought meant for me.”

Claire ran her finger over his chest. It was still rough from the docks, even two years later, but he shivered at the touch. “I’d heard stories, I guess, in the way Sightless hear anything. Heard about the room with the flashing lights, and seen people snap, then come right back to work, zombies again.” He kissed her forehead and covered his fear

with a smile. “You saved me from that.”

He didn’t know how close it had been, but the thought of returning to that mindless place filled his heart with ice. At the time it wouldn’t have meant as much. He would have been denied something he’d never experienced. Now, though, looking into Claire’s eyes, he had too much to lose.

He hooked his foot around her heel. “What about you?” he asked. “What was your first thought?”

“Someone called my name. I liked the sound of it.” She grinned. “That seems silly, but you understand. It’s a thing of identity. Recognizing my name made me a real person.” She slipped her bare leg between his. “Then I was terrified. I’d heard the stories. I knew what would be taken from me. Life was a fruit I had never tasted, so what should it matter? But it did. I wanted to taste it. I wanted to experience everything there was to feel. So I pretended nothing had changed. I went on working, and watching the fool who had woken up and didn’t do the same.”

They shared a grin. “It was close, you know,” Mike said. “If you hadn’t gotten me out of there--”

“Don’t think about it.” She raised up to her knees, one on either side of his leg. The sheet fell from her back.

She caught his eyes and smiled. “Don’t get any ideas. You’ve got work to do.” She rose from the bed, made her way across the room to the dresser, and tied her hair up in the back. Mike tried not to stare, but wasn’t very good at it.

Soon they were dressed, and the truth of their lives returned.

“Today?” she asked.

He didn’t have to ask what she meant. He’d been laid off due to lack

of work, and unemployment was about to run out. It was the perfect time to start working on Charlie.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ll talk to him today. Maybe I’ll come home with a job.”

She didn’t smile at that. That was the plan, but it wasn’t an appealing one. His stomach twisted at the thought of working for the man that would have seen him Sightless again, but it would be worth it.

If they could save a single person, it would be worth it.

* * *

The dockyard was familiar under Mike’s feet. He’d walked this slab of concrete so many times it was burned into his memory. He navigated by rote, and felt eyes on him the whole time. A couple of Charlie’s thugs were at the gate when he came through--the same ones from the bar. He couldn’t hear their footsteps behind him, but they were there.

That also meant they had probably called ahead, so Charlie would be expecting him. That’s good. He didn’t want to unnerve the man too much when he showed up. The play at the bar was too dramatic. He needed to earn his trust, not scare him.

Not yet.

The main office was a repurposed warehouse. After so many years, it would have made sense to build a real office there, instead of the steel building with cubicle-like partitions, but that was the way it had always been. It had been there when he had been sold to his first owner, and when they had turned over the business to another man. The place had changed hands six times in twenty-four years--some only holding onto it for a year or two at a time. Then it was sold to Charlie.

Speak of the devil, the man stood at the front of the building, watching

Mike approach with his beady eyes under slicked-back hair. Mike made his gait more casual, with a hint of business.

“Mikey boy!” Charlie called, and reached out to take his hand. Mike put his arm out and Charlie pulled him into a hug. There were cameras.

“What brings you to my part of town, eh, Mikey? Got some shipping to do?”

His grin was painted by a hack artist, laid on thick and phony. Definitely cameras.

“Oh, you know,” Mike said, “just in the neighborhood. Thought we could talk business.”

“Sure, Mikey, sure. Come on in. I’ve got coffee on.”

He led him through the big garage-style door. There wouldn’t be any cameras in the building. Outside they were an asset to him. He could show the tapes to anyone and say, “Yeah, he was here,” then show himself treating Mike like a friend. Inside, they would be less convenient.

They were barely in the door when Charlie said over his shoulder, “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but it won’t end well for you. You a cop or something?”

Mike smiled, “Not a cop.”

“So, what, a detective? PI?”

“Nope. Just a guy looking for work.”

He could hear the grin on Charlie’s face, “Yeah, sure you are. And I’m hiring, too. What a coincidence.”

He led him to a room toward the back. At some point the steel wall had

been painted beige, but the paint was mostly flaked off now. The concrete floor had a crack running the length of the windowless room, and the light cast a pure-white glow. It was like the room had been designed to be intimidating.

They sat at a table in the middle of the room--an old particle board piece with the rubber pulling from the edges--and Charlie leaned back on two legs. His guards followed them in.

“So, you want a job,” Charlie said. “I’ll humor you. What makes you think you’d fit in here?”

“I know docks,” Mike said. He knew it wouldn’t be enough, but he would start small.

“Docks don’t take long to learn, kid. What else you got?” Charlie pivoted on the back legs of the folding chair.

“Not much.” Mike raised his hands to his side, “I know these docks.”

“Congrats.” He continued rocking back, just on the verge of falling over, looking up at the ceiling.

“I’m a hard worker, and I don’t ask questions. I’ll do what you ask with little to no information.” The man still rocked back, not paying him any attention. “And I can run ol’ Betty.”

Charlie’s chair fell forward. He stared Mike in the eyes. “You say you know these docks? How so?”

Mike kept himself from smiling as the man ran the name ol’ Betty through his head. “Worked here for a bit before you bought the place.”

“For Jack Collins?”

“Before Jack,” Mike said, passing the test. Jack didn’t use Betty. He locked her away the day he bought the place. “Rick Hodges. The place

technically belonged to his dad, but he ran the operation.” Charlie might have to check the paperwork, but the records would back him up.

“Give me a few minutes,” Charlie said, then walked out. The guards stayed, and for a minute Mike wondered if the words were a cue for them to break a few bones. They stayed where they were, though.

He’d played it right, he thought. The ol’ Betty thing might have shaken him a bit, but it was necessary. He’d find the Hodges’ names in the records and see that everything had been signed by the son. That was a point in his favor. Maybe it was enough.

When Charlie came back, he didn’t look very assured. He reached a hand out and Mike shook it.

“Welcome aboard,” he said. He held Mike’s hand a few extra seconds. “I’m not saying I trust you. Consider yourself on permanent probation.”

“Works for me,” Mike said.

He had wondered what it would feel like to work for the man. To work under the very person who wouldn’t have let him go had he had the chance.

His stomach twisted.

* * *

It was two weeks before Mike got a look at ol’ Betty. Two weeks of hauling mystery boxes to and from ships, working alongside others, both Sightless and not. Charlie called him on the radio one day and asked him to meet him in the back of the warehouse.

It seemed different now. The place already had the familiarity of memory, but now it had a different kind. The familiarity of something he’d

obsessed over for two full weeks.

“There’s something I want to show you,” Charlie said. He didn’t have his trademark smile anymore. His jaw was set in a sort of grim determination. Mike knew where they were going. He’d seen the room before, but never been inside. The door was slate black, and a red sign was taped on the front. “Do Not Enter.”

Reading that sign, he considered obeying it. He could turn around now. He could walk away from his plans. But no. He couldn’t let Charlie get away with it. He couldn’t let that scum continue what he’d been doing for years.

Charlie pushed a key into the lock and opened the door. The room was dark, except for a light in the middle. It looked like it was shining down from a thick, black lampshade, but he knew what it must be.

It was a chair, like you would find at a dentist. It was raised upright, and a man sat in it, head inside the lampshade-like helmet from where the light shone.

Ol’ Betty.

One of the thugs stood beside the chair, and where the light shone on his face, his features were blank.

The man sat still in the device, lured there by some lie or another. He wasn’t Sightless. Not anymore. He was just like Mike. Just like Claire.

Now was his chance. He could stop them. He could save this man, and—

The room flooded with flickering light, and Mike shielded his eyes. He screamed inside his head, impotent to do anything to save the man in the chair. He held his hands over his eyes, blocking out the light that could render him a mindless zombie.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. His voice was a shade of its usual self. “It’s hard

to watch.”

Mike opened his eyes under his cupped hands. Steady light shone between his fingers, so he put his hands down. He tried to control his breathing and slow his heart, but the blood rushed in his brain, fueling his rapid thought. I could have saved him. I could have done something. There was another thought in there as well. That could have been me.

The man lay back in the chair. His body would have been tense just a moment ago, nails scratching at the leather arms. Now he just sat there, a patch of saliva on his dirty gray shirt. If Mike hadn’t covered his eyes, he might have been the same.

The thug who flipped the switch lifted the bucket off the man’s head, the light showing tears in his own eyes.

“Mitch doesn’t like to do it. I can’t really blame him. It’s business though, right? I’m barely staying afloat. You do what you have to do.”

The words echoed in Mike’s head.

“This is where you’ll be,” Charlie said. “Whenever it comes up. We have a couple hundred workers here. The problem comes up about once a week. You still in?”

Mike watched the man--the Sightless--as he was led out of the chair. He would be absorbing everything in the room with his almost mechanical mind. Somewhere in his head, he knew exactly what had happened. He knew that he would never again have the freedom he had experienced for such a short time. The freedom Charlie had stolen away.

Mike nodded. “Yeah, I’m in.”

He would never flip that switch. He would end this--end Charlie--before the next Sightless snapped.

He would do what he had to do.

* * *

“Was it a man or a woman?” Claire asked. She held Mike’s head in her lap, and her voice echoed with hollowness.

“Man. Not very old. Maybe twenty. I never saw his eyes. Not before it happened.”

Claire breathed out. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have done anything to stop it.”

“But I could have. I could have run across the room. I could have knocked out the guard, or broken the machine.”

“You could have gotten yourself killed.”

“I could have helped.” He tightened his hand into a fist, remembering the man’s dead eyes. “It’s not happening again. I’m taking him down, Claire. Charlie’s done.”

She stroked his hair, and he stared off into space. He saw Charlie in his mind. The man that ordered it to be done. The man who was responsible for what had happened. He saw his face, and his thoughts turned. He had gone into this to save someone--just a single person. In that moment, with Charlie’s face hovering in his mind, his motives shifted. He wanted revenge.

* * *

Another Sightless snapped the next day. It was a woman this time, maybe thirty years old. Her eyes were a mess of confusion and fear when she looked at him, standing by the chair.

She tried to speak to him, but it came out garbled. She knew the words,

but had never used her voice. It was something that took time.

“Don’t worry,” Mike said, quiet enough that Charlie and his thugs couldn’t hear him from across the room. “I’ll get you out.” He tasted the lie on his lips, and it made him sick. He couldn’t free her. Not with the others looking on, waiting for him to make a mistake. Waiting for his cracking plan to crumble under the pressure.

She stared into his eyes, and he stared back into hers. All the stories she had heard lurked behind her pupils.

He met Charlie’s eyes, and there was no insistence in them. No hurry, or even demand that he do it. He could take his time. He could walk away. He could tell him he didn’t want the job and walk out of here. Mitch would throw the switch, and no lives would be saved, but he could escape this place.

But he couldn’t. In the taciturn glaze of Charlie’s eyes, he saw the man that let this happen. He saw the man who was responsible for maybe hundreds of unrealized lives.

He saw evil in him, and he knew that he had no choice.

He closed his eyes, bit his lip, and flipped the switch.

The chair shook beneath his hand as the woman convulsed, her mind being sent back to that subconscious place of emptiness.

Tears leaked from his clenched eyelids, running down his face.

In a moment, it was over. The woman had stopped shaking. Her nails relaxed on the leather arm of the chair, where her white-lined scratches mingled with the rest.

Mike looked up toward the door, ready to stare hatred into Charlie’s eyes, but Charlie was gone. Mitch stood there, the man whose job he

had taken over. His eyes were distant. Even being in the same room as the machine seemed too much for him.

Mike lifted the bucket from the woman's head and led her toward the door.

Mitch caught him by the shoulder. "I heard what you said to her. About saving her from this place." He looked down at his shoes, not meeting Mike's eyes. "That's what I tell them, too."

He opened the door for Mike, and they led the woman back to the docks, where she would work for the rest of her life, or until she became too old to use. Where she would live for years to come, with the memory of this moment locked away where she couldn't even see it.

* * *

Claire backed away from him, holding her hands in front of her. "No."

"I didn't have a choice. If I hadn't done it, Charlie would have fired me. I'd never have been able to save anyone. I couldn't have brought him down."

Claire stared into his eyes, and through him, lost in some other place.

"Claire, I--"

Her eyes focused on his, and what he saw turned his sweat cold. Her lip raised, lips parted, eyes on the verge of tears and filled with disgust.

"Claire," he said, and she backed away.

"No," she said, putting her arms up again. She looked into his eyes, and he felt like a stranger in them.

"It was just one person, Claire. I can save hundreds of people. I just have to take Charlie down. What's one person compared to hun-

dreds?"

She laughed, but it was hollow, her eyes on the floor. "You're one person, Mike. I'm one person." The last words were barely a whisper.

"But Charlie--"

"Charlie? Charlie didn't do this, Mike. No matter what he told you to do, you flipped that switch. You stole her life."

The room grew cold in the silence that followed. Mike stepped toward her again, but she backed away. He sighed and walked toward the door. Claire didn't follow.

As he stepped over the threshold he heard her voice, distant, from her room. "Don't come back, Mike. Please."

He closed the door behind him and sunk onto the floor beside it. Shock and grief twisted in his stomach. It didn't matter what Charlie told him to do. He flipped the switch.

But Charlie hadn't told him to do anything. He'd offered escape. He would have let him leave.

He flipped the switch himself.

Mike held his head in his hands, thinking about Claire, and about the woman in the chair.

He sat there in the hall and wept.

* * *

White light shone all around Mike's head. It was his fault Claire was gone. It was his fault that woman was back on the docks after a chance to live her life. He'd become so obsessed with revenge on Charlie--with ending him--that he hadn't seen what he was doing.

She was gone.

The person he had known longer than any other. The person who had saved him and shared her life with him.

Loss and guilt tore at him, and he wanted it to end. He wanted to stop seeing their faces. He wanted to stop hearing Claire's voice. He wanted everything to go away. His fingers flexed at the side of ol' Betty. One flip of a switch. That's all it would take. One flip of that switch, and everything would be gone.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he reached for the switch. His fingers touched empty air and fell back to his side. It was too far.

Footsteps echoed through the otherwise silent room, sounding Charlie's gait. Mike clung to the hatred he had for the man, grasping for any reason to continue.

"Hey, Mike," Charlie said. His voice was softer than Mike had ever heard it. He reached for the switch again, but fell short. "You don't want to do that, Mike."

He let his hand fall limp at his side and closed his eyes. The light burned red through his eyelids. He thought back to the days before he could read his own thoughts. Before he had known worry, hate or loss. "You know, I used to work here, Charlie. For you."

"I know, Mike."

"Claire too. We got away." Mike laughed. "You remember us."

"I remember all of you. Every one that got away."

He saw the woman he had turned back. She had trusted him. He had told her he would set her free.

The world was a terrible place, full of terrible people. And now it was a place without Claire.

"I want to forget!" Mike yelled into the bucket. "I want to forget her!"

The metal feet of a chair scraped the floor as Charlie sat down. "It's not always that easy, Mike."

Mike reached for the switch again, straining his arm to flip it and become numb to the world, and to forget everything that had happened. The chair scraped the floor again, and Charlie's hand rested on his arm.

"You could do it," Mike said, pleading. "You could make it all go away." Tears ran down his cheeks as he begged his enemy for help. "Please, Charlie."

Charlie squeezed his shoulder. "You know, Mike. I've tried. I really have." His hand left his shoulder. "I could never flip that switch."

The door opened and closed across the room, and Mike stared into the light, thinking about Claire. Thinking about Charlie, and what he had become.

He stared into the light and wanted it all to go away.

Once in a Lifetime

by Gerri Leen

Mom saved for months
It took forever for my ticket
To get pulled in the lottery
But it did, and I'm here
Outside the door, the other kids
Pushing against me
But gently because none of us
Want to get kicked out for acting up
And then the door opens and while
We want to run inside, we walk
Stand quietly over the grated floor
And listen to the instructions
There are a lot of them for such
A simple room but I guess some kids
Panic or something—I'm not gonna

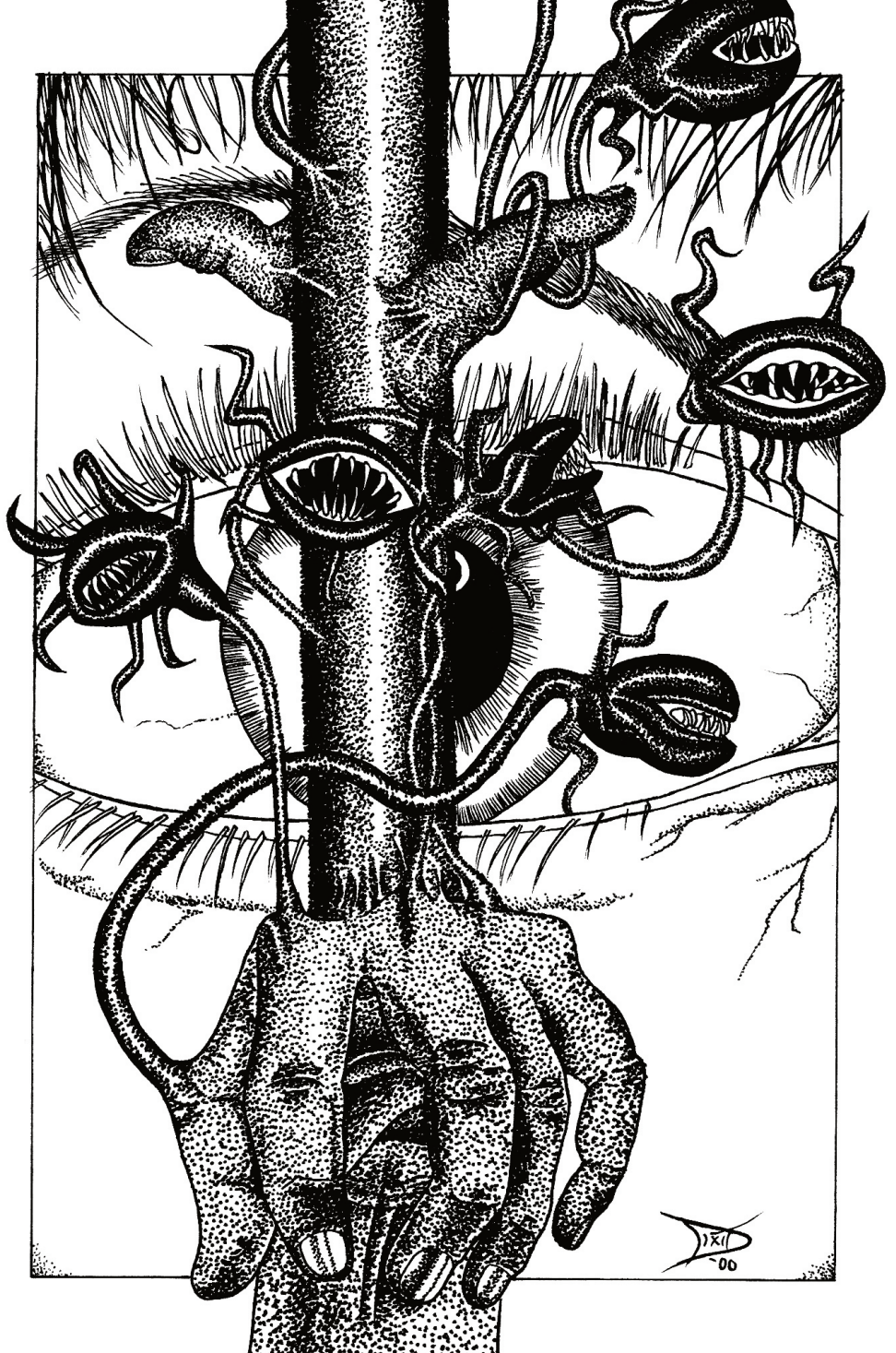
Then it starts, the room darkens and
There's this sense of heaviness
Like when you close your mouth
And puff it up with air and you can feel
The pressure in your ears and your nose
There's no other warning
The rain just starts—one of my
Classmates said it would feel
Like a shower but she was wrong
Yeah, this is water but it doesn't trickle
It's misting down on us steadily and the clothes
We changed into when we arrived
Are getting wet and heavy and then
The mist becomes harder and comes faster

And the rain just pours on us and I try to
Imagine when this happened in the real world
And people just went about their day
Or maybe waited out the storm
Or if they were growing things in dirt
Instead of air or water like we do now
They prayed for rain to water their crops

We start to dance, skipping and laughing
And everyone is smiling, even the kid
I thought for sure was going to freak out
Once she got in the rain room but she's not
She smiles at me and says, "Rain's cool"
And she's right so we hold hands for a moment
And spin like in that old movie only
We don't have an umbrella or a lamppost
But I get it now, I get why someone might
Want to sing in this, and then, the downpour
Starts to taper off and the instructions
Come back and I bet they do that on purpose
To ease us into reality, the same way I
Have to ease my baby brother into being awake
So he doesn't get too upset when he has to
Leave a dream, and even though I know this
I still want to go again, but there's nowhere
To hide in the room so I can't do that
I follow the other kids out, to the room where
Our dry clothes wait for our dry walk back home
As I dress, I hope tonight I'll dream of rain

A Dead Hand's Plant

by Shikhar Dixit



Bone Seeds

by Eva Papasoulioti

I planted your bones
under the roses and waited.

Tibias and femurs bloomed.
Our moments curved on them,

deep, as your remembrance
in my chest, on my tongue.

Every summer when ripe
and heavy, I will pick them

and make soup. Drink you again
like the last time we kissed. Taste

you, like the last time we made
love. I remember the day I bit

your clavicle and you smiled.
You offered me your fourth rib.

I offered you seven hundred years
of existence. A promise. Yours.

Forty years I'm waiting for you.
Fourteen bones from your toes

to go, to eat, to need. Then, I will spit
you out, bury you again and unearth you

on the seventh moonless month
of the seventh leap year. We're so

close to meeting again, love. We'll
have to find someone for the both of us

after, but it's too soon to think about it.
Tonight, I eat your ossicles. Tomorrow

I'll water you and keep on waiting.

The Wall

by Tim Hildebrandt



Doorway

by AD Ross

Heavy footsteps, getting closer. Laura tried again, pushing all her weight down onto the rusted bar. It creaked defiantly and refused to move. The fire door would not open.

He appeared at the end of the corridor. Two desperate, feral eyes, on a face that was half a child's, fixed upon her. Stoop-shouldered yet lanky, he towered over her, tall as she was. He came, lurching, muttering incoherently.

Laura watched him approach. He seemed to shift between dimensions; colours strobed along the short blade of the knife he held; his uneven strides lost speed until he staggered in slow motion. She was transfixed, the rusted bar loose in the grip of her fingers.

Dreamlike was the movement. The fire door swung open. To reality, Laura returned; harsh and jarring was her landing. She bolted. He followed.

The sky was blood. Laura noted the oddness but did not stop. She was no stranger to odd. True, this was a notch above usual, but he was still coming, his intent murderous. Time to ponder colour-spectrum hallucinations later.

Ahead were the southern blocks, looming ominously, drab municipal obelisks set against the crimson. She scanned for someone, anyone. The concrete expanse was inexplicably depopulated; debris-strewn more than was normal.

There was a scream, shrill, terrified.

Laura kept running, no matter how the effort burned. She would not be

a victim, not here.

Another scream. It sounded like a small child's.

Now she spared a glance. *Something* had intervened.

Its shape was vast and eldritch, a lurching, scorpion-like form of rotted timbers, a driftwood chimera. It had emerged from a great mound of refuse, an otherworldly vermin of monstrous proportions.

Trapped in a pincer, he was little prey, lifted easily from the asphalt. He sobbed and begged for his mother. His mother wasn't coming. Curiously, it shook him and then prodded him with a probing protuberance. He didn't try to fight back, he just cried. The driftwood chimera was unmoved by his tears.

Laura had stopped running. She watched in horrified fascination.

The driftwood chimera forced him to the ground, pinning his chest with an arachnid limb. The protuberance groped its way into his mouth, forcing his lips open. Teeth closed defensively. The appendage drew back and rammed its way inside, shattering enamel.

Laura scanned the open space between the three towers. Nobody was around, nobody watching, nobody filming with a mobile phone. Her phone had no signal. On the horizon, great pillars of smoke rose to the bloody heavens. The estate had turned from shithole to apocalyptic wasteland. She must've forgotten her meds, yet she'd never felt so clearheaded, so corporeal.

His cries were choked out now. The only sound above the low hum of the wind was the wooden creak of the chimera as it shook its vast body rhythmically. She couldn't help him, even if she wanted to.

With an eye on the driftwood chimera, she made for home.

* * *

The inside of her block was as deserted as the concrete expanse. She crept through corridors of bloodstained dilapidation. Doors were smashed open, violent struggle was much in evidence.

Laura peered through a broken doorframe on the fifth floor. There was no sign of Mrs McKinley. The sofa was upturned, the TV alive with static, the oven sparking, but no one was present. She stifled a sob and backed out into the corridor. The carpet squelched sickly beneath the thick soles of her boots.

Her own front door was untouched. She slipped her key into the lock. It turned reluctantly, sticking and creaking mutinously. She rushed in as quickly as the door would open and locked it behind her.

“Mum?”

No answer.

Her back to the door, Laura examined the hallway. It was different. Old paint flaked from the walls. The threadbare carpet bore an entirely incorrect pattern. She edged forward, into the living room. The furniture was old and passingly familiar. Discarded on the floor was a picture-frame. She picked it up, turned it over, and looked. Her father, impossibly, stood beside his daughter, who looked not at all dysfunctional.

Laura sat in an armchair for some time, staring out of the window, watching ashen clouds move across the crimson backdrop of the sky. The picture lay in her lap.

Hunger drove her to the kitchen. The fridge was empty and smelt foul. In the cupboard, she found a box of stale crackers and a half-empty bottle of cheap gin. In the tired armchair, she feasted on the crackers and sipped the rough spirit from the bottle.

Outside, the red of the sky deepened. She moved to the windowsill and perched. Below, the driftwood chimera still had him. Its movements were faster, sharper. It reared back its great arachnid head; limbs stretched out exultantly. Done, it released him, pulled its appendage from his mouth, and returned satisfied to its refuse pile, settling atop it.

Landed-fishlike, he wriggled for freedom; spitting broken teeth, fingers tugging at great clumps of hair, as if determined to pull them from his scalp. Pitiless, she observed.

Voices echoed in the wind. He heard, as did she.

They emerged from behind the new houses on Culver Street, scavengers, spears in hand. They saw him before he saw them. None looked up to see Laura. From her perch, for the longest time, she took them for people. Actual, living people. They were not.

He stretched out his hand toward them, in mute appeal, until closer, he could see what they were. He shrivelled up and covered his head with his arms, hunkering down to the concrete like he expected to be enveloped. Laughing, they surrounded him.

Their leader looked up to survey the three towers. Guttural, inhuman, his voice came: “Warmth!”

Laura saw his face. A face not of flesh, but of mottled stone, with gleaming jewels in place of eyes.

“Lurker!” another gravel voice declared.

From atop its trash-pile, the driftwood chimera lurched, swishing its

pincers menacingly. It would not relinquish its prize.

The stone scavengers lowered their spears and jabbed at the great beast, keeping it back, whilst their leader grabbed the overgrown boy by the arms. The chimera smashed down a driftwood pincer angrily, reducing a humanoid figure to rubble and dirty clothes. It pursued the band as far as the new houses and then fell back, frustrated and thwarted. It turned over its trash-pile and stalked the concrete expanse aimlessly, putting Laura in mind of a child, pouting because it had lost its favourite toy. Finally, sulkily, the chimera settled and there was nothing else to see. Laura retreated from the window.

* * *

Laura's room looked as it once had; a time so far back that its reappearance dredged with it a haul of buried memories. The stuffed rabbit was a Christmas present. Sitting cross-legged, beside a short, artificial tree, sparsely decorated with tinsel, she had received it. Her father smiled. He rarely did. The rabbit should be in a charity shop somewhere, not sitting on the pillow. She swatted it to the floor.

Her drawings of nightmarish creatures from other times and places were nowhere in evidence; nor were her meds. The bathroom cabinet was cleared out. There would be no chemical escape from this hallucination. She exhaled slowly. So many times she'd called down an apocalypse, she felt an uncanny lack of surprise at all this, as if she were responsible. No doubt it was that childish predilection to believe the fanciful, to escape into fantasies, which she'd never been able to fully cast aside. It was dangerous. Dr Randall told her so, warned her not to reject reality.

She slept. There was nothing else to do.

In dream, the sky was blue again, at least behind the grey veil of the clouds. Her mum watched TV. A boy was missing. His mother cried for the camera; her mum rolled her eyes, coldly. A bad family; always had been. Drugs, gangs. This was inevitable. No sympathy. Laura

leaned against the kitchen counter, eating a slice of toast. She'd be late for college if she didn't leave soon, but the TV caught her attention. She wandered over to see. Fear cut through the dream.

Laura woke at the sight of the overgrown boy's face and the sky was still blood.

There was no more food. The crackers were all gone and so was the gin. Brown, shitty water came from the taps in glops and spurts.

"Oh, fuck a duck sideways," she muttered. She had to leave soon.

Delaying the inevitable, she opened her mum's bedroom door. There was a double bed. That should be gone, replaced by a single. More photos, her father in many. She gazed down at the grandest upon the dresser. In the picture, they were a family. They'd never been a family.

The wasteland seemed more appealing now. She took a deep breath before the front door and moved her key to the lock.

The door rocked. She jumped back, startled. There was another heavy knock.

"You gonna' let me in, or what?"

She hesitated. The voice belonged to an Englishman and was unfamiliar.

"Laura?"

Unfamiliar, yet welcome.

Treading lightly, carefully, she moved to the peephole. In the corridor was a man with a heavy pack slung over his shoulder, wearing an army surplus jacket over faded black clothes; his dress sense almost a mirror of hers. His unshaven face was drawn, fatigued. Dried blood caked his hands. Some crazy little voice at the back of her mind said it was good

to see him.

“How’d you know my name?” Immediately she took a step back and cursed silently. Why did she have to speak?

“It’d be a bit strange if I didn’t.” Through the peephole, she saw him glance over his shoulder. It looked like a casual gesture, but somehow, she knew it wasn’t. “I’d like to come in now please.”

“What the hell’s going on?”

“You don’t know?” He turned his back to the door, and she heard his mumbled curses.

“Can you get me out of here?”

“I came here to ask you that.” That was quiet, not meant for her to hear. He raised his voice; “I don’t know, but we can help each other.”

“Why should I trust you?” The crazy little voice was insisting that she could and should trust him. She tried to ignore it.

He shrugged, incredulous. “Do you think you have much choice?”

She hesitated and turned to look over her shoulder at the uncanny state of the hallway and the empty kitchen beyond it. With a defeated sigh, she turned the key, tensing herself, anticipating an attack. Yet the sight of him, standing in the corridor, smiling tiredly made her relax, made her feel safer than she had in years. He stepped over the threshold like he was home.

* * *

Black beans, from the tin, had never tasted so sweet. So much better than stale crackers and cheap gin.

He sat in the chair opposite, not eating, frowning. He’d expected to

find more supplies, not share the little that remained.

“You’re not a shadow, I wouldn’t have felt your presence if you were. So that means you’re off your own branch, but you haven’t woken up yet.” He glanced up at the ceiling for a moment, summoning patience.

“Do you still have your key?”

She finished the beans first. “What?”

“You used a key, to get here, to this branch. Tried it on a door, any door; came through, found yourself here, in this version of the world. Do you still have it?”

He leaned forward expectantly. She pointed toward her keys, deposited on the side table.

He shook his head irritably, as though he were speaking to an idiot. “No, your *key*.”

“What the hell is going on?” She straightened in her seat; narrowed her eyes determinedly. “You don’t seem surprised at any of this shit.”

“You lost the key, didn’t you?” His jaw clenched in exasperation.

She exploded from the chair. “I don’t have any key! I don’t know what the hell is going on, and I want you to tell me.” She turned away, cheeks burning. The outbursts had to be controlled. Dr Randall said that was crucial. If only her meds were here.

He stood and spoke gently. “You went through a door, didn’t you? It was normal before you stepped through and then, suddenly, it was like you’d walked through the devil’s sphincter. Whole world gone to shit, right?”

She didn’t turn around. Fingers sought the comfort of her hair, thick bundles of it to pull. Recalling the fear stung. She was not a victim.

A hand rested on her shoulder. She looked down, the urge to swat it

away absent; the revulsion at being touched mysteriously vanished. If even her mother did this, her skin would crawl. She should be flailing, trying to claw out this strange man's eyes, yet the touch felt no different to her own. She stared at the hand and some crossed wire, that crazy little voice, said it was her own.

“Did someone try to hurt you?”

She pulled away, dismissing the crossed wires' weird signals. “He said he'd cut me up, and he gave it a try.” She grimaced and snorted. “But instead, he got mouth-fucked by a giant wooden scorpion and I'm not sorry.”

“A Lurker?” He sucked air between his teeth. “Ooh, nasty.”

She drifted toward the window. Down below, the driftwood beast was still pacing, inconsolable at the loss of its prize.

“So, you're being chased, but you didn't have your key with you?”

Irritated, she answered: “I already told you no key.”

He tilted his head, impressed, maybe even proud. “You opened a doorway without it.”

“You still haven't told me what's going on,” she said, moving back toward him. “Don't tell me you don't know either. You're way too casual, like all this shit is just normal-everyday to you.”

“Well yeah, this isn't too far from a normal Thursday for me,” he said with a shrug. “Usually in a situation like this, where you haven't woken up yet, I'd leave quietly and not say anything; but I dropped my key in a lake full of glass piranha, so I don't have that luxury right now. So just brace yourself Laura, I'm gonna' come right out with it.

“You have powers. You're special. More than human. You can open doorways to other times and places, other branches on the tree that is

the time-space continuum. You're Amaranthine, unfading, ever constant, undying, above all the petty little humans in your life, this current life, which is just one shit example from an impressively vast collection.” He grinned and gestured ever more extravagantly with his hands as he spoke.

Laura glared back at him unamused, her face stony. He frowned and changed tact.

“Or maybe you're just delusional, and I'm a figment of your imagination. Either way you need to get us both out of here. To do that we need your *key*. Your shadow on this branch should have a copy. You know the one I mean ... if you really think about it.”

Laura squinted out at the bloody sky, the apocalyptic rendering of her everyday world, so much like the scenes she liked to draw; hoping to see through it, to the normal, which must be hiding beneath. The ravaged world refused to dissolve, remained defiantly extant. She closed her eyes, defeated, feeling a wash of despair building within her ...

And then she saw it, in her mind's eye. The key, and with it, the compass.

* * *

They were a gift, from whom, no one could say. Yet her mum insisted they were important. She usually scorned the fantastical, mocked sentimentality, but an otherworldly gleam came into her eyes whenever the subject of the key and the compass came up. When questioned, she seemed genuinely no better informed than anyone else, but raise the idea of selling the odd items and there would be rage, incorporeal rage. *It's your birthright – blink – I don't know what that means – blink – but it is!*

Laura didn't like the key or the compass. The vibration in her eyeballs started around those things, no matter how recently she'd taken her meds. She was trying to avoid crazy; the key and the compass were

lunacy forged in silver, plated in gold. If she wasn't smart, she'd swear they were under some enchantment. But if she were smart, she'd recognise that was just delusion; Dr Randall agreed.

She wanted to be smart, to realise that she hadn't stepped through a doorway into hell. Except that meant her grasp on reality had literally dissolved and she might be destined to spend the rest of her life running from the monsters in her mind, bumping unknowingly into padded walls.

"Maybe the key is just a metaphor, in your mind. One you need to wake up," he said, smiling reassuringly.

Laura said nothing, nodded, went back to emptying the packed suitcases she'd found under her mother and father's marital bed. Somehow, it was unsurprising he could tell what she was thinking. The crazy little voice insisted that she could tell what he was thinking too, if she paid attention. She held back from trying, a little afraid of success.

"It's not here," she said. The declaration was final, incontrovertible, though there were still suitcases and drawers to search.

"You remember something?"

"They ran. Camps, for refugees, on the news, before ..." Laura trailed off. Dimly, she could see the block before the sky bled, alive with fear and panic. Mrs McKinley refusing to go. *This will all blow over; you'll see, but not before the looters have had everything you own.* She'd been here, normal, a happy daughter; no meds. Her father said they had to go. It would get worse. Ultimately running had made no difference.

"In your travels, you saw camps, outside the city." It was not a question. Without meaning to, she had looked into his memories. "Dominus, you walked right past it." She chuckled; it was so much like him.

"So, you remember me, now?" He'd never mentioned the name he liked to use.

She scowled, retreating in her mind, retreating from the flashes of impossible, bloodstained adventures, as enticing as they were terrifying. "We've never met before. I wanna' go home. I need my pills." She was normal, just ... imaginative, suggestible. Dr Randall said so.

Dominus mirrored her scowl and stood. "Pack up anything you need. We'll go soon."

* * *

In sullen silence, they prepared to depart. Laura froze. She could hear something scraping against the exterior cladding outside the window. Dominus looked up, and without speaking or giving any visible sign, told her to get back. She reacted without hesitation, as if his instincts were now hers.

It came through the windowpane, a writhing mass of latticed plastic, moulded into a lizard-form, fabricated organs visible throughout its hollow body. It scuttled inward, quick and agile. Peg-like teeth snapped viciously.

Dominus pulled a blade and then a second. They were reassuringly familiar and like nothing Laura had ever seen. Whoever designed them had looked at a nightstick and decided that could be more lethal with a blade in place of a blunt baton. The nightstick-blades pleased her. Instantly, she wanted a pair of her own, though that was wrong, she knew. Dr Randall said she mustn't carry knives or weapons. She could be expelled, arrested. That wasn't normal.

Dominus stepped forward, plunged the blades into the lattice-lizard's neck at opposing angles, snapped them back and wrenched its head clean off. The lattice-body skidded off into a corner, limbs still roving, scrabbling.

“We have to go.” The sound of more claws came from the broken window.

She followed without a word, allowing herself only a quick glance, fleeting; home as it might have been, home half-remembered. Into the wasteland they fled.

* * *

“They want life-force, mostly,” Dominus explained, “sometimes other things. Lurkers feed on hopes; dreams; imaginings.” He noted the sour look on her face. “Or maybe they just represent your neuroses. I’m sure your psychiatrist would agree.”

They had edged around the ‘Lurker’ and its upturned trash-pile. It watched them with glass-eyes affixed from rotted-reed antennae but kept a trepidatious distance, as if taking them for something dangerous.

As they departed, Dominus produced a small, clear crystal from his pocket and tossed it toward the driftwood chimera. The last she saw, the Lurker was sniffing at the asphalt, investigating the parting gift. He raised a mischievous eyebrow when she gave him a quizzical look.

He led them out into the ruination, streets littered with burnt-out cars and discarded bones, hugging the shadows of abandoned houses.

“Blessings from the gods. The old, or the new; I’m not sure which,” he muttered.

“This was all normal.”

In her mind’s eye, she could see another life, her own but not. Her father was a respectable man, her parents’ marriage a happy one. These things had never been true, but here, they were, and she could glimpse it, through half-closed eyes. She’d had friends. No double vision, no vibrations behind the eyeballs. Little creativity though. No imagina-

tion. Limited horizons. Just a contemptable normal, or not even really that; just a sketch of a normal. Less than a shadow of herself. Boring, mundane, never imagining anything strange could happen. Until the news said something strange was happening. The sky begins to bleed. The earth opens. New beings, fresh lifeforms, emerging from inanimate materials. The end-times come.

“Remembering things?” he asked. When she didn’t reply, he offered, smirking: “Or imagining them?”

She changed the subject. “The blades, where’d you get them?”

His face brightened. “I took them from a Wolf of Winter, a million years from now and a trillion miles from here.” He unsheathed one and handed it to her, hilt-first. She took it. The feel was familiar, if slightly heavy. Her wrist came alive, and the blade rotated, clumsily for a moment, then fluidly, then expertly. The weight was a little off, nothing more.

Dominus walked beside her, watching approvingly.

“I know how to use this.” She clenched her fist and brought the blade to a halt in a guard position parallel from her wrist to the point of her elbow. She handed it back.

“Of course you do,” he said, receiving it.

“What am I?”

Dominus grinned. “Not normal, whichever way you spin it.”

* * *

The Stone-kind had taken the camp.

There had been soldiers to keep the refugees safe – they turned on each other and then they ran. Madness reigned. Some refugees tried to

get away. They didn't get far. The jewel-eyed stone men came out of the ground. They overwhelmed everyone. Her mother was among the first to die. In terror, hiding behind an army jeep, Laura watched. She couldn't reach her dad. They took him, struggling, shouting. She covered her mouth to smother her scream. And then she was someone else, a daughter from a different life, strange and medicated, lost in an unfamiliar world.

"It's like I was here. Another me."

Under an abandoned truck they lay, watching the camp below.

"I wouldn't worry about it; either she was just a shadow, holding your place on this branch, acting as your eyes and ears. Or you're living out your delusion, in which case you made all of this up, and you know everything about it."

"Oh great, nothing to worry about then," she scoffed, before an involuntary sob escaped her. She ground her teeth angrily and dug her fingernails into her palms. Dominus noticed and squeezed her shoulder again.

"Whatever you decide is going on here, I am going to help you."

"I don't need saving." Angrily she swatted his hand away. "I'm not a victim."

"Good stuff, you stick it to the bastards." He pointed almost merrily to the figures who been watching them for some time.

They had the trucks surrounded. Ruby eyes gleamed in the dim half-light, hungry, envious.

"Warmth!" their leader exclaimed, voice rumbling deep. Marble joints creaked. Cracked, statue-fingers reached exultantly to the blood sky. "So much warmth!"

The four-ton truck flipped over like a plastic model; it was no true ob-

stacle to stone hands. There was no escape. The Stone-kind closed in. Dominus raised his hands peaceably, offering them no resistance. Laura backed up, as far as she could, insisting to herself that it couldn't be real. Yet the inhuman embrace felt all too real. Her skin crawled. She struggled. Implacable, they held her; dragged her down the hill, toward the camp. She looked to Dominus. He had his blades; he could use them, surely, he could carve them a way out? He was marching along almost amiably.

"So, which set of gods do you lot serve anyway?" he asked, conversationally. If the Stone-kind understood the question, they didn't let on. He caught her eye and she glimpsed apprehension beneath the well-practiced façade of relaxed confidence. Flashes of other times and places ran through her mind's eye, sensations of excitement and danger, recollections of the future, seen through Dominus's eyes. She braced herself against the memories, feeling they might subsume her. She shrank back into herself, back into the grip of the stone men and the horrors they had prepared, with only the hope that Dominus knew what he was doing.

* * *

The rows weren't fully visible from the truck on the hillside, hidden as they were behind the perimeter of upturned army vehicles surrounding the camp. Cultivated neatly like ornamental bushes amongst the tattered tents and broken prefabricated buildings were the structures of living metal wire. Hung upon them, bound into their vaguely moving vines, were the refugees. Most were dead. Some were not.

"Laura?" His voice was hoarse, pained, but unmistakable.

Her heart broke. It took with it whatever composure she still possessed.

"Oh, Jesus no!" she wept. Here he was. In the flesh. She'd sworn she never wanted to see him again, yet all she wanted now was to run to him. Inhuman arms would not have it. They dragged her by.

“You bastards!” her father screamed, thrashing, strength recharged from anguish. “Let her go! I’ll kill you all! If you hurt her, I’ll—” Living wire sealed his jaw shut.

The leader of the Stone-kind chuckled mockingly. It was a rumbling, cruel, tectonic sound.

Laura struggled against their grip. Angry tears burned her eyes. Her teeth ground madly. She would not be a victim. Not there, not here.

“You’re going to regret that.”

The Stone-kind turned their heads, curiously. Dominus seemed very calm, very resolved. They had crossed a line. Unnerved, the Stone-kind hushed.

“This way,” their leader insisted, casting a nervous glance back at their captives.

* * *

Metal wire vines snaked around her arms and lifted her. More enveloped her torso and legs. Strength sapped from her core outwards, almost at once. It was a lull, seductive, insidious. Into it, she could fall easy and never rise again. Let herself bleed away into the wires, surrendering strife, piece-by-peaceful-piece, until she ceased to be at all.

“Stay with me,” Dominus said.

Her eyes struggled to focus.

“Just a little longer.”

She murmured, something, nothing. Dreamless sleep seemed better.

“Think of dad.” Dominus said the words knowingly, in what seemed to be her voice. Her eyes snapped open.

He was here. He’d come back. Memories, from her own life, from her other lives, surged up through the blanket of numbing paralysis. Her dad, *her dad*; he slammed the door on his way out. Tears were in his eyes. Too weak and he knew it. *Run away, like you always do.* That was what her mum said. He could find the strength; she wanted to tell her mum, tell him, but she was a child, and she couldn’t find the words. She knew how her dad felt. How did she know that? How could a child know that?

Run away Dominus, like you always do. Another memory had snuck in covertly. Dominus was staring back at somebody, somebody who needed him; much as her father had stared back at her. Dominus’s face shifted, morphed into another in the fugue of recollection. She expected it to be her father’s, but it was her own.

“Please, we have to help him, save him ...” she begged.

Dominus shook his head. “We can’t take him off this branch, this is his world. But there is someone else here who doesn’t belong.”

She knew whom he meant.

“You’re responsible. You brought him here.”

She howled, enraged, frustrated. “You bastard!”

“That’s the spirit.” He chuckled, knowingly. “Just stay awake for five more minutes. Help’s coming.”

* * *

Help arrived in a monstrous, driftwood form, just as Dominus intended. It launched itself at the barricades, scattering steel hulks. The dead vehicles crashed into the camp, ploughing through stone bodies. An explosion announced its arrival like a claxon of catastrophic mayhem.

She was straining impotently against the grip of the wire vines. Domi-

nus seemed very calm. He wasn't struggling. Even after the explosion, he didn't start to struggle. Instead, he closed his eyes, and his lips began to move. He was reciting names. The wiry entanglements began to shudder in discomfort, until, jerkily, the vines rushed to disentangle themselves, like a poisoned man desperate to wretch up a contaminant.

He hopped down without a care as the living mass of wire withered.

"How'd you do that?" Her struggle was making the vines' grip only stronger.

"Fed it my past lives." He grinned. "That's like feeding a baby aviation fuel. You could do it."

"Can you get me down?"

Disappointed, he drew his blades and cut through the wire vines as easily as if they were made of string.

"So, what's it going to be, are we going to save the little shit?" he asked when she was free. "He's up that way, somewhere." He waved his hand, vaguely.

"I'm going to save my dad."

"He's not your-" Already she was away. "You can't save him."

"Watch me," she shouted back. He ran after her. She turned, defensively. "Don't try to stop me."

He spun his blades, bringing the hilts forward, offering them up. "You'll need these. I can find the key and the compass. Meet me back here."

Cautiously, she took the blades, half expecting a trick.

"This isn't going to bring you any closure. You can't save your dad.

You'll fail." He spoke the words apologetically. "But someone you brought here, well that's a different matter."

"Piss off."

She tucked the blades into a guard position, resting them against her forearms, and sprinted forward. If this were indeed a delusion, it would make sense; why she couldn't save a figment of her imagination. So maybe she was just running deeper into her mania, her flight of fantasy. Perhaps the only way out was to confront reality. If Dominus was a part of her psyche, maybe he really was trying to save her, to get her home? It all went through her head. She probably believed it too. She didn't turn back though.

* * *

It was all muscle memory. She didn't have to think about how to use the blades. Her body moved as if it were someone else's. The strikes didn't have the power they should, that she expected, like she'd been someone physically stronger when she'd learned the moves. But the timing, the form, the fluidity; it was all perfect. The stone golem moved in slow motion. It swung and jabbed at her without success, until it was off balance and flailing desperately. She stepped behind it, locked her blades, and ripped its goddamned head off.

She ran on, thinking maybe it wouldn't be so bad if all this were real, the concussive force of her steps drowning out any warning that might be calling out to her in Dr Randall's measured, dulcet tones.

Her father's mouth was sealed shut by the living wire vines, but his eyes were still open. They focussed on her and there was relief. She swung the blades around and slashed at the wires, making quick, nimble cuts with practiced fluidity. In moments, the metal vines were receding, withering back into the earth. Her father staggered but managed to keep his balance. Laura turned to face him, but all the things she'd wanted to say, had ever imagined saying to him, dissolved, leaving her mind blank.

He stared at her for a moment. It was her father, unmistakably, but so much older than she remembered. His dark hair had greyed and thinned, his aquiline features were creased with lines, his stature seemed shrunken. She realised quickly that he'd grown no shorter since she'd seen him last; it was she who'd grown taller, a woman not far off six feet in height and not a child of forty-eight inches. She smiled dumbly, hopefully. His face changed. The expression was as unwelcome as it was omnipresent in her memories.

"You're not my daughter," he growled, backing off half a step.

She swallowed and said nothing.

"Where is she?"

"Back that way, two rows over." The words came of their own accord. She turned and walked toward the place where the Stone-kind had hung her other self, beckoning him to follow. She hadn't come down that row with Dominus, nor had she traversed it on her way to save her father. She remembered the way vaguely from another life, just well enough to retrace it. The other Laura was concussed and semi-conscious before they fed her to the wire vines. She turned her face away when they came to the place, unable to look at her own dead body.

Laura stared at the muddy ground, pushing at it with the toe of her boot, listening to her father cry and to the ever-shifting sound of chaos that moved with the Lurker, somewhere on the other side of the camp. It seemed the driftwood scorpion was keeping the Stone-kind occupied elsewhere, quite possibly on purpose.

"Who are you?" her father asked.

She opened her mouth but had no answer to offer.

"If you think I won't beat you to death ..." he hissed. This was the father she remembered, even if the words were a little stronger than anything she could recall him saying. She raised her head defiantly,

hardly caring about her own corpse hanging by his shoulder.

"I'm the one you walked out on," she spat back.

His brow creased in confusion. "What?"

"You never even looked back, did you? Never gave a shit what happened to us. Just took the easy way out." She paused, choking down a sudden sob. "Was it me? It was, wasn't it?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm her." Laura raised an arm toward her doppelganger, but kept her eyes turned half-away. "From the world where you walked out and left us."

"So, what, are you saying you are my Laura? From like a parallel universe, or something?" he asked, incredulously.

She nodded, but then shook her head, defeated. "No, not a parallel universe. There's no such thing. I'm just having some sort of breakdown and I'm seeing you here, trying to make sense of it. You're not real. She's not real. I've just lost it."

Laura looked right at her other self, expecting the world to dissolve around her to reveal a padded cell, or worse; some dark cellar, where *he'd* locked her up, made her *his* victim, a reality so painful that it made this fantastical horror show an appealing refuge.

The world, the bloodied sky, the ongoing apocalypse; all of it remained obstinately unchanged. Nothing dissolved. Rather, she got a fleeting glimpse of what it was to die.

"Not real?" Her father's mouth tightened, dangerously. "Not fucking real?"

Dazed, teetering at the threshold, she focussed her eyes on her father,

almost too late.

He made an enraged, animal noise and charged.

She still had the blades. Her arms worked by themselves, executing someone else's reactions.

One blade stopped just as it dug into the skin at his throat, leaving a mark indistinguishable from a shaving cut. The other stopped just as it parted the fibres of his shirt, an inch above his navel, leaving no more than a pinprick indentation.

He froze, powerless and afraid, afraid of her. Unconsciously, she smiled.

“Do you have any idea how many times I've imagined putting a knife to your throat?”

He backed away slowly, eying the blades nervously. “You can't be Laura. No matter what happened, she could never turn into such a hate-filled little bitch.” Once again, she saw the father she remembered.

“It was me, wasn't it? Why you left. Because I wasn't her, little Miss Perfect.” She looked again at her dead self and got another glimpse of passing. It made her wince, hold herself back from the threshold. It was all the invitation he needed to run.

For the second time, her father left. Desperately, Laura tried to follow, but this time there was more than a slammed door in her way. Half a dozen stone men emerged from the rows, spears in hand, jewel-eyes gleaming.

Their leader took a step toward her and raised an accusing marble finger. The mottled face shook with anger.

She let out a demonic shriek and rushed at him.

* * *

“Help me. Laura, please.”

She stopped and ground her teeth, the sound of his voice, pitiful as it was, making her shudder.

“Please,” the overgrown boy sobbed, air whistling through his broken teeth. “Please help.”

She looked up at him. His tracksuit was tattered, his face covered in grime and bruises, his limbs bound by living wire vines. His brutish, half-child face contorted in a piteous grimace. She'd hacked down six stone monstrosities using instincts and muscle-memories that were not her own. She'd pummelled their leader into the muddy ground as the stone man pled for mercy. Slitting this boy's throat should be no difficult thing.

Laura raised a blade until it rested against his throat. He whined and his swinish eyes followed the edged steel fearfully. The power of it felt good. She was not a victim. It would be satisfying and there would be no consequences in this place. She told herself to do it, ignoring the voice of Dr Randall, which insisted this was unhealthy, not normal. Yet as her fingers tightened around the blade's grip, she heard another voice. It belonged to Dominus.

This isn't who I am. This isn't how I do things.

“Easy for you to say. You're not weak. You're dangerous, no one's preying on you.”

Oh, I am weak, and afraid; I really am, but this still isn't how I do things.

She narrowed her eyes; willed herself to do it. Yet the strength went from her arm. The blade dropped away from his throat. She couldn't, as detestable as the boy was.

“You ready to get out of here?” Dominus asked. He had appeared behind her, the key and the compass in hand. The objects shimmered, mystically. He glanced up at the boy. “Despicable little shit, isn’t he?”

“My dad ran.”

“Yeah. It could have been worse though.”

She bit her lower lip and went to work on the wires holding the boy. He flopped to the ground and then scrambled toward her legs, meaning to wrap his arms around them. She got the sole of her boot into his shoulder and pushed him away. He skidded in the mud.

“We’d better go. The Lurker’s running out of Stone-kind and I don’t see any doors around here.”

* * *

The Lurker was waiting for them, guarding the discarded end of a porta cabin where a lockable door remained on its hinges.

“Oh, fuck a duck sideways!” Dominus exclaimed, dismayed but unsurprised.

The great otherworldly vermin reared up, expectantly.

“It wasn’t helping us?” she asked, keeping her shoulder behind his. Behind them, the overgrown boy cowered and whimpered.

“It was, but only because I kind of promised it the contents of your imagination,” Dominus admitted, sheepishly. “Thought we’d be gone before it finished off the Stone-kind.”

The Lurker advanced, reaching out at Laura with a multitude of freakish limbs.

“I need to swap you.” Dominus thrust the key and the compass toward

her, his eyes on the blades. Reluctantly, she held them out hilt-first. He tossed the key and the compass down at her feet and snatched the blades.

“Come back for me!” he shouted and charged at the driftwood chimera. It skittered backward, fearfully.

Laura cursed, grabbed the key, and the compass, which was connected to it by a chain; took the boy’s filthy, sweaty hand, and made for the door. In a frenzied blur, the key clicked snugly into the keyhole despite the wild variance in their shapes, the door swung open, and they stumbled out into another world.

* * *

She stared up at the sky. The clouds were deep grey, thick and bruised. Tensed, she searched for some indication of the sky’s colour behind the covering, hoping and praying that it would be a light blue and not the claret-red of the nightmare. Finally, she spotted a parting in the clouds. She exhaled, almost on the verge of tears. It was blue, blue and normal.

She dropped her head, which still felt heavy, thankfully and recognised the refuse-strewn space as the bins behind one of the north towers. Her relief was short lived.

In her peripheral vision, she saw him rising from the piss-stained concrete. He still had the knife. He was making incoherent noises, not even attempting to form actual words. Her head swam and an insidious urge to go limp rose through her chest.

“I should have killed him,” she said to herself, starting to feel almost far away.

No, you shouldn’t have; but that doesn’t mean you can’t beat the shit out of him now, Dominus’s voice answered.

“You took the blades,” she protested.

You don't need them.

Without thinking, she spun around and slammed her fingers into the boy's throat. He gagged and dropped the knife. She got her boot to it and slid it away; it disappeared down a drain. At the same time, she grabbed his outstretched wrist and pulled him toward her, manipulating his movements so that she could get her hand behind his elbow. She applied pressure. The joint strained. Bones cracked. The boy dropped to his knees. She landed a savage kick below his ribs, and he went all the way to the ground. She stamped on his lanky, prone form again and again, until he was begging for mercy, and she was laughing, giddily.

Finally, she pulled her up hood and stalked away, leaving him in a pool of his own blood. She turned a corner and walked right into two uniformed police officers.

* * *

Laura stared at the table, sullenly. Sergeant Cameron sighed, tired and unsurprised. They'd been here before.

"You put him in intensive care," Cameron said.

Laura couldn't suppress a snicker. The Sergeant's teeth clicked together.

"Jordan's been in and out of consciousness, but we managed to speak to him. He didn't make a lot of sense, but he did say you kidnapped him, did things to him."

She flinched at the sound of the boy's name. Whenever anyone spoke it, a wave of prickliness cascaded down the back of her neck. For years now he'd cast covetous glimpses in her direction. Each time she'd rejected his advances the insults he'd hurled had grown stronger, *slut*, *bitch*, *whore*; the more extreme his threats had become. He'd promised he would cut her; if he couldn't have her, he said, he'd make sure no

one ever wanted her. She'd grown accustomed to living with the uneasy certainty that sooner or later, his talk would turn to action.

"Did you?" Cameron pressed, already half-believing it was true.

"He took me," she muttered. Admitting that made her feel sick. In that moment, she wanted to believe that they'd both tumbled into an apocalyptic other world, but she could only return to a more horrible conclusion. Jordan had taken her, had kept her somewhere, tied up, and all the while she'd fled into a fantasy. She thought about the key and the compass but couldn't recall when they'd left her grip or what had become of them. She realised that she hadn't thought about Dominus once since her return; found no concern within herself at what might have happened to him. There were bruises, signs of restraint tattooed up her arms, but she wondered if the grip of the stone men and the embrace of the living wires had simply been Jordan's hands. The thought made her gag. Sergeant Cameron averted his eyes for a moment.

"Are you saying he did things to you?"

"I don't remember. I guess so." She dug her nails into her palms, determined not to break down.

"Where'd he take you? You have to give me something, Laura. I can't help you otherwise. All we have is that both of you two disappeared for forty-eight hours and then we find Jordan beaten half to death by the bins and your boot-print on his face."

"I don't know." It was getting harder not to cry.

"Come on now, I need more than that. I know what a little shit Jordan Nesbitt is. But you're no angel yourself, and if there's a lass on that estate who I could see terrorising the local Neds it'd be you."

Laura closed her eyes. "I don't know where he took me because I was seeing shit." She could hold back the tears no longer. "I saw monsters

and my dad was there and the sky was all bloody and I'm just a fucking loon." She collapsed against the table.

"I take it you're off your pills again."

"No, they just don't work anymore." She clutched at her hair, begging for the sky to turn bloody once again. She never heard the interview room door open.

"Sergeant, this young lady seems to be in distress." The voice was English and familiar. Laura smiled, relieved; the fantasy was taking her again. She didn't look up, fearful of breaking its spell. "I won't file a grievance if you give me the room so I can speak to my client."

She heard Sergeant Cameron stand, heard his chair scrape against the floor; heard the door as he left the room reluctantly.

"I didn't ask for a lawyer," she said, keeping her head down, her eyes squeezed tight shut.

"Good job I'm not one then, isn't it?"

Finally, she looked up. It was him, here in the real world, shaven now, wearing a suit.

"But I just imagined you, didn't I?"

"You still believe that?" He deposited the key and compass on the table before her. "I wonder how long before you wake up. I was a lot younger and I kind of already knew it was coming. But then, they didn't have psychiatrists where this version of me was born; nobody telling him the visions were an illness. They're sending Dr Randall by the way, to do an evaluation. He'll tell you you're crazy, not in so many words, but you get the picture. At some point though, you realise you're not; you realise that you're Amaranthine, that you don't belong in this world."

"I don't know what I believe, so how can you tell me what I'll decide?"

"I know because you came back for me. I didn't die at the pincers of a Lurker with a dream-straw stuck down my throat. Something happened to you, after this point, and you woke up, you remembered who you are and what you're supposed to be doing. I'm glad; death by Lurker is most definitely not death by too much fun." Dominus stood and straightened his jacket. "I'll find out whatever it was when the time comes, anyway, when I get there."

"You're talking like you're a time-traveller."

"Yes. Haven't you been paying attention? *Opening doorways to other times and places?* I guess we'll have to work on that. The compass is set, anyhow, for whenever you're ready. Just find a door, bumble through the rest like we always do." He paused at the door of the interview room and smiled at her. There was something profoundly sad in that smile. "I'm glad I got to meet you, before I well, you know, become ..." He shrugged. "I don't know, feels like maybe things won't be so bad after all. You're not a coward. You do what's right, even when it's difficult. I need that backbone." He raised his hand to knock.

"Hey, wait a second. *Run away Dominus, like you always do.* What does that mean?"

His head snapped around as though he'd heard a gunshot and he looked as though he'd seen a ghost. He swallowed nervously.

"Being able to go anywhere, at any point, to countless different versions, to live different lives; something that wonderful always comes with a cost. You broaden your horizons and become aware of the possibilities, the beautiful, magnificent possibilities, but also the horrifying ones ..." His voice faded and she watched his face darken as knowledge and memories assaulted him. "The temptation to run and hide, just to pretend none of it exists; that never goes away."

“It’s still there, happening, isn’t it? The version of the world with the bloody sky?”

“Yes, and that’s just one. There are countless others, and some make that place look like a paradise; but that’s not what I’m talking about. Not really.”

“The gods,” she began.

“The old and the new,” he continued, “facing each other from either end of the tree, the ancients buried in the roots and the eventuals growing in the branches. Sooner or later one set of gods tries to take the tree from the other.” He turned to the door and knocked. “Maybe it would have been better if we hadn’t woken up, after all.”

* * *

They charged her with aggravated assault. There was no physical sign of her having been injured or raped, no evidence in the block of a place where Jordan could have hidden her. Dr Randall sat with Laura as she recounted all that she’d experienced, scribbling notes with the enthusiasm of a man whose career was about to experience a dramatic upswing. Laura didn’t mention Dominus’s visit in the interview room, nor did she show him the key and compass, suddenly afraid that he would say Sgt Cameron had left her alone, that there had been no man claiming to be her legal counsel, that it had been Cameron who’d returned the items to her. She was intrigued by what Dominus said and found that she wanted to believe that she wasn’t really a deluded nobody; that she was in fact a magical soldier in a grand universal war with unearthly monsters and evil gods. But outwardly she made a well-practiced show of accepting the unreality of all she’d experienced.

Laura’s mother arrived soon enough, with a real lawyer in tow, her dad’s old brief, who was no stranger to getting McKyres out on bail. Valery McKyre rampaged through the station, haranguing any officer too slow to evade her, warning them that any jury would find her

daughter innocent; she had clearly acted in self-defence. Laura wondered if the bail hearing came up so quickly and bond was set so paltry-low just to shut her mother up.

When she finally got home, to home as she expected it, Laura collapsed face-first onto her bed and slipped into a deep sleep. She dreamt of Dominus, dreamt of being him. Through his eyes, she saw a woman, on her knees, drenched in blood, reaching out to her, silhouetted before an alien sky that was ablaze. *Run away Dominus, like you always do*, the woman said. Laura woke with tears in her eyes.

“When are you going to tell me what happened?” her mum asked.

Groggily, Laura pushed herself up high enough to turn her head. Her mother was sitting facing her, her back to the drawing table, leafing through a stack of Laura’s most recent drawings. She raised her eyes, piercingly blue, intense, difficult to lie to, and fixed them on Laura.

“I don’t know.” Laura turned her face back to the pillow. She couldn’t bear the thought of telling her mother what she’d seen.

“You don’t know when you’re going to tell me, or you don’t know what happened?”

“Both.”

“Well Dr Randall called, asked me to ask you to give him a ring. He sounded all very excitable. Something about that little shit waking up and talking some nonsense about a scorpion, or something.”

Laura’s eyes widened, but her face was obscured, so her mum carried on speaking.

“Whatever happens I’m proud of you and no matter what, that little shit will rue the bloody day he ever laid eyes on you.” Laura became aware of her mother leaning over and then hesitating, reminding herself that her little girl couldn’t bear physical affection. She began to

back away. Laura pushed herself up and reached for her mum's hand; she squeezed it and tried not to wince.

"Love you," she mumbled, pulling her hand back as gently as she could bear.

"Love you too." Her mum withdrew, clasping her hands together and blinking away tears.

* * *

Laura tapped the landline handset against her chin and stared out of the window, down at the spot where the driftwood scorpion had violated the overgrown boy. Her chest felt nervously tight. Her would-be tormentor was awake and talking. She could no longer keep the truth of her reality sealed in its box, at once mundane and fantastical. She would have to speak to Dr Randall and find out what the boy had said; whether he'd endured the otherworldly horrors she'd seen or experienced something altogether more banal. But she couldn't bear the thought of either being told that she was indeed a time-travelling, dimension-hopping immortal or just a delusional schizophrenic. She didn't want to call Randall for the same reason she'd avoided trying the key and compass, or why she hadn't checked the bottom of her wardrobe to confirm they were indeed fresh copies given to her by Dominus and not those she'd always possessed; she wished she could remain in a state of flux.

Procrastinating, she made some toast and turned on the TV. There was a report on the news; there had been some kind of terrorist attack on a local hospital. Security footage had leaked. Massive figures, wearing some type of black body armour, wielding exotic weaponry, were striding through the chaos. The oddly flat motorcycle helmets they wore had blacked-out visors, which were adorned with the spray-painted outline of a skull. They looked uncannily like a character she

often drew, a cybernetic slave-soldier from the far future. Laura felt her breath catch in her throat. Through the smoke, one of the figures emerged dragging the overgrown boy, struggling, clothed in a hospital gown. A slight woman wearing an expensive-looking red leather jacket and designer jeans followed jauntily, skipping her way through the pandemonium. She noticed the security camera and looked up, flicking her unruly hair from her face to grin at the lens. She almost seemed to see Laura, rooted before the TV, and mouthed the words *run away, like you always do* mockingly, before bouncing along after the overgrown boy and his monstrous kidnapper. Laura stared back at the oddly familiar woman, trying to place her, until she realised that she'd seen her when she'd dreamed of being Dominus. *Run away Dominus, like you always do*, the woman, bloodied and desperate, had said.

The sound of her plate clattering against the carpet snapped Laura out of her trance. She knew immediately what she needed to do. She raced into her room and pulled open the drawer where she'd stowed the key and compass. She felt her eyelids flutter involuntarily as she touched the gold-plated-silver.

Laura approached the front door and let her *key* slip into the lock. Despite their disparate shapes, key and keyhole clicked together snugly. She looked down at the compass and hoped it was indeed set correctly, feeling her resolve waiver. In the silence she could hear her own shallow, uneven breathing.

Silence.

Laura frowned and looked back toward the living room, trying to recall when she'd switched the TV off. She shrugged, deciding it wasn't important, and turned the key.

The door swung open to the bloody-skied hell. She smiled and crossed the threshold.

I happened to pass here

by Irina (Tall) Novikova



The Harpy's Chick

by Deborah L. Davitt

From the first tentative tap
of soft-taloned infant hands
against the inside of the eggshell,

to the soft, downy grey feathers
that keep the infant warm
in the nest against the barren rocks,

to the voracious, gaping mouth,
that opens, begging to be fed
gobbets of meat dropped

pre-chewed, yet still red and stringy
from the mother harpy's mouth
(best not to ask where she hunted,

where she scavenged the raw and bleeding flesh,
to what creature or being
it once belonged)

the infant is a study in contrasts—
the soft roundness of its infant human body,
the jagged, ragged row of infant teeth

in its red-stained mouth,
the newly-hardened black talons upon its
pudgy human hands;

but its eyes, those belong to a hawk
predatory and cold,
announcing to the world

that this infant will grow up to hunt,
will course the skies in pursuit of prey,
will become what men fear in themselves—

a monster
without conscience
and no consciousness of evil.

Fool's Trap

by Ashley Abigail
Gruezo Resurreccion



My Wonder Book of Snails and Slugs

by David Stevens

1.

Towards the end of his long life amongst the snails, the man sat diminished within the rattle and crunch of the wind blowing through the fractured shells—from the merely broken, through to ground down grit—that composed the beach. His spine bowed so that his body curved inwards on itself. Left long enough he would become a logarithmic spiral, but he knew that death was coming soon and would thwart that outcome.

Above him on driftwood pikes flapped weathered black bath mats. Lower down on lesser pikes were impaled the skulls of those for whom the bath mats had been skin and fur, mammalian intruders like himself, scant interruptions to the world of molluscs.

He had killed them all, but had taken no pleasure in the deaths, other than a slight contentment in a technical skill well exercised. As a collection, the remnants left a lot to be desired. They were uniform, unlike for example the marbles of his youth, all the different aggies, cat's eyes, alleys, and jaspers that he had played with in the basement. There was no variety to catch the eye, to lead it from one specimen to another. Just a bunch of fading black bath mats.

He had not exterminated the brutes, he still saw them in the distance on his perambulations, but as he killed more and more, they had wearied of their nightly attacks on his camp. He could not remember why he had mounted them so. They did not serve as scarecrows. Tradition he supposed. Something for him to do, and once done, he could not be bothered to undo the arrangement.

He wondered if his friend had ever been among the waves of attackers. He did not think that he was amongst his victims. The man was sure

that he would have recognised his friend's suckered scar, even through the fur.

Now, as he more frequently slipped into a twilight state beneath the warm sun, the problem he dwelt upon was this: what force had propelled him to this land? What had driven him here, so far away?

2.

Why had he been barefoot, the man wondered. He could have turned back and collected his shoes, but no. The boy that the man had once been shuffled only one way along the path. He would not be changing direction.

It was dark—it was always dark—but not yet true night. A hint of light came from far away, bouncing between earth and sky, until it flickered at the base of the low clouds above his head, a poor—and slightly green—imitation of lightning.

It was cold—it was always cold—and the boy distracted himself by picking out details of the path revealed by the flashes of not-exactly-lightning. He noticed his feet were dirty; well, that was a given. On a rock he saw a snail. It was slightly different to what he was used to, its shell a cone spiralling into the air. He hadn't thought about that before, that snails could be different. Sea snails are different, he supposed. All the shells washed upon a beach, and when you pick them up, each is flawed. Every single one of them pierced through by a predator inserting a proboscis, drilling into the softness beneath, sucking it up to make it one with itself.

He could look in his library he had gathered in the basement, see if

there was an *Observer Book of Snails*. He had one on butterflies. There's one on shells, but only sea shells, not land shells. No one collects land shells, he suspected. But no, he would not be turning back to check.

The boy walked on and on and on. He did not see if the shell of the next snail was different, he did not see it at all, but heard and felt it crunch beneath his foot. He felt a little bad, but walked on.

Soon, each footfall was crushing a half dozen or more snails. When he looked down to see them, the next flash revealed the slightest strand of mist reaching towards his ankles. He leapt forward, lest he felt an acid sting across the back of his legs.

He jogged for a bit, crushing mounds of snails with each step, and his feet were not just wet with the damp of evening on the trail, but with the mucus and protoplasm of the crushed animals, mixing with drops of his own blood from the nicks in his feet from the crushed shells.

His breath came a little harder. The slope was rising. He was climbing a hill of snails. He staggered, his steps were slower, and finally he fell on all fours. With each reach of his hand, he dislodged clumps of molluscs, the lone foot of each stuck to one or more shells of others. He pushed his hands in deep, disregarding the destruction his progress caused.

Fragments of cracked shells splintered their way beneath his fingernails, constantly irritating him. Slime was ever present. Wind whipped up as the climb grew steeper. As he slowed he began to cool, and he continually shivered. The air was clear though; he had left the mist behind.

He climbed and climbed. His thoughts drifted. Could the hill be composed completely of snails, all the way through? Snails are converted plants; were there enough plants in all the land to make this many snails? Can snails be claustrophobic? Can fish be thirsty?

Shivering became shuddering. He was unprepared. He should have worn boots and an oilskin. He floundered. A flounder is a fish. He is a fish because he is not thirsty. What is never hungry? A rock? He is a rock. But rocks don't shiver. Except in earthquakes. It would have to be a snail quake. Fish shiver. Quiver, when hooked from the sea and flung on the shore. His teeth chatter. Fish have teeth. Sharks have teeth. Sharks are not fish. Sharks never sleep. *Sleep ...*

There was a clinking noise, then warm tongues began to lick the boy clean of blood and shell and mucus, in long comforting strokes. Abundant fur emerged from beneath the shells, as hidden mammals shook themselves free of clinging snails. Their fur was soft and luxurious. Burrowing dogs climbed out and covered him with their weight and fur. Their beating hearts comforted him, returning him to the womb. He warmed, his quaking reduced to an occasional aftershock. He was not meant to die here. He moved from confusion to sleep. Beneath his ear, broken shells whispered to him of fractured seas to come, and he began to dream.

3.

Why seek truth in memory? The only advantage memory has over dream is its consistency, because we've had more than one night to get our stories straight.

He dreamed of sleeping. At night—true night—all the interior doors are locked. He has been told from a young age not to worry about any noises in the hallway. Sometimes there is a dull thumping, as something makes its slow, unsteady way along the wall. His door handle might erupt in a mad, jittering rattling. He does not mind. That is like laughter, like something outside yelling "*Surprise,*" joyous at catching him unawares. Other nights, he awakes to silence, and wonders why. Wait—the tiniest noise. A vibration. Something slowly turning his door handle, testing it on the off chance. His thoughts: what if this is the one night Mother forgot to lock the door? Or worse: it is left unlocked, but not because she forgot.

The whispers: *You're special. You're special. Now—open up.*

4.

He wakes, dreams forgotten, as the dogs slink off, insinuating themselves into the gaps between the snails, burrowing their way down away from daylight.

The boy set off. He knew it was the correct direction, because it was up. He never looked back. As the morning passed, the slope levelled off and became a plain.

After a long journey, snail bedecked and shell sharded, he came to a sea. He tested its surface, and found that spreadeagled—starfish shaped, like the boys in quicksand in his *Guide to Scouting*—the sea bore his weight.

It was a sea of slugs. At first he thought only to try it, if just for a break from the shell-crushing monotony of the snail paths. After a moment, the wind blew, and the current took him away, sliding across the jelly of them.

They wait until he relaxes, then mould about him. He shifts from side to side, to spread the burden of the sun across the different parts of his body. Soon their soothing mucus covers him. It begins as a balm for his burns, and then shields the rays entirely so that he sleeps again, and their work begins. Discharges seal the breaches of his skin, the myriad cuts and nicks, the entry points of fragments of snail shell. Gently, the slugs insinuate themselves into each orifice, worrying their ways through resting sphincters, gliding between flaccid lips, merging into nostrils. He is lined and lubricated throughout. The burden of breathing is removed, and the slugs—varied in size and function—take on the roles of ferrying nutrients through his veins and electrical impulses through his nerves.

Before long, he is far from the sun, deep in an amniotic sea. He is vaguely aware of others in the depths, all borne on the tide. Their

dreams leach from one to another. For a time he forgets his name. Then gibbering voices wake him, and he starts to drown.

Rain falls; the slugs retreat. Inside him, they begin to break down. and he sneezes and convulses, breaking the seals within. The bits of them are expelled in a diarrhoeatic spasm, to reform later.

Blind at birth, spitting out gulped rainwater and slug fragments, he drags himself from the sudden surf onto a beach. The sand is pulverised snail shells, but he is impervious to its points and edges. Sight returns, and he grows used to breathing air again.

A shadow down the strand resolves itself into a small boy, still not free of the sea. He wonders if it is a past reflection of himself, caught in a very slow mirror. It is not, for the second boy tries to flee as gibbering creatures swarm towards him from the dunes. First they flail him, and when the child falls, one thrusts a spear and pierces him.

Enraged, the boy charges towards the creatures, arms waving. Some flee. Others stand to fight, but soon find that the broken snail shell beneath the boy's skin is an armour that absorbs the energy of their blows. The bravest stays to grapple, so the boy tugs at its fur and stares at its face, which is like a bat's, all doubting and clenching, challenging the air. The boy sneezes, a last discharge from his sea voyage, and red welts rise on the face of the shocked beast. The boy's snot burns it like strands of stringy fire.

The boy pursues the screaming beast as it runs, clutching its ugly, pained face, until they reach the creature's settlement. The boy stops, his target forgotten. There are purpose-built dwellings, constructed of driftwood and the opportunistic weeds that litter the place. There are mothers with their young at their breasts, baby faces emerging from large shells that encase them like hermit crabs. Little bat-faced monkey hermit crabs. One baby pulls away from the teat, its mouth a toothless surprised 'O' at the sight of the boy. From its lower lip hangs a strand of drooled mother's milk, grey and viscous. The baby shakes its arms in excitement at something new and falls from its shell, plump

and squishable.

What will he do, wreak havoc? At the edges of the settlement, the warriors have paused. Perhaps they will decide it is now their turn to chase the boy. The fallen baby starts to cry. An older child chews on a slug. He decides that the important thing is the speared child, so he returns to the beach. It is not, he tells himself, because he is embarrassed by the sight of a bare breast.

The wounded one is still alive. He lies holding the spear so that it does not move and tear his insides any further. Returning from the settlement, the boy takes a greater interest in the weapon than in the boy from whom it protrudes. The spear is a long broken bone. The boy tries to identify it by remembering pictures of skeletons he has seen in the encyclopaedia, but the atmosphere is not conducive to recollection. The spear will have to come out. "Sorry about this," he says, not knowing where he learned that combination of words. "It may hurt." It is a lie, for he holds no doubt. He wipes his hands and takes a firm hold of the bone. He pushes his foot down hard on the prone boy for leverage, then pulls the spear up and out.

There is resistance, there is a squelching noise, there is a flicking of fluids. The wounded child screams, then is silent. The boy checks him and finds he is still not dead. However, they cannot remain here. The scream was a signal of weakness and will attract predators.

The child is light and easily lifted over his shoulder. After some time, the lips of the child's wound find purchase on the skin of the boy's back, so that he can draw sustenance and healing. The boy does not mind. He has been alone on his journey for a long time and is glad of the parasitic burden.

5.

The injured child began to communicate through his wound. Perhaps to thank him, he sent the boy a story of another beach, composed of mundane sand and splashed by tedious waves of mere water. There,

yet another boy has found the beach littered with thousands of starfish, their arms curling as they fry in the sun. The boy's heart is shocked by the mass deaths. He hesitates, tempted to walk away. He steels himself. Knowing that he cannot save them all, nonetheless he does what he can, and begins throwing the animals as far as his strength allows, back into the sea.

An old man approaches. The boy thinks he will be lectured on the futility of his actions, but reassures himself: it is better to do something than nothing. However, the man says nothing, but once he is close enough he cracks his walking stick across the boy's back. The boy falls to the sand in pain and fright. The old man is nimble and keeps the boy pinned down with a series of whacks.

The old man screamed, "We know not what horror drove them here, except that, to flee their own world, we know it must be great. And as they pass into death victorious, you are cruel enough to snatch them from their refuge and return them to the maelstrom?"

6.

After a day of hard work, the boy slept. He dreamed he was awake, lying in his bed in the damp, cold house, whispers coming through the keyhole.

Nothing is forbidden. he accepts all. he would not have us miss any experience for his sake. Now: open the door.

7.

He awoke next to a bonfire, still burning, the product of his labour. It is a tall beacon that he constructed, despite the burden of his parasite. The flames will attract any other children here, to this safe place, where he will protect them from bat-faced monkeys and other menaces yet to be discovered. Despite his bravado he is unsure how good a guard he will make, as on opening his eyes he saw that he was almost surrounded.

There was a loop of girls, their arms fused where their hands once were. They still had two hands though, a left and right, at the two extremes, where the end girls were unconnected.

“We don’t want you to join us,” said one, without him enquiring. “Boys are problematic.”

Though he did not want to join anyway, the boy could not resist pointing out a flaw in the statement. “He is a boy,” he retorted, pointing to one of their number towards the centre.

“Only for the moment,” advised the same girl.

“I’m Richard,” the boy said, but was ignored.

The girls sighed at the sight of his big fire. Different voices spoke.

“You’re going to have to put that right out // It’s a good idea // Your heart is in the right place.”

He started to feel angry at their challenge. They were *girls*. “I need to bring the children here.”

“It is dangerous for them // I understand your motivation // Some children survive because they are spread out.”

“I will protect them.”

“You’ll try // You won’t, you know // Your beacon won’t just attract children. Look.”

One with a hand presented him with a pirate telescope. He took it.

In the distance, there was a massive bulge in the sea of slugs. Something huge moved beneath the surface. It was travelling towards him, at great speed.

“You are also attracting the things that feed on children.”

Shaken, he returned the telescope, but he could not just admit he was wrong.

“It won’t come on the land.”

“You did // We did // Yes it does.”

It was too late to extinguish the beacon. Instead, they all fled, aiming to be somewhere where the beacon wasn’t. He ran and ran and ran, his parasite bouncing on his back, until he could run no more, and fell. The earth shook. They did not look back.

The girls had many rules. The boys didn’t like such regulation, so they—except for Richard—went their separate ways. Some of the rules were like fairy tales. If you find a cardigan, you can wear it to get warm, but you must never, ever sleep with it on.

8.

There was no lemonade, no google buns or pop biscuits in this land, but it did not matter, he only knew the words as puzzling references in the mouldy books in the basement.

There was a type of potato, and there were fruits and berries from the scraggly vegetation. The only source of water was rain, which fell regularly. He collected it from puddles in depressions in the scattered boulders. When the puddles dried, he scraped off a salty sediment. The scrapings increased the edibility of cooked snails.

Between the woody scrub and the driftwood borne over the slug sea, there was always enough fuel, but he never again attempted anything on the scale of the bonfire.

No matter how dull his fare, he kept his resolution never to eat a bat-

faced monkey. Not even their plump babies.

9.

It was cosy close to the stove, where he would often find his mother. Move slightly away, however, and the air was cooler than the rest of the house, as though the cold gathered its forces to ensure that the warmth was a statistical aberration. It was wetter there than elsewhere, from the steam from the pots on the stove. Fungi sprouted from the walls, lumping out in horns and antlers the boy always admired. His mother taught him that you could not just pick from the growths willy-nilly. Some were good for cooking, some would wipe out the whole family in seconds.

With the omniscience of the dreamer, he knew that dinner tonight would be soup. It will be hot and filling, if he eats it quickly enough. Sometimes there were also boiled vegetables. He pressed them down onto his plate with his spatula to watch the stained fluids leak out.

In the dream, he and his mother do not talk. He leans, pressing his shoulder to her hip. She does not push him away. He sleeps easily, and wakes with tiny tears.

10.

He awoke to find his parasite gone. It was not a relief, it was as though part of him was missing. He searched until he found him.

“I hoped this would happen,” said the parasite. He had broken a rule. A cardigan was becoming one with his skin, beginning to grow like matted fur.

“I will fix you,” said the boy, crying.

“No you won’t,” replied his former parasite, “Now we are both free! The cardigan has healed my wound.”

“But the cost!”

“What cost? I shall be a bat-faced monkey, free of rules!”

“I will never forget you.”

“I will forget you in about 15 minutes, once the cardigan has settled right in.”

And he did. Befurred, he raced off through the dunes of shell grit, between the boulders, his legs forgetting that they had grown useless from months of hanging idle. He screeched happily, leaping and spinning in the air, his sonar allowing him to avoid all obstacles.

Later, once his emotions had settled and he had an opportunity to reflect, the boy thought about how his parasite had managed to remove himself unnoticed by cutting through his own flesh above their join. What had he endured, to hold the flesh tight so the boy did not wake, to not jerk in pain? Where had he found a blade, or stolen the time to fashion one, undetected? How had he sharpened it? How long had it all taken?

Sitting in his campsite, he saw a glint as the sunlight struck a snail trail just so. The trail was not random. Leaning closer, the boy made out words:

“Gratitude is a burden I can no longer carry. It was either this or kill you in your sleep, and this is warmer.”

Of course he would not have killed me in my sleep, the boy said out loud to himself. He was just being dramatic. And the parasite hadn’t been doing *any* carrying.

But his parasite had a blade. And there were no locked bedroom doors here.

What else was he failing to notice? He resolved never to be surprised

again.

11.

Digging in the scrub for potatoes and roots, he fell back, startled, and dragged himself on his haunches out of the bushes. *Snake!* His heart raced at the prospect of danger and distraction.

He did not want to get too close, but he did not want to lose sight of it either. *How do you catch a snake? Why, what are you going to do with it if you catch it? Make a pet of it? Eat it? What if it is a poisonous snake? Snakes aren't poisonous, they're venomous.*

He was talking to himself again.

Shrubs shook. The snake crunched amongst the shells and emerged into view.

It was not a snake. It was a human arm, severed just before the elbow, propelling itself by grabbing and dragging with its fingers.

The boy watched it pass by, oblivious to him. It had only the sense of touch. Unlike a snake, it had no tongue to flick in the air and taste the delicious scent of fear from its prey. He was not sure if he was disappointed, but he knew he would not eat it. He wondered if he could fashion a collar and lead for it, but by then it had dragged itself out of sight.

12.

Seasons passed. His clothes were gone, his body tanned, his dominance over the bat-faced monkeys established. Taller, confident, he decided a long distance recce was called for, and took the path less chosen.

One morning he came across a circle of huddled stones and thought of the Beaker burial sites and standing stones in his *Child's Book of World*

Mysteries. Then one of the stones coughed, and he saw that it was the arm-fused girls, and Richard, from years ago.

They did not react to his approach, though walking was never silent when the trail was composed of snails. Should he cough back? "Why, hello!" he called, instead.

Slowly, their heads turned towards him. Their hair was long and lank, their shoulders slumped. As one, they rocked back and forth on their bottoms, and rolled forward onto their knees. From there, they slowly rose.

This time, though, they did not fan out in a line to greet him, but remained in a circle.

He noticed a new girl, not facing inwards like the others. Her red hair stood out. Her eyes were doing something funny. She was trying to signal something, but it was a language he did not understand.

There was no end to them. They had no hands. All their arms were fused together, so they formed a permanent ring.

"What did you guys do?"

"This is what we wanted // Oh yes this was our plan // It's God's will."

The middle voice was clearly sarcastic, the last tinged with hysteria. He thought it might be Richard.

"Did you sleep under a red berry bush when the moon was full without all hopping on your left foot three times? Everyone knows that is what causes this."

"You'll never understand the rules // Such a boy // Very funny."

"How do you eat?" he asked. *How do you wipe your arses?* he thought, but did not say. How do you do *anything?* He began to think

of ways to help, but there were a dozen of them. How could he feed and clean them all himself? There were only so many potatoes he could dig and snails he could boil in a day.

“We co-operate // The sun and the air feed us // Like the plants.”

The unwiped stains around their mouths gave the lie to that last. Unless they were Venus flytraps. They had been chewing at something recently, something that bled more than air and sunlight.

He wondered how it would be now, if they came across him sleeping at the beach. He pictured the circle closing in, each jostling for prime position.

They were a fairy circle, and if he entered, he would never leave.

The girl facing outwards. She hadn't wanted to join. She had turned her back to flee, but in her kindness, she had let them get too close. The girls had made a mistake, two of them had reached to grab her instead of one, and hands joined, the circle was closed.

There was a restless energy coming from them, He thought they must be cold, the way they shifted slightly from foot to foot, then he realised the whole time they had been moving slowly towards him. Without saying another word, he turned and jogged away from them, ensuring he did not head towards his temporary camp.

Shuffling grew quicker behind him, then with several thuds, he heard them trip and fall.

13.

He dreamed of home. Sometimes, there were screams in the hallway. Sometimes, there was meat in the soup.

14.

There came a season of storms. Wind whipped through, thrashing his

shelter, reaching its vibrating fingers through the gaps between the boulders where he was hunkered down. Rain pelted, but the sea did not rise in waves to flood the land with slugs. Rather, the creatures batted down, compressing themselves together, so that the sea level sank.

There grew a new recklessness to the wind, an abandonment. Lightning joined earth to sky. Bored from long confinement and the monotony of the shrieking storm, the boy lifted his head to sneak a look. In the distance, he saw an impossibility. The night itself was curved in obsidian spiral. There was a mountain where there had been none. Thunder welled, and lightning forked across the horizon.

The mountain had a horned head that turned more swiftly than its size and kind suggested possible. A sphere shifted, and he saw it was a giant snail bestriding the landscape.

The storm moved with it. He suspected the titan dwelled permanently within tempest, the size of it creating its own weather.

A wind-flung cone snail thumped him between the eyes, to punish his daring, and he withdrew into his shelter.

15.

He found her after the storm, as though she had been torn free and blown far away to land near his (metaphorical) door.

She was bone thin and soggy, and he took her for a waterlogged frond. He felt stupid when he recognised her red hair. He saw that her long arms ended in infected stumps, where she had broken free from the fairy ring. Though he did not know all the rules, he had taught himself a few things. Snails were set to work, bound to her extremities with tied leaves, so they kept mostly still and drained her pus into themselves. Less fortunate snails were boiled in a broth, which he dripped into her mouth a little at a time.

To ease her fevers and keep her clean, he washed her gently. In the

early days, if he pressed too hard on her arms, dents remained for a long time. Underneath her skin, her arms felt crackly. Later on, the problem disappeared.

He surrendered his bed of leaves and branches to her. She did not speak much, and she slept a lot. He did not mind. Unlike his home, here sometimes the nights were clear, and with no impediment the sky hung fat with brimming brilliance. He was happy to fall asleep outside, stars filling his eyes.

16.

Leaning into his mother's leg, the wool soft on his cheek, he closed his eyes and listened to the wooden spoon hit the side of the pot as she stirred the contents round and round. With her free hand, she stroked his cheek.

“Mama?”

“Yes?”

“Am I special?”

She bent down, gripped his biceps, and looked him right in the eyes. *“Has someone been whispering nonsense through your keyhole?”*

17.

There were screams in the night. This time, it was he who had to be comforted. The girl held him and stroked his brow with her forearms, hushing him as the adrenalin from the dream pulsed through his system, now easing, now rising again. The details of the nightmare left him, but the taste remained—metal mixed with his mother's soup.

He calmed, and they both slept.

She grew stronger, and they entered a life together. She did not speak

of the past, of the fairy ring, or of the time before that. He thought about her escape, of course. Her arms were longer than his, though they were around the same height. The stumps of her arms reached near her knees. Perhaps his arms were disproportionately short. He only had his memory for comparison. If she didn't comment upon it, neither would he.

He carried out thought experiments about breaking free from a fairy ring. He suspected that at least part of each arm used to belong to her former companions. What happened in the last days? Did she have to wait until the others died, hoping by force of will to be the last one standing? Did toxins from the dead and dying carry through the chain of arms, each to each? Did she drag the corpses of all of the others to a convenient spot, where she could break their arms over a sharp rock? He envisioned her somersaulting again and again, twisting the arms around and around until they tore, but in the end he dismissed that as unlikely.

Whatever happened, he was glad that she had survived it, and that she was here now.

18.

“Sweetheart, of course you are not special.”

“I am.” Foot stomp.

“No. We are all the same. Good and bad, man and woman, rich and poor, the god does not distinguish. No matter how far we fall, none of us will ever hit the bottom, because the god will catch us in his web. He will gather us all together, rolled in his silk. Then he will scoop us into his mouth, and we will fall down, into his giant gut, pressed together in the dark, slowly dissolving.”

19.

She joined him in all of his chores. Man is a tool-using animal, be-

cause of his opposable thumbs, which put her at a disadvantage. She could not dig, but she found likely spots for potatoes, and she carried a decent load over her shoulders. She had good ideas and kept him company.

He asked her about the god one time, and she had no notion of what he was talking about.

Eventually—fumbling, uncertain as to what went where, in their world with few mammal examples—they began to do the thing that makes babies. Not like the snails that lay side by side with their bits oozing out from under their shells. Certainly not like the slugs, with their promiscuous chains that stretched for metres, all of them inter-wrapped head to head or head to tail, not much caring what was where or who it belonged to.

Sometimes he felt bad, not at the act itself, which he enjoyed very much, but because it would be wrong to make a baby. He remembered the baby bat-faced monkey, and the grey gruel of its mother’s milk. What life could they offer a baby? But after some time with no baby actually being made, he assumed it must just not be possible. Too much snail had got into them. Some of the zillions of fragments of shell forced beneath their skin had carried through their systems and lodged in strategic parts, so that there was always a barrier between them.

He loved the mammal-ness of her. That she was just right—not too hard, not too soft. That she yielded in the right places. He delighted in the extravagance of her varieties of hair. The bristly, springy coils of it down there, where he liked to very gently rub the palm of his hand, afterwards. Under her arms, where he would bury his face and draw deeply of the rare, rich human smell of her. And though there was no baby, the bits of her that were built to feed one. Proper skin, that kept all her bits in, that did not bulge weirdly, or allow her to climb up rock faces. Her skeleton on the inside, where it belonged. Eyes that stayed within her face, and did not protrude and toggle about.

He did not know all the rules. The first few times they did the thing that makes a baby, he thought, if we fall asleep like this, will we wake up joined together down there, forever? Well, not forever. She had escaped the fairy circle. He knew that if it came to it, she would break off his thingy to escape. She might regret it, it might make her sad, but she would do it. So he made sure that they did not fall asleep like that. He did not want to put her in a position where she had to make such a choice. He also did not want his thingy broken off.

20.

Though he was nothing special to her, he still dreamed of his mother.

“Mama, do you love me?”

“Of course, silly.”

“Will you love me forever?”

“I will love you until we die.”

“Will you love me after we die?”

He felt her exasperation strongly. “Sweetheart, do you think anyone will have time for such things, being dissolved in the gut of a giant spider?”

21.

One day when he woke, she was gone. Later on, he would tell himself that just as the wind had carried her to him to begin with, so had the wind borne her away. It was not literally true, as the air was actually quite still when he awoke and she was not there.

He searched for her. He called her name. He worried that she was injured.

He berated himself. What could he ever have seen in the type of girl who had been a part of a fairy ring? He kicked, he threw great clumps of snails into boulders, he stormed, he stomped.

When he calmed, he knew she would be safe. She was clever and resourceful. It was just that the energies that had driven her to flee across the snail mountain and the slug sea had never gone away.

Perhaps for those driven enough, there were different paths, other lands to discover, to take them even further away. He never found them.

He missed her.

22.

Children continued to come, but over time, more and more they avoided him. He had ceased to be a child himself, and he may have reminded them of what they fled.

There was no reason other than his loneliness to seek them out. He had little wisdom to pass on—he had never picked up on all the rules that the fairy ring knew, and he had no idea how the knowledge had been imparted to them. There was plenty of room for everyone to spread out and avoid each other, and enough potatoes and snail meat for all.

He suspected there were those who, after a season or two in the land of the molluscs, would brave the sea of slugs and seek to return home. Who knew if they made it? There was no communication between the lands. It was something he would never try.

Sometimes, there was the sour smell of berries that had turned. Usually he ignored it. Sometimes the world inside him grew dark. When the two events coincided, there was a good chance he would follow the scent. Each time he finds clusters of snails that beat him, covering the base of the bush and clambering over each other in little hillocks. Some snails have had their fill and toppled away. They behave in most

un-snail-like ways, shells lying here and there, bodies limp and exposed, their foot unanchored to any surface.

It takes a lot of berries to achieve the same effect for himself. Of course—he is larger, and as a mammal, his systems are more complex and generally superior. He eats himself into a stupor and collapses with juice running from his mouth. This will be followed later by all number of other leakages, and a terrible headache. He will finally fall into the sea, so that the slugs can bear the pain away.

The main reason that he seldom indulges is that when drunk, he is likely to be awoken by a crying baby. He will try to ignore it, assure himself that it is not there, but it always ends with him reproaching himself—what if it is out there, alone, exposed? He will cry out her name, and think of the impossible baby that they did not make together. He will run about seeking the lost child. Tears pour, but he never finds them, and it is no comfort to know the whole time the sound is only inside his head.

She would not have left him if she was pregnant. There would be nothing in his face to suggest that a baby should be kept far from him.

One time he reassured himself—of course she would not leave: with no hands, she would not be able to care for a baby by herself. A wave of peace passed over him. A moment later, he realised that that was no reassurance at all.

23.

He would seek refuge in the stars and try to name the constellations. As age dimmed his eyes, the points of stars were replaced with blurred snail trails in the sky. Look, he told himself. All things are linked, and nothing can be truly lonely.

24.

In the stuttering twilight beneath the bright sun as death came closer,

the distinction between memory, dream, and the worlds blurred.

He was a boy sitting outside that house again. He deliberately wore no shoes for the frisson of wrongness, wanting to feel the cold and damp earth through his bare hands and feet, desiring the uncontrolled shiver.

He scared himself delightfully by thinking what creatures of darkness approached from all around. Inside the rooms were lit, people went about their business. Outside, there was rustling in the bushes. Creeping steps. He held steady, prolonging the time until the moment when he could bear the delicious fear no more and sprinted to the house. He pictured the soundless flap of dark wings in the sky above. Blind upward burrowings in the earth below. Dread shuffling through the forest.

Upstairs the light from windows dimmed, then was gone.

He sat upright at that.

Cloud descended. A tongue of mist licked about the house. He saw it explore, tentative. He thought: all the places light leaks out, something could leak in.

He found himself standing.

The strands wound round the house. Individual silken threads, seeking entrance. Random lights disappeared. Timbers creaked as the walls were wrapped. Something huge hung above the cloud.

Not mist. *Web*.

Being nothing special, he ran.

25.

Death approached. He heard it, though his senses were failing. It is

hard to move quietly on a floor of broken shell.

There was movement at the edge of his deteriorating vision. Something crept towards him. He kept his promise to himself, never to be surprised.

It clambered up onto his bed, and he felt the pressure of it. An unmistakable stink. A bat-faced monkey! Come to finish him in his weakness. After losing so many battles, they would win the war. There was nothing he could do, he had no strength to resist.

Aged simian fingers stroked his cheek. The primate's body covered him against the cold that persisted despite the brilliant sun. It breathed regularly into his ear, calming him as he slipped away. Its weight was comforting, reminding him of the dogs who dwelled between the shells on the snail mountain, who laid with him and wrapped him in their luxurious hair on that first night so very long ago.

Was there perhaps a protruding ridge of dried lips hidden beneath the bat-faced monkey's fur? If he was able to roll over, would he find that the ridge matched the suckered scar on his own back? He was happy not to be alone, though he was too old to hope that nourishment and dreams of starfish could flow between them again.

As the man died, he wondered at the girls of his youth, the fairy ring and all the rules they knew. Who knows? Perhaps there is a rule that if a boy falls into his final sleep while draped in a bat-faced monkey, he will wake far away, transformed into something special that would not be caught in a web and gathered with everyone else.

The wind blew and the shells rattled, as though he had never been there.

The Bone Whale Rids Itself of Its Inhabitants

by Goran Lowie

Deep beneath the frozen mass,
the winter light a shallow sight,
the white walls, a stormy rhythm
the bones whales are at home.
they are sleek, monstrous, atavistic
their gut outside of time and space
inside them are small spectral seas
entire worlds and citadels.
the elongate and limpid heart-fish
finds a rumbling inside its belly
foothills with people digging too deep
fierce expatriates pushing ahead.
at once, the bone whale scorches its insides
shimmering with heat, people extinct
succumbing, perplexed
at their starship igniting.

Rising by the Red Moon

by R. Mac Jones



Brood X

by Olivia Payne

The ground is getting warmer,
Soon the humans will emerge.

For some time
In the summer
Each brief brood
Makes the same mistakes
And meets the same end.
They fill the same spaces
Plug the same gaps,
If you made a map
Of each contagion
You could see them overlap
Building up and on
Over and again
Endlessly uninventive.

They can't help but overshoot
Overspilling past our protection
Pushing out in each direction
Until we're forced to shut it
Down, keep the earth fallow
For a while.

It's something to see the planet work
Around itself
In silence.

For when they awake
The noise can reach into the ears
Of the whole universe.
Some can't stand the buzzing
And others hate the bodies
And we must beg patience
For them, for they'll run
Themselves out.

Hairless flesh and huge heads
Hands groping in the dirt
To find the parents lost,
The ones who sent them
Unprotected and unguided
Each generation
Thinking they're alone.
They go to ground
Thinking they're the end.

Unseeing they're the seeds
Unheedful of their impact
Unknowing of it all
Outside their own selves.

Half-Man Half-Wolf

by Sydnie Beaupré



Oh Spider, Sweet Spider

by Michelle Muenzler

she didn't know she was with
Spider
until Spider was born
a wet packet slipping
through the doctor's flinching grasp

so fragile Spider so small
the size of her (two) cupped hands
its delicate limbs flailing
twig-like in the cold

Spider made no cry, no wail, no
peep of misery
merely thrashed those long limbs
tearing the swaddling with a
swish-swish-swish
like a moth bursting from a cocoon

and when it (or was it a he? oh yes--he!)
reached for her
for her, his mother
across that fumbling gulf of nurses' hands thrusting
him to and fro, like some poisonous thing
she wept
and
straining against herself

reached back

*

Spider grew
not so fast as if he were not a spider
but fast enough for her

at three days, he toddled across
the carpet, stumbling while
beige yarn pulled at his leg tips
and at ten days he learned to clamber from the crib
when restless and restless he was, so restless
and not until the thirtieth day
his spinnerets finally spitting out something more
than pale opalescent goo the
texture of warm rice pudding
did he cease his fidget
and fall asleep in
the cradle of silk he built
above her bed

silent and still

and though other mothers called it odd
she slept the better for it

Against the Tide

by Kristin Cragg

Mo'qin exited the shuttle and looked around at her home for the next year. As a Qualix, she was a head taller than the Zublarks, who rushed around her, anxious to be home. Their bright skin, in various shades of blue, was always slightly damp and stood in stark contrast to her dry, pale, pink skin. She stopped and sniffed the air. It was heavier and more humid than her home planet of Qualixes and smelled faintly of fish.

Someone bumped into her. She turned around and saw a Zublark man glaring at her. His uni-brow frowned. One set of his hands rested on his hips while the other, lower set was holding his luggage. "Some of us have places to be."

Mo'qin grimaced. Not a great way to make a first impression on this planet. "I'm sorry, Sir," she said, using her universal translator. "I'll move out of your way." She slid over to the side, out of the flow of traffic. "Have a good day!" she called, waving at him with her seven-fingered hand.

He turned and glared. "Ugh, Qualix. So unnecessarily friendly." He shuffled off until he was lost in the crowd.

Mo'qin shrugged and made her way to the entry platform below. The other passengers were lining up at the visa checkpoint, but Mo'qin wandered over to the edge of the platform, which stood overlooking a wide green sea below. She opened her mouth and inhaled deeply, then coughed. The air was so salty.

"Madam?"

Mo'qin looked down to find a tiny creature, about half the size of a Zublark. Red eyes looked up at her through a sea-foam colored face. This must be an Asher. She'd read about the Zublarks' servant class, but she'd never met one. "The line is this way." The Asher gestured to the now-empty customs line.

Mo'qin's eyes popped open. "Oh! My apologies. Thanks for your help."

The Asher made a disgusted face and turned, heading back towards the employee area.

Mo'qin shook her head. On her home planet, the hierarchy was based on wealth and property, but on Zublark, your status was determined by your race. She wasn't sure where Qualix fit in—there were only a handful of them on the entire planet, and she was unlikely to run into another one to ask.

After passing through customs, Mo'qin found herself in a small open-sided waiting room. Things were much more airy on Zublark. Qualixes was so hot and dry, they relied on thick-walled buildings and frigid air dispensers to keep the temperature manageable. In fact, Mo'qin could count the number of times she'd been outside on one hand. The time she'd spent outside here had lasted longer than all the other times put together.

"Mx. Mo'qin, I presume?"

She looked down to find a well-dressed Zublark man. She would've

once considered him short, but after an entire journey with a spaceship full of Zublarks, she realized this man was rather tall. She smiled widely, displaying her faded yellow teeth. “Yes! How kind of you to meet me.” She bowed. “Please call me Mo'qin.”

The man sneered. “I am Thox. I am your connection to the city of Zurob. I will be bringing you to your new dwelling and helping you acquire anything you might need.”

“Well, it's nice to meet you, Mx. Thox.”

Thox looked like he'd sucked on a sour candy. “Thox is fine. My Asher will take your luggage.”

Before she knew it, an Asher had scooped up her bags. Thox turned and began walking towards the sea with the Asher close behind. Mo'qin frowned and followed the two.

They boarded a boat docked nearby. Mo'qin held her breath as she stepped inside. The boat rocked with her weight, and she lost her balance. She fell on the floor and laughed. Thox rolled his eyes and signaled the Asher to start the boat.

Soon, they'd arrived at a small island with a handful of tiny cottages. The Asher docked the boat and unloaded Mo'qin's belongings. Thox and Mo'qin disembarked, and Thox led the trio to a small building nearby. It was brilliant white with a round purple roof and large open windows.

Thox stood at the door, then announced, “This will be your dwelling for the next year. I've taken the liberty of having my Asher provide some food for you. It took great pains to get you something suitable. We've heard you don't eat fish, so we've imported some vegetables for now. We hope you will become accustomed to our food, otherwise you'll need to wait for the monthly shuttle to bring you more provisions. I'll be here promptly at the ninth hour tomorrow to give you a tour of the city.”

Mo'qin looked around. “It's mid-afternoon. What am I supposed to do until then?”

Thox sighed. “Take a walk. Unpack. Get settled.” He paused, then added, “If you do take a walk, keep to yourself. People around here don't like to interact with each other unless absolutely necessary. If you need anything, press this button here. It'll summon the island Asher, who can help you with whatever you need. It's a shared Asher, so you might need to wait until it has finished its current task. A slight delay is common.” With that, Thox turned and headed back to his boat, his Asher on his heels. Mo'qin watched them walk away, then slowly closed the door.

* * *

The next morning, Thox arrived promptly.

“Let's get started then,” he said dryly, turning back towards the dock.

Mo'qin pursed her lips. No greeting. She plastered on a smile and said, “It's nice to see you, Thox. I trust you slept well?”

He stopped walking, then turned to glare at her. “It is none of your business how I slept.” He turned back and continued to the dock.

“Glad we're getting to know each other,” Mo'qin muttered under her breath.

The two spent the morning being chauffeured around by Thox's Asher. Mo'qin discovered that the city of Zurob was a loose collection of islands governed by one man, whom she met as part of her morning rounds. There was a reporter and a photographer—all very formal, but not very personal. The governor had stood on a stool behind his desk so that he appeared to match Mo'qin's height. He'd greeted her politely when on camera, but quickly became cool once the reporters had left.

Thox led Mo'qin out of the governor's office and back to the waiting

boat. As they headed back to her home, Mo'qin asked, "Is the governor always like that?"

Thox frowned. "Usually he's not so warm. You are useful to him. We need a Qualix for public relations."

Mo'qin tilted her head. "Because of the trade difficulties?"

Thox sighed. "Yes. It seems other species are not as to-the-point and prefer niceties, which only waste time. You are here to teach the younger generation how to properly relate to the worlds outside our own."

"And how am I to do that?"

"As you know, you've been assigned to teach at our region's secondary school. You'll have a hundred or so students. They are just about to enter adulthood, so the governor is hoping that you'll be able to affect them while they are still impressionable, but also old enough to internalize your lessons."

"So I'm here to teach manners?"

"If that is what you call awkward forward conversation, then yes. You'll teach manners."

"Is that all?"

"Of course not. You'll be expected to make appearances at all major functions, and we expect good reports to be sent to your supervisor on Qualixes. You are also free to share your culture, should the need arise, but do not be deceived, Mx. Mo'qin, you are a tool for this region, nothing else."

"Understood, Thox."

He snuffed, then looked out onto the water.

When they returned to her home, Thox did not leave the boat. She looked down at him from the dock as he said, "I have scheduled boating lessons for you this afternoon with your island's Asher. You'll meet him at the dock at the fifteenth hour."

"Is that really necessary?" Mo'qin asked.

"It is if you'd ever like to leave this island. There are no shops here, so you'll need to reach the big island sooner or later. The island Asher can put you in touch with a ferry service, but taking the ferry on the regular will be cost-prohibitive given your weekly allowance. It's in your best interest to learn how to work a boat." With that, Thox signaled to his Asher, who turned the boat back into the water.

Mo'qin watched until they disappeared over the horizon, then returned to her cottage to eat lunch alone.

* * *

Slowly, Mo'qin got used to the atmosphere, the heavier gravity, the humidity, and all the things that were so different about this new planet. She still had a difficult time with the antisocial behavior of the Zublarks, though she seemed to be making headway with the older lady next door. After some research, she'd discovered that Zublarks like wild Wikle flowers, so Mo'qin spent an afternoon gathering a bouquet, then presented them to Mx. Mabop, her neighbor. To Mo'qin's delight, Mabop had stopped glaring at her. It was progress.

* * *

Soon, the first day of work came. Thox, whom she hadn't seen in several days, greeted her at her door early in the morning. "Today I will be accompanying you to the school," he said, "but starting tomorrow, you will be responsible for finding your own way there. You've been practicing." It was a statement, not a question.

Mo'qin nodded with a smile. "It's still a challenge, but I think I can

manage.”

In response, Thox simply turned his back and escorted her down to the docks.

A short time later, they found themselves outside the school on the island Xoxixx. Like the region itself, it was not a single location, but rather a collection of many smaller parts. The main office of the school was large—a more impressive version of Mo'qin's tiny home. There were white walls, large openings for windows, and a green roof. Mo'qin had since learned that the color of the roof determined the function of the building. She remembered green from growth—wherever education facilities were located. Thox directed Mo'qin into the large building, where she located her desk among the sea of desks in front of her.

Thox gestured for her to take her seat. He pointed at the clock on the wall. “The students arrive in about an hour. They will have a half hour homeroom class, then they will begin their teacher rotations. You are responsible for teaching six classes—two per grade level. The schedule rotates, so you will generally teach three classes a day for an extended time period, alternating days.”

Mo'qin nodded. She wanted to ask what she was expected to teach besides manners, but when she'd asked in the past, the only response she'd received was a growl. Despite her desire to make a good impression and to plan ahead, it looked like she was going to need to improvise. It was going to be an interesting year.

Thox continued, “I will be here to guide you through your first day. Beginning tomorrow, you will be on your own. Of course, there are two Ashers that belong to the office, so if you need something, check with them before disturbing another instructor.”

Thox disappeared, and Mo'qin leaned back in her seat. She had visited the school a few times prior to get the feel for the layout of the buildings and to meet her co-workers, but today was the first day the kids

would be in attendance.

Mo'qin pulled out the book she'd picked up on the history of Zublark and tried to read, but it was difficult to concentrate. Her eyes kept darting to the clock, where she counted down the minutes.

Soon, the kids began filing in. She couldn't see them from her desk, but she could hear them. Kids were kids no matter what planet you were on. True, these kids were more subdued than the ones she remembered, but there were still shuffling feet, swung bags, and conversation. There was, she noted, a lack of laughter, which usually punctuated first days back at school on Qualixes. Mo'qin closed her eyes and listened to the students, imagining what it was going to be like to stand in front of them.

It wasn't long before Thox came to fetch her. She followed him down the hallway to her first class. There were conversations going on in the class, but they were muted whispers, unlike the chaos of the Qualix teenagers. She took a deep breath as she passed under the rounded archway marking the entry to the classroom. The moment Thox's foot passed the threshold, the class went deathly silent. Mo'qin followed Thox to the front of the room, where she stood uncomfortably as he introduced her.

“This is Mx. Mo'qin. She is from the planet Qualixes. I know you have heard many rumors about her and her planet, and—while most of them are true—not all are.”

Mo'qin tilted her head. What rumors?

“Mx. Mo'qin will be teaching this class for the next year. She is your connection to the galaxy outside Zublark. I expect you to take full advantage of this resource.” Thox stared down the students, then took a seat to observe.

The eyes of every student followed Thox to the back of the room, then snapped forward to look at Mo'qin. She wrung her hands. They were

clammy—something she had never experienced before moving to Zublark.

Mo'qin let out a slow breath. “Good morning, class,” she said. She paused, waiting for a response, but there was nothing but silence. Mo'qin wondered if she had been speaking too quietly and raised her voice, “I said, 'Good morning, class.’” She waited expectantly.

There was uncomfortable shifting in the seats. Some students frowned. Others broke their gaze and began to look out the closest window. One student coughed.

Mo'qin could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She knew that this was going to be difficult, but they didn't even know the basics. She decided to scrap her introduction.

“My name is Mx. Mo'qin. You may call me Mo'qin if you prefer.” A few students relaxed, and she second-guessed herself. Maybe they should be using formalities. Oh well, too late now. She continued, “As Thox mentioned, I am from Qualixes. There are many, many differences between our planets, but let's start with an easy one. On Qualixes, when someone greets you, you reply. Let's give it a try. Good morning, class.”

About half of the kids in the class grunted in response.

With her smile frozen in place, Mo'qin tilted her head and clarified. “Oh, dear, I'm afraid I didn't explain well. When someone says, 'Good morning,' the proper response is 'Good morning.' Let's try again. Good morning, class.”

“Good morning,” a few brave students mumbled.

Mo'qin smiled widely. “Excellent! Now, all together. Good morning, class.”

“Good morning,” came the stilted reply.

“Well done, everyone. Let's work on greetings today.” Mo'qin proceeded to work through basic greetings: “Hello,” “Good morning,” “Good afternoon,” “Good evening,” and “Good night.” She briefly considered trying “How are you?” but that seemed too advanced for the class, so she decided to hold back on that lesson. The rest of her classes progressed the same way. By the end of the day, Mo'qin had a better idea of what to expect.

When the final bell rung, the students picked up their belongings and made their way out. Thox stood, clearly waiting for the students to leave. The class was nearly empty when one student shuffled up to Mo'qin. Caught by surprise, Mo'qin put on a nervous smile, her thoughts fluctuating between excitement and anxiety. The girl, who was shorter than most of the other students, was a brilliant blue. She darted a glance back to Thox, who was still in the corner, and then looked back at her teacher. “Hello. I'm Roj. Thank you, Mx. Mo'qin,” she whispered, then rushed out. Thox narrowed his eyes, but Mo'qin hardly noticed.

She felt like she was floating. All that difficulty, and one student wiped it all away. Thox guided Mo'qin back to the teacher room, but she was oblivious to everything around her. Someone had been kind to her—the very first Zublark who had shown any ability or inclination towards friendliness.

That afternoon, Mo'qin headed home, excited for the next day.

* * *

Mo'qin leaped out of bed the moment the sun rose. She'd been laying in bed staring at the ceiling, too excited to go back to sleep. She rushed through her morning routine and drove her boat to Xoxixx. After tying her boat to the dock, Mo'qin made her way to the school and found her desk, then waited for classes to begin.

The first few classes passed as well as Mo'qin could've hoped. Without Thox there, she felt much more comfortable. There were still too many

eyes watching and minds judging, but at least they weren't her superiors. Mo'qin had planned on focusing on teaching the next step of greeting: asking how someone was doing. She didn't realize that she was going to need to spend 80% of the class time reviewing and practicing what they'd discussed the prior day. It was no wonder Thox hadn't expected much more out of her than the basics. It was going to be a long year. However, that realization didn't deter Mo'qin's excitement. She mentally ticked off the classes in her head, looking forward to the final class with Roj.

Finally the last class of the day began. Mo'qin addressed the class, "Good afternoon, class," and waited for the response. All the other classes had simply stared at her, and she had to coach them through the concept all over again. This time, Mo'qin was hopeful. She looked at the friendly student immediately after greeting the class. The student, Roj, immediately responded with a cheerful, "Good morning, Mo'qin." The other students turned to look at her, and she slunk down in her chair as her face turned a shade of purple.

Mo'qin coughed gently to get the students' attention. "Once more, please. Good morning, class," she prompted. The class watched her greet them, then turned to look back at Roj, who had pursed her lips closed.

Mo'qin struggled to regain control of the class. It was one thing to try to get a disinterested class to engage; it was quite another to get a hostile class to let up on the object of their mockery. Mo'qin's heart raced as she tried to think of a way to rescue Roj and regain control.

"I've never eaten fish before."

The class turned away from Roj and stared at their teacher.

She hesitated. "I, uh, had never seen an ocean before two weeks ago."

The kids leaned forward.

"And that was the first day I'd ever been on a boat as well."

At this point, she had their rapt attention. She thought quickly and widened her eyes. "Oh, and I also ... oh dear, I shouldn't be telling you about myself until we've finished the lesson. Another time, then." She smiled. "Now, where were we?"

"Good morning, class," a student in the front said absentmindedly.

Mo'qin tried not to smile. "That's right." She cleared her throat. "Good morning, class."

"Good morning, Mo'qin," replied every student.

* * *

After unlocking the secret to connecting with the students, Mo'qin made much faster progress with her lessons on manners. The students were more than happy to respond to her niceties as long as she rewarded them with tales of her home planet. A week into class, Mo'qin decided to have the students pair up to practice greetings. They were hesitant, but with a bit of bribery, they were willing to give it a try—so long as Mo'qin answered some of their questions, as promised.

The longer Mo'qin taught, the more comfortable the students became around her. To her delight, they often asked questions between classes. Her final class was still her favorite—partially because it was the class Roj was in, and partially because there was nowhere to be immediately following class, so she could chat with the students as long as she liked.

Now that the students had warmed up to her, knowledge about Mo'qin and her planet became a commodity. Students would stay late to chat in order to find out more information, which would increase their popularity. Mo'qin knew they were using her, but she didn't mind. As long as they were learning, she was happy to be a pawn in their game.

* * *

One afternoon, Mo'qin found Roj hiding behind the other kids who had stayed late. Roj often left the moment the bell rang, much to Mo'qin's disappointment. After answering a question from one of the boys about what kind of weapons her people used, Mo'qin called Roj over.

“Hi, Roj, do you have a question?”

The other teenagers looked over at Roj, then sneered. Turning back to Mo'qin, they smiled, then said, “See you tomorrow, Mo'qin,” and promptly left the room, leaving Mo'qin alone with Roj.

“Hi, Roj. It's good to see you. What can I help you with?”

Roj rubbed her shoulder uncomfortably. “I was, um, watching a film from your planet, and I had a question about something.” Even with the translator, Mo'qin had a hard time hearing Roj's low voice.

Mo'qin grinned. “Wonderful! What movie?”

“*Destiny.*”

“Oh, I love that movie! What were you wondering about?”

“The scene with the life joining.”

“You mean the wedding?”

Roj nodded. “Yes. It looked like the couple actually loved each other ...?” Her voice trailed off into a question.

Mo'qin smiled gently. “Yes, people often do on my planet. There are some who marry for money or family, but often, mates are chosen based on romantic attraction.”

Roj frowned. “I cannot imagine that sort of freedom. Here, every union is based on whatever is mutually advantageous, never what--”

She was interrupted by a deep voice at the door. “Roj,” the voice repeated. Mo'qin looked up to see Thox standing at the doorway with his arms crossed.

Roj hung her head. “Coming, father,” she replied.

Thox glared at Mo'qin, then turned and walked down the hall with Roj.

* * *

The cold season rolled around, and Mo'qin assigned her students a two-minute speech on what their plans were for the upcoming break. Most students spoke about the upcoming Holiday of Connection, where families would gather and tell each other what benefit they brought to each other's lives. At the end of class, one student would always ask Mo'qin what her plans were, and she always cheerfully responded that she had none and had planned to catch up on some reading.

After the final class of the day, Mo'qin sat at her desk in the teachers' room organizing her papers in preparation for the break. She heard a loud cough and turned to see Thox standing next to her desk, eyes narrowed.

He looked down over the bridge of his nose. “I have been informed you have no plans for the Holiday of Connection. You will join my family.”

Mo'qin frowned. “Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Yes. I have been informed by my superiors that it would not look good to leave a foreign guest alone on the holidays. So I have been asked to host you. You may decline, but it will make me look bad.”

“I’d hate for that to happen,” Mo’qin replied. “Where, what time, and what can I bring?”

Thox handed her a piece of paper. “The details are here. We will see you tomorrow evening at the twentieth hour.” As was his habit, Thox turned abruptly and left without saying goodbye.

* * *

The next night Mo’qin dressed in her best clothes and navigated her way to Thox’s home on Xoxixx. She docked her boat and found his dwelling. Standing outside the front door, she took a deep breath, then knocked.

The door opened immediately, and Mo’qin found herself looking into Roj’s eyes. Mo’qin broke into a grin. “Roj, I’m so glad to see you!”

Before Roj could respond, Thox and his companion Laor appeared behind their daughter. Laor wore the same expression Thox often did: one of aloofness with a pinch of distrust.

“Enter, Mo’qin,” Thox commanded.

“Your outerwear should be placed here,” Laor added, gesturing to a nearby hook.

By the time Mo’qin had hung her coat, the two had disappeared. The corners of Roj’s mouth upturned. “They went this way.” Then she whispered, “Welcome to my home.”

“Thank you,” Mo’qin whispered back.

Roj showed Mo’qin to her seat. Dinner passed quickly as the Asher brought out dish after dish of food. Mo’qin tried many new things, some of which she loved, and some of which she would love to never try again. At the end of the meal, each member of the family was given a few moments to speak. Thox went first. “Laor, you are useful to me

in taking care of the home while I work.” He turned to Roj. “And you, Roj, are useful in assisting your mother. I anticipate you will be useful in the future once you are able to contribute more fully to the family.” Thox sat back down.

“Father, you forgot Mo’qin,” Roj said.

Thox growled, but stood again. “Mo’qin. You are useful in teaching our young to better communicate with the outside world. Your work will be useful in increasing trade and productivity between Zublark and other planets.” Thox sat down and crossed his arms.

In turn, Laor and then Roj repeated their assessments of the others at the table. Finally, Mo’qin stood. “Thox, you are useful in protecting your family and your school. You are useful to your community and your planet. You have been extremely useful to me in becoming acclimated. Laor, you are useful in caring for Thox and Roj. Roj, you are useful in questioning the status quo. You are useful in being exactly who you are.”

Mo’qin sat down, noticing that Thox had narrowed his eyes as he looked at her.

The speeches finished, Laor called on their Asher to bring out dessert. The Asher approached, carrying a large plate. His foot caught something on the floor, and the Asher fell, sending the dessert flying across the room, landing in a gooey puddle several feet away.

Thox stood in a rage and kicked the Asher, who was attempting to get up. “Clumsy, useless fool!” he said, kicking the Asher once more for good measure.

Deeply uncomfortable, Mo’qin stood. “It’s getting late. I should be heading home. Thank you for your hospitality. I ate so much I wouldn’t have had room for dessert anyway.” With that, Mo’qin fled the house. She ran until she was a few houses away, then slowed her pace to consider what had transpired. By the time she’d reached her boat, she had

come to terms with the situation. She didn't like it, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Mo'qin drove her boat home, lost in thought. As she docked her boat near her home, there was a cough from the front of the boat. Mo'qin stepped back inside and lifted the tarp she used to cover the boat at night. Crouched under was Roj, who smiled nervously.

“Roj! What in the world are you doing here?” Mo'qin asked.

“Please don't be mad,” Roj replied. “I can't take it anymore. My father is so cruel to the Ashers. They do nothing but serve him, and he treats them as less than garbage.”

Mo'qin sat back down in the boat, facing Roj. “I understand how upsetting that can be. But what are you planning to do about it?”

Roj raised her eyebrows. “I was hoping I could stay with you?”

Mo'qin smiled sadly. “I'd love that, Roj, I would. But you have a family. I can't take you from them.”

“But I don't want to be with them. I don't want to be anywhere on this stupid planet. I want to go somewhere where creatures care about each other. Where feelings matter. Where there is romance. Where people don't take out their pent-up frustrations by kicking another creature. I hate this planet.”

Mo'qin took Roj's hands gently between hers. “No one loves everything about their planet, Roj. There are things about Qualixes that I'd like to change. But I can't do that if I remove myself from Qualixes altogether.”

“But isn't that what you did?” Roj asked.

“Touché.” Mo'qin laughed. “What I mean is that you are young. You don't yet have the freedom to leave. You have family and responsibili-

ties here.”

“But –” Roj began, but Mo'qin wasn't finished.

“There are amazing things about your planet. Your people are brilliant and efficient. You have beautiful holidays. Your family cares about you, and not just because you are useful to them.”

“But the way they act ...” Roj trailed off.

“If you want to see things change, Roj, you need to start changing them yourself. Things won't get better just because you wish they would, and they certainly won't get better if you run away. The only thing to do is to stay and fight—to change the small things you can, and then watch that have a ripple effect. You might never see what your actions will result in, but keep fighting for what you believe. Stand up and say something even when it's hard. But above all else, be kind. You can't change everything at once, but you can continue to make steps in the right direction.” Mo'qin waited for Roj to respond, but she merely nodded her head.

“I'm going to take you home now, Roj. Your parents will be worried about you.”

“I doubt it,” Roj mumbled.

The two rode back to Xoxixx in silence. Mo'qin docked the boat and walked Roj back to her home. She knocked on the door, which was immediately opened by Thox. Before he could say anything, Mo'qin said, “Roj wanted to get some fresh air and chat for a bit. She's ready to be home with you now. I know she didn't mean any harm.”

Thox uncrossed his arms and Laor rushed past him. Laor grabbed her daughter's arms and pulled her inside. Thox watched his companion and daughter disappear into the house, then turned to look at Mo'qin. “Thank you,” he said simply, then closed the door.

Mo'qin smiled to herself. *One step at a time.*

The Doctor's Boy

by Elizabeth Broadbent

Ember picked past garbage bags, cardboard beds, and makeshift shelters. Men warmed themselves at a burn barrel. One muttered something about upworlders and shiny clothes. Another hawked, then spit. “That’s the Doctor’s boy,” he said.

The Doctor’s boy: Ember straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin despite the dirt and danger of venturing below. When he reached a low hutch of gummed-together bottles, a voice rasped, “Come in.”

Ember ducked under a tattered cloth. The old man’s face had lines like crumpled paper. He didn’t look up from his fire, but asked, “What did you see when you flew here?”

Ember dropped to the sooty ground. “Every traffic light was green.”

The Doctor pulled his rough-woven blanket tighter. Ember’s friends would’ve called it a Mexi-blanket. They bought them cheap at charging stations. “You saw more than that.”

“I saw a skyboard with a tree on it.”

“What kind of tree?” he asked, poking at his fire.

“The skyboard was for Firefly Vodka.”

“Fireflies. What’s it mean?”

Ember sifted through memories of bio class. “They signal to find mates at certain times of day—living with natural rhythms. Near the Earth.

And they’re unique and sort of—magical. Being close to magic, then.”

The old man nodded. “Your spirits are teaching divination. Do you dance your watching animal?”

Ember reddened.

The Doctor’s fist slammed the ground. “Crow will leave if you don’t!”

“There’s nowhere to do it.” Ember hugged himself. “People are always around, they’ll hear my drumming—”

“Use headphones.”

“There’s hardly any space—”

“Better than no space. Do you sing your songs?”

That was easier. “Yes.”

“Good.” Ember waited, used to the Doctor’s silences. “They want you to get modded,” he said finally.

Ember’s long hair fell in his face. “They say I could concentrate longer and noise wouldn’t bother me. I wouldn’t get distracted. My mom said I’d stop wandering around. They’d take my hovercar if they knew I was down here.”

The old man gestured. “Then go.”

“But—”

“You’ll come back when you’re needed. Go.”

There would be nothing else. Ember slipped out. As he threaded through the alley’s refuse, his stomach knotted. The old man had asked about modding. Ember had been told to live with the natural and stay close to magic—no modding, ever.

“It would be an *improvement*,” Mom said at late-night snack. “You wouldn’t have ADHD anymore.”

Ember shifted, tilting his seat’s float mechanism. “I wouldn’t be me.”

Dad shook his head. “I had it done. I’m still me.”

“How do you know?” Ember asked.

“Don’t talk back,” his father snapped.

At midnight, Ember slid on his headphones and flipped to a drum track. His room seemed too cramped. Crow would feel caged. But he came anyway, and Ember let him dance.

* * *

“You went below,” Dad said flatly when Ember dragged into the kitchen for breakfast. “You don’t get dirt marks on your fenders upworld.”

Ember didn’t speak. The old man had said: Never lie.

“When did you start that nonsense?”

Dad would ask questions, and he wouldn’t like the answers. Ember tensed. “A few months ago.”

“Why do you do it?”

Ember winced. “I had a dream.”

Dad’s expression didn’t change. “What kind of dream?”

“A dream about below,” he replied, which was not a lie, which was not: *I dreamt where to go, which alley to walk down and what I would see. A rat asked, “What took you so long?” So I went where the dream told me, and I found the old man. His watcher is Rat and he called me from upworld.*

“That’s impulsive, reckless behavior.” Dad waited for Ember to answer: two beats, three. “Those are symptoms of ADHD.”

Ember kept silent.

His father walked out.

* * *

“Ember, collect your work if you’re leaving early,” his Calculus IV teacher said as class bustled to a start.

Ember’s chest tightened. “I’m not leaving early.”

“It’s on the attendance sheet.”

Students were only excused for medical reasons. Ember had no check-ups scheduled. Unless—

“I need to leave now.” He stood. “I’ll email about my assignments.” With no pause for argument, he walked out. His hands trembled as he flew his hovercar. Maybe the old man wouldn’t take him. He sang his songs and begged Crow for help.

Every traffic light was green.

A skyboard showed a globe, a world, an Earth entire.

* * *

Ember rushed into the alley. Daylight hardly penetrated, and deep shadows swaddled the same slumped forms, some sleeping, some warming themselves. “Doctor!” he shouted at the hutch’s makeshift door. “Doctor!”

Someone huffed. “The Doctor isn’t here.”

“I’ll wait.” Ember leaned against the dirty wall.

“The Doctor isn’t coming back.” A woman’s voice rose. “He said he

would pass in the night and he did.”

Ember clung to that skyboard like a prayer. It rose into belief. *You will come back when you’re needed.* “Would you sell my hovercar?” He handed his keys to the woman. “We’ll use the money to feed everyone, like the Doctor did.”

“You’re the Doctor’s boy,” repeated the man from the night before.

Ember nodded, then slipped inside the hutch. They would never find him below. In this squalid alley, far from his pristine apartment, Crow would have room to dance.

Aftermath

by Chinedu Gospel

The story starts with the falling of cold embers from the sky.
Everything I once loved falls as ashes on my skin.
I lie on a bed of flames and my body ignites.
This was how we began a conversation with God.
I sit. Like an observer—soundproof & numb with oblivion.
Something crawls out of my throat.
Black smoke wriggling around the body of a beautiful boy.
Every line in this poem ends with a period.
& that implies that there's no breaking point.
Dear brother, hold your breath till you run out of music.
Our breath smells like the last elegy we heard our mothers sing.
& that was after colonization.
That was after we learned to spell slavery without vowels.
To prove how meaningless it was.
That was after we learned to count in tally marks, every man who was exiled.
That was after our brothers learned about the Pentecost.
After they learned to pray in unknown tongues to attract the glory of God.
And after I practiced to stream my fricatives with a similar cacophony.
To modify my tongue until God found it worthy of an answer.
I know our mothers also prayed.
They prayed for ships to wreck.
They prayed for rubber skins, that could take so much suffering & still not break.
They prayed for their husbands & sons to return.
They prayed & prayed.
& still prayed to be heard.
Dear brother, do you know what it means to breathe & yet, be breathless?
To be the story & yet, the metaphor.

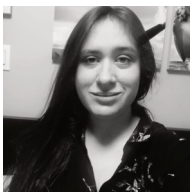
Discus Self Portrait

by E.E. King





Contributors



SYDNIE BEAUPRÉ is more than just a girl: they're an openly LGBTQ2IA author that lives in their own imagination: a post-apocalyptic, zombie-inhabited world, where magical creatures and supernatural occurrences are simply the mundane.

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ELIZABETH BROADBENT escaped the wilds of the Deep South for the Commonwealth of Virginia, where she lives with her three sons and husband. She's the author of *Ink Vine*, a Southern Gothic novella publishing in April 2024 with Psychotoxin Pink, and *Blood Cypress*, coming out in 2025 with

Raw Dog Screaming.

Her speculative fiction has appeared with, or is upcoming in, *Hyphen-Punk*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Hyphenpunk*, *If There's Anyone Left*, and *The Cafe Irreal*, among others. In summer of 2023, ELJ Edition published her novelette, *Naked & Famous*, about teenagers faking appearances of the South Carolina Lizardman. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Insider*, and *Time*.

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KRISTIN CRAGG has enjoyed writing throughout her life. She graduated from UCLA with a B.A. in English Literature. Her first published story can be found in *Twisted Tales of Holiday Horror*, and her drabbles reside in various locations. She is happily married with three kids and three cats.



DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her award-winning poetry and prose has appeared in over seventy journals, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Lightspeed*. For more about her work, including her Elgin-nominated poetry collections, *The Gates of Never* and *Bounded by Eternity*, and her chapbook, *From Voyages Unreturning*, see www.edda-earth.com. For her podcast, see www.youtube.com/@ShiningMoonSpeculativeFiction.

* * *



SHIKHAR DIXIT's stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and Barnes & Noble's *365 Scary Stories*. He lives

with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com.

* * *

CHINEDU GOSPEL, *Frontier IV*, is an emerging Nigerian poet. His works have been published in several online & print magazines & journal as *Bath Magg*, *Fiyah Magazine*, *Blue Marble Review*, & *Sonder Magazine*. He tweets @gonsoetry & grams @gospelsofpoetry.

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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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JORDAN HIRSCH writes speculative fiction and poetry in Saint Paul, MN, USA, where she lives with her husband. Her debut chapbook *Both Worlds* is out with Bottlecap Press, and more of her work has appeared with *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and other venues. Find her on

Bluesky: [@jordanrhirsch.bksy.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@jordanrhirsch.bksy.social).

* * *



R. MAC JONES is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

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E.E. KING is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals.

Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking."

* * *



GERRI LEEN lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. In addition to being an avid reader, she's passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has stories and poems in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Dark Matter*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and others, and has a poetry collection coming out from Trouble Department. She's a member of SFWA and HWA. See more at gerrileen.com.

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GORAN LOWIE is an aro/ace high school teacher from rural Belgium. In his spare time he writes poetry in his second language. Visit him at goranlowie.net and connect [@goranlowie](https://twitter.com/goranlowie).

* * *

She's been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Short Edition*, and *Flametree*. She's published several novels. Her stories are on Tangent's 2019 and 2020 year's best stories. She's been nominated for a Rhysling and several Pushcart awards.

She's shown at paintings at LACMA, painted murals in LA and is currently painting a mural in leap lab (<https://www.leaplab.org/>) in San Paula, CA.

She also co-hosts *The Long Lost Friends Show* on Metastellar YouTube and spends her summers doing bird rescue.

Check out paintings, writing, musings, and books at: www.elizabetheveking.com and amazon.com/author/eeeking



MICHELLE MUENZLER, known at local science fiction and fantasy conventions as “The Cookie Lady”, writes fiction both dark and strange to counterbalance the sweetness of her baking. Her short fiction and poetry can be read in numerous science fiction and fantasy magazines, and she takes immense joy in crinkling words like little foil puppets. Check out her website, michellemuenzler.com, for links to more of her work...as well as recipes for her convention cookies!

* * *



IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.

* * *



EVA PAPA SOULIOTI is a Greek writer of speculative fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Heartlines Spec*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for the Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards. She lives in Athens with her spouse and their two cats. You can find her on twitter and bluesky @epapasoulioti and on her blog plothes.com.

* * *

OLIVIA PAYNE is a librarian working in London. She's an alumnus of the Faber Academy and proud member of the Write Like a Grrrl community. She's previously had work published or forthcoming in places including *Uncharted*, *body fluids*, *Cobra Milk*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *The Broadkill Review*, *Alphabet Box*, and *Sonder Magazine*.

* * *



ASHLEY ABIGAIL GRUEZO RESURRECCION (siya/they) is a Filipina Asian-American, certified 200-Hour Yoga Teacher, and Returned United States Peace Corps Volunteer (Thailand 130) who graduated from Seton Hill University with a MA in Art Therapy. Art therapy is their instrument for healing the weights of cultural somatic impressions and empowering their communities. @twiichii X <https://twiichii.wordpress.com/>

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ADAM ROSS first started writing seriously whilst studying at university, working on numerous student film productions. His short film *Plan C* was screened at "Screentest", the UK's National Student Film Festival. In 2011 he was long-listed for the BBC's Future Talent Award. However over the past few years, Adam has increasingly dedicated time to writing prose and his first published story appeared in the 2017 anthology *Realities Perceived*. He also has a PhD in Modern British History, though he is not entirely sure why.

* * *

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*.

* * *



ADDISON SMITH has blood made of cold brew and flesh made of chocolate. He spends most of his time writing about fish, birds, and cybernetics, often in combination. His fiction has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and *Daily Science Fiction*, among others. You can find him on Twitter @AddisonCSmith

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DAVID STEVENS usually lives in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and those of his children who have not yet figured out the locks. He is the author of more than twenty five published stories, largely speculative, sometimes experimental, which have appeared

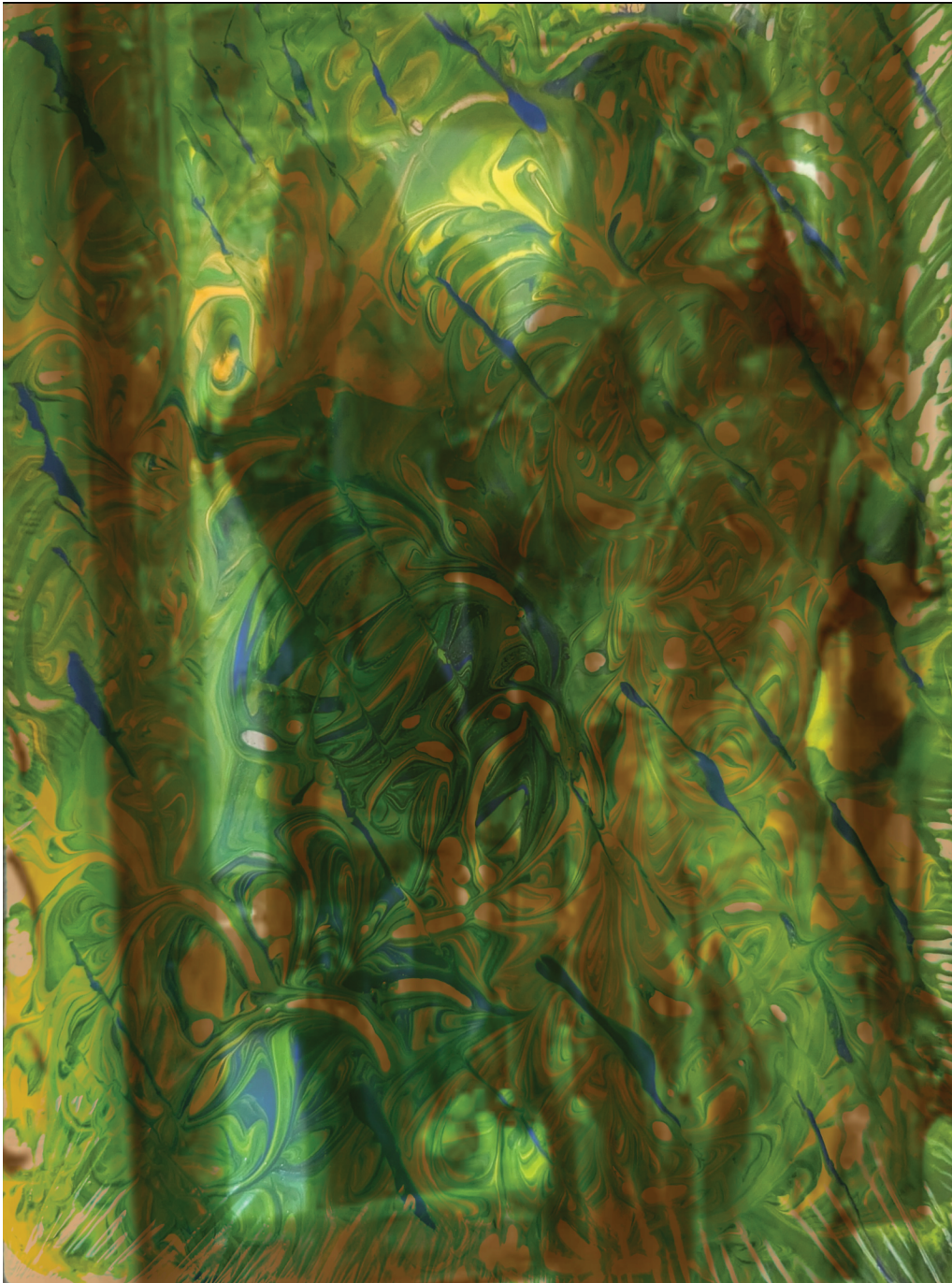
among other places in *Crossed Genres*, *Aurealis*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Pseudopod*, *Cafe Irreal*, and most recently in *Vastarien Literary Journal*, *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*, and the anthology *Prolescarayet*.

David is an Australian Shadows Award finalist, and his stories have received favourable comments from Ellen Datlow in her yearly summaries. One day he will finish his novel. One day he will finish his novel. One day he will finish his novel. One day ...

* * *



SJ TOWNEND is an author of horror, sci-fi, speculative, and dark fiction. She has published with Brigids Gate Press, Ghost Orchid Press, Gravestone Press, *Gravelly Unusual Magazine*, *Dark Matter Magazine*, and Timber Ghost Press to name a few. Right now, the Bristol, UK-based writer is compiling her first collection of horror stories under the working title *Sick Girl Screams*. EIC: www.bgaof-bonespress.com Find her on Twitter: @SJTownend or hiding behind that sentinel oak in the woods.



Green World Reflection

by Carl Scharwath

(full image)