

penumbra

speculative
fiction mag

Feb 2k22 • vol v issue 5

We interview artist

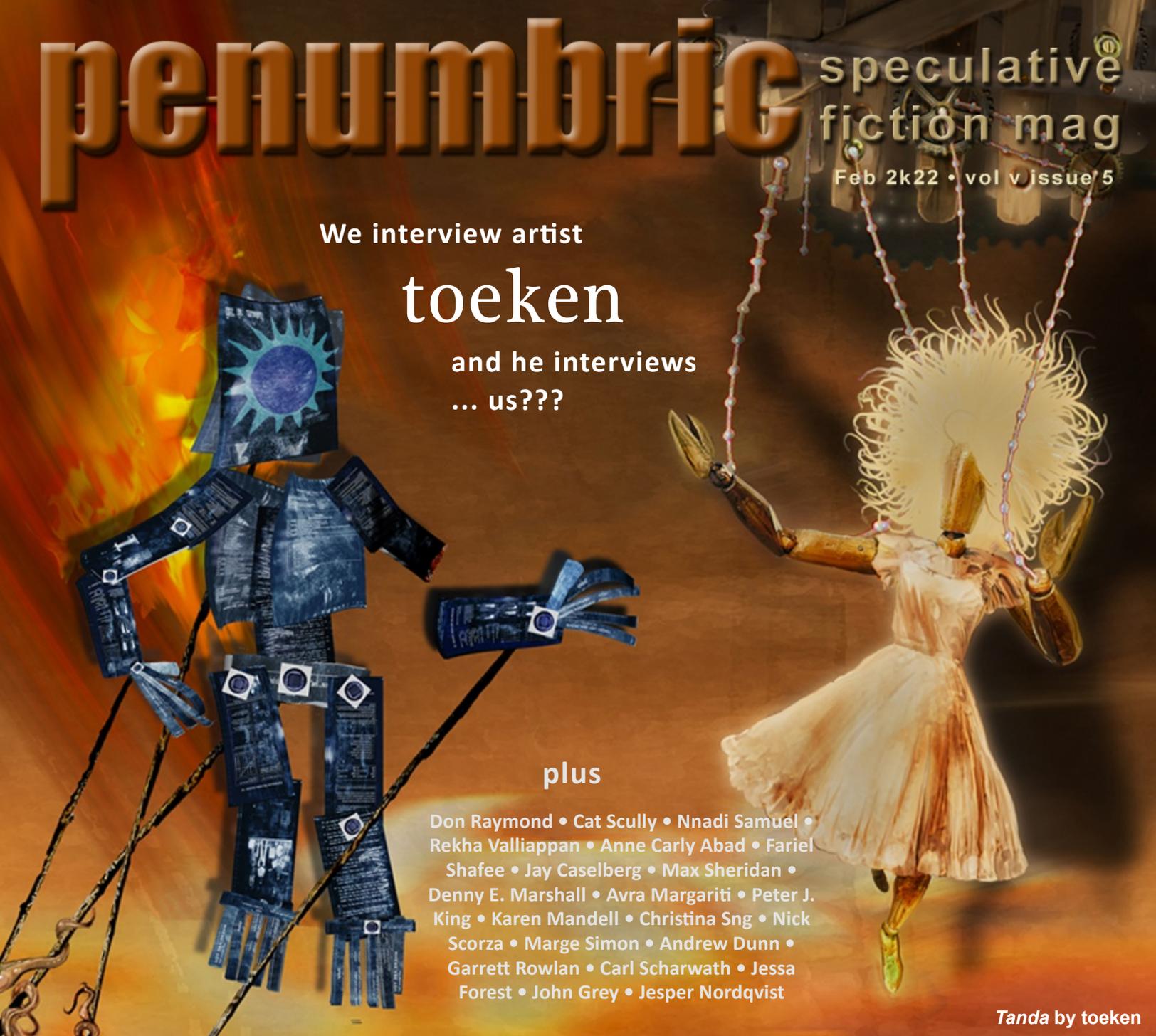
toeken

and he interviews
... us???

plus

Don Raymond • Cat Scully • Nnadi Samuel •
Rekha Valliappan • Anne Carly Abad • Fariel
Shafee • Jay Caselberg • Max Sheridan •
Denny E. Marshall • Avra Margariti • Peter J.
King • Karen Mandell • Christina Sng • Nick
Scorza • Marge Simon • Andrew Dunn •
Garrett Rowlan • Carl Scharwath • Jessa
Forest • John Grey • Jesper Nordqvist

Tanda by toeken



Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2022 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

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

Table of contents

from the editor

article

interview

More than Art, More than an Interview:
We interview toeken; he interviews us!

fiction & poetry

by Don Raymond
by Nnadi Samuel
by Rekha Valliappan
by Anne Carly Abad
by Jay Caselberg
by Max Sheridan
by Avra Margariti
by Peter J. King
by Karen Mandell
by Nick Scorza
by Andrew Dunn
by Garrett Rowlan.
by Jessa Forest
by John Grey

The Feast of the Shepherd
The Earth Never Forgets
The Mirror Effect
Coalescence
Syntax
The City
Neon Vandals
Heading for Home
The Edge of Doom
Pleasant Valley
Hand-Me-Down Days
Target with Four Faces
The Promise
Great Beast

art & g. narrative

by Cat Scully
by Fariel Shafee
by Denny E. Marshall
by Christina Sng
by Marge Simon
by Carl Scharwath
by Jesper Nordqvist

The Summoning
Drowning
The Outpost
Ironies
Woman/Wolf
The Emerging Man
Mondo Mecho

contributor's

bios



The Summoning



Drowning



cover: Tanda
by toeken

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Well, this is new ...

Usually (read: every time) when we request interviews, we're the ones doing the interviewing. The interview itself often becomes more conversational; in fact, I hope it does. But what appears in *Penumbria* is mostly about the interviewee—I don't figure you come here to find out about me. Yet when we approached artist toeken about being interviewed, he asked that he get to interview me at the same time. And, well, I accepted. And then wondered how far under the rocks I could hide.

He asked really good questions, though, and so very un-hermit-crab-like I came out of my shell (or would that make me more hermit-crab-like?). I like to think I asked some good questions, too, and hopefully what we ended up with is in fact something you do find interesting—besides, toeken's art is featured throughout, and that is always a good thing.

February's *Penumbria* is full of great work, albeit not really as part of one theme (even accidentally, unless you're the sort who can connect dots that probably aren't even there ... which I sometimes am lol). So how do we go about putting together an issue without an overall theme? Honestly, usually there's still a flow to it, still some sort of unconscious connectivity in the way we select works for an issue, at least in sections. For February, Don Raymond's "The Feast of the Shepherd" ties in some sense (without giving too much away) with Cat Scully's *The Summoning* and to Nnadi Samuel's "The Earth Never Forgets," and further (thematically? Perhaps in this case) to Rekha Valliappan's "The Mirror Effect." "Coalescence" by Anne Carly Abad flows into Fariel Shafee's *Drowning* and, in some small way, to Jay Caselberg's "Syntax." I would say this perhaps acts as a bridge to Max Sheridan's "The City," Denny E. Marshall's *The*

Outpost, and thence to Avra Margariti's "Neon Vandals." Peter J. King's "Heading for Home" acts as a kind of crossroads between these and Karen Mandall's "The Edge of Doom." I admit we have a bit of a break for Christina Sng's art series "Ironies" and "Pleasant Valley" by Nick Scorza—a break into the strange, really, perhaps an *X-Files* sort of break, but this leads into the transformative with Marge Simon's *Woman/Wolf* and Andrew Dunn's "Hand-Me-Down Days," and maybe into both transformative and strange in Garrett Rowlan's "Target with Four Faces." You'll see how *The Emerging Man* by Carl Scharwath and Jessa Forest's "The Promise" tie together when you get to them, although to me this was a visual tie more than a thematic one, along with John Grey's "Great Beast" at the end. Well, near the end ... Jesper Nordqvist's *Mondo Mecho* is kind of its own thing, as always.

OK, so yes, there's the evidence that I'm one of those "connecting the dots" types. As you go through this issue, or any issue, you may find none of these connections works for you. Or you may find it such an amazing linkage that you're sure there's a secret message wound throughout. (I wish ... it would be secret even from me.) Hopefully, though, we've succeeded in at least not jarring you from the stories, the poetry, the art as you wander through, immersed in one great image after another. Our work is to show off these pieces, already great in and of themselves, without detracting from them; a sort of train moving between different dreams of different worlds. Hopefully we've done that.

All the best here in these chaotic times,

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbria

Much More than Art ...

... And more than one interview.
We ask toeken about his life and
art, and he asks us the same

TOEKEN'S ART HAS GRACED not only the cover of Penumbria but also many other fine magazines, and he's also done book covers, like that of Halldark Holidays. He's a friendly yet mysterious figure, and we wanted to know more. What else does he do? What are his influences? Inquiring minds want to know ...

However, toeken's own inquiring mind wanted to know more as well, and a condition of our interview was that he also get to interview me—that the curtain be pulled back and the managing editor be subject to the same sort of questioning. Sigh. So you get a bonus, dear reader: two interviews for the price of one!

Let us leap right into the tennis match, if you will, of our discussion ...

* * *

Jeff Georgeson: You've studied EU literature and teaching. Did you go into teaching in the end?

toeken: I came out of University with a joint degree, in English and in Modern European Literature and Culture, and I realized afterwards I'd pretty much sabotaged myself when it came to trying to find work with that kind of qualification. It would have been great for research-based work. After a few years of lying to get work (basically omitting chunks of my cv), I needed to pay the rent and was getting to a crisis point with my fiancée at the time, I took a job as a Librarian in a local school and went back to night school to retake my maths (I am f**king awful at maths even now) so I could take the following year taking my teaching degree. I wound up teaching English and Drama for about seven years before deciding to up sticks and sod off to Spain.

JG: What did you do when you moved to Spain (and why there)?

TOE: I had family there who were renovating an old cortijo. Met a local guy there who wanted to sell rural real estate, so while I was helping my brother out with the building work during the day, I



PICTURED: toeken's special cover art for this issue, *Tanda* (Javanese for 'signal' or 'shadow') and inspired by the Shadow Play he first saw as a kid watching the opening titles for Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*. It's the only thing he remembers from that flick, aside from Maurice Jarre's score.

studied html at night and set up a website for this guy. This guy turned out to be a real slippery character. Quite a greedy piece of work. That whole enterprise fell apart and I wound up eventually doing labouring, bar work, helping build houses and swimming pools before eventually taking on art commissions.

I see you graduated with a writing degree initially; what was it about that particular discipline that appealed to you?

JG: I'd been writing short stories for years before finally deciding that going to uni would be useful; after all, why would I need a degree to be a writer? But then, ultimately, it was helpful insofar as I made writerly friends and had both those and professors who would critique my work. It also provided a framework that required a certain amount of writing, and I became very good at proofreading, which became part of my actual "career" after uni (along with serial entrepreneurship lol).

I think all the scifi and fantasy I'd read as a child, along with creating all kinds of worlds and stories in my D&D campaigns, lead me to be interested in writing generally. I've never managed to make it "the" thing I do, though ... I was originally going to be an astrophysicist, then an AI programmer (which I have done). But somehow writing stories about it all ended up being more immediately interesting to me. Now, of course, I'm trying to do all these things.

TOE: What kind of science fiction and fantasy literature did you read as a child? Were there particular authors you gravitated more towards than others?

JG: I remember being attracted to Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders of Pern series, Asimov's Foundation trilogy, Herbert's Dune series. I also remember Zelazny's Chronicles of Amber very fondly. I was very influenced by Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*; that is one of my favourite books ever.

I think the last reference I saw said you were currently living in Spain, but you've been to university in the UK and, I suspect,

travelled other places as well. Do you do a lot of travelling?

TOE: I was born in the UK but I spent chunks of my childhood all over the place, most notably, for me, Tahoe in the US. That particular "chunk" of time there had a profound impact. That hasn't changed, the shifting around; on average I'll shuffle about every eighteen months or so. I travel light. What was that quote by Palahniuk? "The things you own wind up owning you?" They pretty much anchor you, for better or worse.

JG: What was the impact of Tahoe and that "chunk" of time on you?

TOE: As a kid relocating from the UK into that kind of environment it felt like I was visiting another planet. An extraordinary experience. A cherished one.

Can you talk a little about your background and current career in programming? And is there a link between the two areas you're currently engaged in pursuing?

JG: I started some very simple programming back in early secondary school—remembering that at the time schools were still teaching FORTRAN and PASCAL, and the Apple II Plus was the most advanced personal computer. When I took breaks from programming, I'd look out the window and gaze at the dinosaurs grazing out in the Mesozoic fields lol ...

From then on I was interested in both programming and writing stories (this was about the same time that I started playing D&D), especially interactive stories. There was no internet, so a friend and I tried to start an RPG play-by-mail company. Needless to say, that was even slower than a 56K modem would eventually be, and it failed. So I had my first failed company in secondary school. (Another problem was its name—"Dimensions in Fantasy"—which prompted a phone call from the police department to my mother, who had to explain that the company wasn't what they thought it was lol ...)

For whatever reason, I ended up being in a pseudo-theatre-ish troupe



PICTURED: toeken

after high school and then focused on writing rather than programming for many years. (I wish I'd continued to work on combining RPGs and programming ... maybe I'd have come up with one of the first online games. But, no.)

Around the time I finished my first round of uni and got a degree in writing, I started doing web and application design, which at the time one could just get certified by Microsoft and be well-credentialed. So I started two businesses in parallel: proofreading and programming. And I've been doing both ever since, in various permutations.

I guess the current link between the two is in publishing *Penumbric* and thinking/writing about the ethics of artificial intelligence, while trying to figure out in which direction to take my AI/games company Quantum Tiger Games. I develop “strong” AI systems that mimic human personalities, behavior, and memory. But is that right? Even in

a game?

TOE: The AI systems that you develop to mimic human attributes—are they honed specifically to test or inform? Is there an element of “trap-feeling” to this?

JG: Both, really. In the sense that they're supposed to have proper human personalities (as measured using OCEAN), I've had to put them in all kinds of situations and test that the results are within a sort of proper “human” response—whatever that is lol. I used existing results from various human OCEAN test samples and compared these to the ways in which my AI characters developed over time. However, once I had done the testing, the characters created going forward could be used to inform us how people might react in certain situations, and could possibly be used in certain therapy situations (if one were using role-playing or RPGs as therapeutic tools, which I wrote a paper on as an undergrad).

I suppose all such AI development fits that “trap feeling” you ask about, for it would be difficult to so thoroughly test the AI characters' reactions that one would know for sure the engine mimicked human reactions and development, especially given we don't know real-world human personality development as well as all that. So you'd be using the systems in more experiments or in games or other situations without fully knowing whether it matches human personalities exactly (but again, can you ever know that, given our limited knowledge of humans themselves?).

When did you start “doing” art?

TOE: Been messing around with crayons and pencils for as long as I can recall. I fell in love with comic books early on, copying Kirby, Byrne and Simonson. It kind of shroomed from there.

JG: How did it “shroom”?



PICTURED: 'Kormaleon'. One-shot dark fantasy comic written by Phil Emery, drawn by toeken

TOE: It shroomed into storyboarding super 8 films that I made with my family and friends, then model-making ... but always painting, drawing. I was kicked out of art college after three months (it wasn't for me) but I did get to mess around in a darkroom for a few weeks during that time, which was fantastic.

How much time do you get to devote to writing outside of programming and publishing?

JG: Not enough; sometimes I magically construe some of my aches and pains (like my teeth, currently, still, for months) to the lack of writing. It's not as though there isn't literally time in the day I could spend on writing, but just that I'm not mentally "there" once I've done *Penumbra*-related stuff, proofreading, programming work, etc.

I managed to write one story last year, but then had a slew of ideas, so I think my brain is ready to write something, once I get round to it.

TOE: Can we expect any new fiction from yourself anytime soon?

JG: [laughs] I hope so. I need more discipline or mental space or both. However, I read so much excellent work as an editor, I'm not sure I'll be confident enough to send out my own works without going over and over things.

Are you able to be a full-time artist?

TOE: I am, for periods of time; I get restless doing that one thing, being in one place.

JG: So do you do other types of work at various times, and then come back to art? Or is the change in scenery the bigger change?

TOE: Yeah, I'll do plastering, roof fixes, swimming pool maintenance. Labouring's great—it's like a day at the gym and you get paid for it, heh-heh.

Your magazine *Penumbra* has an extraordinary ethos and scope. How do you go about selecting pieces to publish? Is it driven by personal taste, modified by relevance, governed by commerce/audience appeal, etc?

JG: I don't even think about commercial appeal—I don't want to go down that road. The site doesn't have advertising, we don't sell advertising. I realize I'm unlikely to ever make any money that way, but I yearn for the days when you could look around on the Net and not be bombarded with pop-up ads, or try to read websites that look like a postage stamp's worth of content nestled in amongst the specially tailored ads for Whatever You Just Looked At.

I look for work that is inclusive, that talks about the issues we face today and tomorrow (climate change, racism, voter suppression, equality, and more), but not every piece has to do that, and the story or poem or artwork needs to be good in and of itself. Ultimately, I guess it does get driven by personal taste, since I make the ultimate decisions, but I try to be open to being moved in new directions. I find it a compliment, actually, that you see it has having such an extraordinary scope. I feel like that means I'm succeeding

PICTURED: 'Vampyre Noir'. One-shot dark comic/horror pastiche comic, written by Phil Emery, illustrated by toeken





PICTURED: 'Ulcred Row'. Painting for *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*. Many thanks to Heather Mattson

in getting beyond my own limitations.

How do you choose your subject matter?

TOE: I get a few private commissions outside of the book and magazine work I'm lucky to get; stuff like murals, tattoos, ads for local events and Klimt homages. The rest of the stuff I do that's not specifically tailored for another party comes from experimenting with materials, smashing up tiles, melting wax, dipping twigs in bleach and syrup and making marks on linen, sandpaper, singeing paper, canvas, bedsheets to get inspiration going. It's f***ing fun. If you keep your wits about you, you'll get an "accident," some "thing" you can work from that way almost every time. That "messing around" will then inform and shape other work later on. Hopefully for the better.

JG: Can you give me an example of this?

TOE: If you have the time to experiment with different materials when you're putting work together and some of those experiments work—like painting on glass, bleaching a finished acrylic painting on a wooden panel, blowtorch glue on canvas or ceramic tiles, soak linen in vinegar and photograph it using the oldest

mobile phone came you've got, then print that, scan it again and then paint or draw images on top of that—you can sometimes arrive at something odd or disconcerting. It's a kind of rehearsed controlled accident a lot of the time that you can revisit. It's play.

You've recently published the first compendium round up for *Penumbria* and it has an extraordinary lineup of talent involved ... what kind of audience are you hoping to attract now? What are your plans/aspirations/hopes for the project going forward, and do you have any other irons picking up a glow in the publishing fire?

JG: I hope that *Penumbria* continues to be a draw for such incredible talent (including yourself!), and I'm happy to try to help that talent reach as wide an audience as possible. I'm open to whatever directions, whatever ebbs and flows in the current come my way. I want the audience to continue to grow, I want the submissions to continue to flow in. I want to continue to learn new things, I guess; that's ultimately what I'm best at, what I enjoy most, is being a student. Both the submissions I receive and the interviews I'm lucky enough to do are big parts of that. If I can apply what I'm learning to *Penumbria* and my other projects, I'll be happy.

I hope to write more of my own work, and I want to re-edit a book of short stories I put out several years ago so that it's more relevant to the now, rather than to the "20 years ago when I was an undergrad and thought I was all that and a bag of chips." I want to publish some work on AI and the ethics thereof. And it would be nice to actually put out some of the videogames I've been creating, which of course requires finishing them.

TOE: Speaking of videogames, Mr G; I imagine you have quite a few favorites, are there any that have stood the test of time for you, that you still play?

JG: There are! I still love some of the Final Fantasy games, especially VIII and X—*FFVIII* was the first game I played after a

long break from video games, and I did so because it was just so beautiful, with such an amazing story. Those two games vie for tops in my estimation. Lately I've been playing some of the Persona games, in particular 4 and 5, which I just started. They're really interesting and allow you to take so many different arcs through the overall storyline (I played *Persona 4*, like, four times); however, I do have some issues with the gameplay in terms of representation and choice.

What does the future hold for your work?

TOE: There are four main "pans" I've got bubbling on the stove right now and three of them involve illustrating comic books written by Phil Emery—dystopian science fiction *Razor's Edge*, a dark fantasy tale, *Kormaleon*, and a satirical alt-horror thing called *Vampyre Noir*. This guy has got an extraordinarily fecund imagination and a sly wit, and it'd be great if one of these projects found a home. The other "pan" has a graphic novel of my own simmering away. In the oven—if I may stretch the metaphor to snapping point—I've got some stuff slow-baking with a few publishers, most notably Muddy Paw Press and Bag of Bones Press. Now, in the microwave over here ... ah, f**k it, just kidding!

* * *

toeken can be found on Twitter at @toeken6, and his works in many, many places. You can see his artwork at atokeneffort.weebly.com.

Jeff Georgeson can be found hunkering down behind a computer screen working on Penumbria, or hunkering down behind a computer screen working on AI. There are no current pictures of him out in the wild, except for unverified blurry images that really could be anything.

The Feast of the Shepherd

by Don Raymond

Found him, Andrew!”

Warren’s voice floated up from below the dike. His quad was parked on the lip of the creek bed, and as Andrew pulled up, he saw the old cowboy kneeling in the mud, cradling a lamb in his arms. It shook with cold and terror, bawling its distress in a weak voice. Somewhere over the hill, its mother returned her own anxious bleating.

A look from Warren was enough; the lamb’s leg was broken.

Would have been more merciful if the poor thing had drowned, he thought.

Warren laid the lamb on its side, pulled out his knife, and handed it to Andrew. Everyone on the ranch wore one, except for him; he wasn’t that country yet.

“Does it have to be?”

“You can see for yourself.”

“But--” he paused. There was no *but*. He took the knife gingerly in his forefingers, then wrapped his grip firmly around the handle before kneeling next to the lamb. It jerked away, its good legs beating wildly out at him. Its breathing was frantic, and its eyes darted back and forth, seeking escape.

He reached for its head and it kicked out, bleating in panic. Its mother answered from farther up the hill. He could see her watching them, occasionally stamping a hoof, waiting for them to leave so she

could go to her offspring. He tried again, grabbing a handful of the lamb’s silky wool. Its flailing hoof slammed into his shoulder. It was too small to hurt, but it knocked him off balance, sending him flailing in the dirt. It kicked pebbles at him as it futilely scrambled to escape.

Warren picked up the fallen blade. He shot a contemptuous glance at the younger man, then slit the lamb’s throat in one smooth, mechanical motion. He moved with expert quickness, and not a single drop of blood got on him, although it sprayed across the rocks of the stream bed with every arterial gush. And all over Andrew.

The animal wheezed as it ran out of air. Warren didn’t wait for it to stop moving before lifting it by its hind feet and carrying it over to the ATV. One-armed, he draped it across the rear of the vehicle and slapped its side.

“Now you know,” he said. His face was a map of the land, a rugged, sunburned topography whose edges drew inevitably downward. The contempt in his voice said he didn’t think the lesson had sunk in. “One more to go.”

Under his breath, Andrew cursed Warren, cursed his job, cursed the county, and most of all cursed the late summer storm that had scattered the flock across half the countryside. Seven of the newborns had been lost, panicked by the thunder. They’d found the mothers in the morning, running distraught through the fields, calling in desperate terror for their prodigal calves. It had taken them all day to round up the six, leaving one still unaccounted for.

They rode in silence, not daring to speak. Finally, Warren said, “Part of life.”

“Spare me your philosophy. Please.”

“Out here is real,” Warren went on.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Andrew said.

“For a while, at least. When you leavin’ again?”

“Week after next.” He’d already told Warren twice, but nothing seemed to stick for long with the old man.

Warren shook his graying head. “That’s right during haying season. We could use the extra hands.”

“I need time to get ready for class,” Andrew said. “And frankly, if I don’t set eyes on something besides prairie soon, I might lose my mind.”

Warren stopped his ATV and shaded his eyes, looking up at the clouds. “Better get back.”

“Still got one more,” Andrew reminded him.

“Not gonna find him in this light. Just get ourselves lost if we try.”

“Coyotes might get him if we wait until tomorrow.”

“If that’s what’s meant to be,” Warren said.

Andrew gritted his teeth, knowing what was coming.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Warren continued. “We needed the rain. Could use more, to be honest. It was a bad summer. And a mild winter. Whole damn county’s gonna burn up, we ain’t careful.”

* * *

Let it burn, Andrew thought as he drove through town the next day,

his economy car dwarfed by the diesel-powered pickups that loomed around him. He crawled along at the thirty miles an hour that was the highest speed permitted off the highway. Even that was dangerous: dogs ran free through the streets, and children darted out from between parked cars, invisible until they were right in front of him. It was a street made for parades, not traffic.

The banner stretched across the road advertised the last one of the year:

FANDANGO DAYS
Oct 21–24
Modoc County Fairgrounds

Below that was a cartoon of the high school mascot: a grinning Native American, incongruously white against a purple background.

Political correctness is for city folk, he thought, then grimaced as he realized the irony: they’d made a mascot of the same people they’d driven from the land and onto the Rez, where they’d continued the job with alcohol, methamphetamine, and fentanyl.

He parked in front of the town’s only grocery store and tried to ignore the eyes that followed him as he went in. He likewise ignored the suddenly silenced conversations that heralded his passage down the aisles. He dropped a box of cereal in the cart, followed it with milk, and decided, at the last minute, to add a bottle of rum. Drinking numbed the grinding days amid the sagebrush and unceasing wind. Andrew’s friends were all off on digs in Iraq and Egypt, but he was too poor to waste a summer on an unpaid internship.

The desert sun was blinding as he went outside, and he didn’t see the man until a pair of massive hands shoved him up against his car. A fist followed; he raised his arm to try to block it; he might as well have dodged a meteor. He saw stars, heard a brass band playing in his head.

He shook his head, and instinct made him duck to the left, barely avoiding the second swing. As his vision cleared, he looked up into

Ronnie Gonzales's alcohol-splotched face. Andrew stumbled backward, trying to edge his way to the car. With surprising dexterity, Ronnie sidestepped him, cutting off his retreat.

"Told you to stay off our land," he said.

"How'd you—"

"Shut up! You're lucky I caught you here, and not on the Rez. We gotta lotta room to hide bodies out there."

Andrew scuttled sideways out of Ronnie's range, still clutching his grocery bag. He wished now he'd carried a knife. He produced the bottle, holding it like an unwieldy club.

"Don't come any closer," Andrew said.

To his surprise and worry, Ronnie grinned and stepped forward.

"Boys! Please, let's all settle down, now. We're friends, right?" Tina's warbling contralto came from behind him, but Andrew didn't dare turn.

"No," the two men said simultaneously.

"Ok," Tina said. She edged slowly between them and put one soft hand on Andrew's upraised arm, another on Ronnie's fist, keeping her eyes locked with Ronnie. "Andrew, can you give me a ride back? Traci had to go to work."

"Sure," he muttered, not moving.

"He ain't gonna be in a condition to give nobody a ride," Ronnie said as he shook off her grip.

"Right," Tina said. "You wanna go back to jail, Ronnie?"

He shrugged, as if it made no difference to him.

"Third strike," she reminded him, and he deflated. He raised a calloused finger and waved it in Andrew's face.

"Stay off the Rez, you understand? Your people already took enough from us."

Andrew forced himself to nod, swallowing the rage that bellowed up inside.

Ronnie turned and stalked off.

"Come on," Tina hissed, tugging at his arm. "We need to go. Right now!"

* * *

His hands trembled on the wheel, and he took his time backing out. Beside him, Tina was calm, her features placid, a mirror of the sky. Around one finger, she twirled auburn hair turned the color of wheat fields from long hours in the summer sun. She stared out the window, seemingly unconcerned how close they'd come to violence, as if it were nothing special. *For her; it's not*, he realized.

They passed the last few bedraggled buildings marking the outskirts of town and passed onto the plain proper. The sky was threatening again, flat and gray, and he knew in another couple of weeks they'd get the first snow.

Tina began humming a nursery rhyme, the same one she always hummed when her mind was running on idle; he doubted she was even aware she was doing it:

"Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb ..."

"It's so flat and empty," he said, mostly as a way of breaking that flow of noise.

She looked his way, startled out of her reverie.

“I think it’s peaceful,” she said.

“Or desolate. Maybe that’s why everybody’s so angry all the time. It’s no wonder they put the internment camp up here. Where would you run to, even if you got out?”

“This is an old lakebed, you know.”

“Is that why they call it Tule Lake when there’s no lake?”

“There used to be. They say it disappeared.”

He snorted. “Lakes don’t just disappear, Tina. It’s not like you see them on the back of milk cartons.”

“They were blasting, or something or other. When they took down the internment camp, after the suicides. They didn’t find all those bodies, either. There’s lava caves all over these parts.”

He nodded. “I looked up the USGS survey maps when I took this job.”

“The what? Never mind. They say it must’ve drained into the old tunnels, but nobody was ever able to figure out where it went. Not even the government men.”

He glanced out the window at the sullen earth. Beside him, Tina resumed singing.

“I shall spend a season below the earth, with my sister Ereshkigal,” he muttered to himself.

“Huh?”

“Just something from my research.”

“About Isis?”

“Inanna,” he corrected. At her baffled look, he continued: “She was

the goddess of love and war. Her sister ruled the realm of death.”

Tina laughed. “Sounds like she would have fit in up here.”

“Heh. Yeah, probably. She really knew how to party. She banished her first husband to the Underworld when he didn’t mourn for her.”

“Sounds like he deserved it. Men,” she said with a snort.

He looked to see if she was joking, but she was staring at the crowns of the mountains, slate gray against the gray sky. “Does that mean you don’t want to have dinner with me?”

“Ask me again tomorrow. We women are fickle creatures.”

* * *

“In case you didn’t cotton on, the white man ain’t welcome on the Rez,” Sal said.

Andrew gesticulated angrily, his waving hands cutting a hole in the smoky air. “You think they’d be happy to have someone volunteer. It’s not like they do much conservation as it is. How many artifacts are still out there, waiting to be discovered?”

“Maybe they want to leave them there,” Tina said. She sat beside him at a battered kitchen table, rolling a marijuana cigarette with a dexterity borne of long practice. Her lips moved silently as she worked: *Mary had a little lamb* ...

“That’s ...” he struggled for words. “You can’t just leave artifacts! They belong in a museum!”

Sal snorted. “Sure, Dr. Jones.”

“But it’s the truth!”

“What’s going to happen to them out there? They’re going to, what,

get dirtier?”

Tina took a long puff on the finished joint. She offered it to Andrew, who waved it away. She frowned and passed it to Sal, who took it between his thin, nimble fingers. He already looked half-asleep, with his lowered eyes framed by dark lashes and long hair. But he always looked like he was on the verge of passing out.

“Are you coming to Fandango Days?” Tina asked. She coughed and waved the smoke away from her face.

“I don’t even know what it is. I’m new around here, remember?”

“I just thought everyone knew.”

“Only if you’re born here. Which everyone is quick to remind me I wasn’t.”

“They do it to all the newcomers. Took me years to finally fit in,” Sal said.

“It’s only in another couple weeks,” Tina said. “You’ll still be here then, right? Shearing season isn’t done until mid-October.”

“I’ve already talked to Warren. My classes start mid-September.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just thought, maybe, once you got to know the place better ...”

He couldn't help his laughter, though he could see the hurt in her face. “Sorry. It’s beautiful up here—” a gentle lie couldn’t hurt —“but my career is somewhere else. You can still tell me about it though,” he said by way of apology. “Was it some kind of rodeo? What’s a Fandango?”

She brightened once more, or at least pretended to. “That’s the pass. Where the first settlers crossed over the mountains into Modoc County.”

“Or where they were massacred by the Modoc,” Sal said.

Tina slapped his arm, then gestured for the joint again. “Spoilsport.”

“That’s not even right, anyway. They crossed in early spring. But half the time it’s still snowing up here then, so they celebrate it now.”

“Wait, there was a massacre?” Andrew asked. “I hadn’t heard about this.”

“They didn’t want you white people here,” Sal said. “Like you could blame them—smallpox, whiskey, resettlement ... ask me, they had the right idea. So they caught them at the top of the pass and wiped them out. Every one of them; didn’t even leave the children.”

“That’s not true,” Tina said. “They took the children. Did things to ’em.” She gave a gruesome, exaggerated shudder.

“But—same old story—the white man kept coming. Drove them off the land, tried to resettle them up in Tule Lake. You never heard of the Modoc War?”

“No! And I’ve lived here like the whole summer.”

Sal shrugged. “You don’t get out much. There’s a museum up there.”

“*Now* you tell me.”

“You know about the lava tunnels?” Andrew nodded. “That’s where they held off the Army. There’s a monument now. They go on for miles, down there, and the Army never would have found ’em.”

“Then what happened?”

“They surrendered.”

“Just like that?”

“I dunno, man. Maybe they ran out of food. Captain Jack—that’s what they called him, Captain Jack—he just walked into camp and gave himself up. Never talked about why. Some people say they found things down there, things they didn’t want to talk about.”

Andrew sputtered with laughter. “Sounds like a ghost story to me. It’s probably just some recycled harvest festival.”

“A say what now?” Tina asked.

“A harvest festival, like Thanksgiving. Or Sukkot, or the Heb-Sed. They’re all just harvest festivals. Fertility rituals, really. In Sumeria, they called it the Feast of Tammuz. Tammuz—Osiris—Jesus—they’re all dying and reborn gods. Corn gods, we call them.”

Sal looked out the window, where the rest of the ranch hands were gathered around the fire cooking dinner. “You might not want to say that too loudly ’round these parts.”

“That’s why I’m in here,” Andrew said. He helped himself to the joint. “The god dies, and his ashes are spread on the fields to renew the life. Those old rituals still survive. Like Halloween. But here you call it ... Fandango Days?” He grinned. “That’s why I love archaeology. The stories never go away, they just change.”

“Maybe, but Captain Jack is real,” Sal said. “I’ve seen some of the artifacts.”

“You’re making that up,” Andrew said, with a smile to take the sting out.

“Oh, they’re out there. You have to know where to look.”

“Like where, Dr. Carter?”

“A lot of it’s on Indian land. Obsidian arrowheads, stuff from the

early ranchers. Even old army stuff from the cavalry outposts.”

“There’s even older things out there, too,” Tina said. “Older than the Indians, they say. Writing nobody can read. And places that, that don’t work right.” She ran down, looking around with suddenly sheepish eyes at the two men staring at her. “At least, that’s what my daddy told me.”

“There’s no story I haven’t already heard about ancient aliens.”

“I don’t think it’s aliens. I think it’s things that were here ... before ...” she trailed off, and they looked at her expectantly, but her gaze was focused on some farther horizon. After a moment, Andrew laughed to break the tension.

“Well, then, I’ll have my career made, won’t I?” he said.

Sal laughed. “If they don’t kill you and rebury it.” He slapped the table and rose. “Come on, I think dinner’s ready.”

* * *

The light took its time in leaving the high country, but the cold was already creeping in. Andrew savored the warmth of the fire, suddenly hungry after the alcohol and smoke.

Warren’s son Hank squatted by the fire pit, building tacos out of the roast. Andrew hesitated; Hank had made it clear he felt there was nothing a city boy could do that a country boy couldn’t do better. But tonight, he merely nodded and handed Andrew a plate.

He folded the taco in his hands and took a bite, savoring the greasy flakiness of the Indian bread as the hot juice gushed into his mouth.

“Hey city, know what that is?” Hank asked.

Andrew shook his head, indicating through his throaty moan that he didn’t know and, just at that point, didn’t care.

“That’s your little lost lamb from this morning.”

The grease congealed in his throat. He noticed all the old timers had gathered in a semi-circle facing him, waiting to see his reaction.

“Baaaaa, baaaaa,” Hank said. “Eat up, city boy.”

Andrew locked eyes with the other man and forced himself to chew, moving the food around in his mouth despite his desire to gag. He took a dramatic swallow. The laughter died down.

“It’s good,” Andrew said, to roars of approving laughter.

He moved on, dumping the plate as soon as he knew no one was watching. He headed back to the ranch house, hoping for another beer to wash out his mouth. He noticed Warren, sitting in the darkness of the porch shadow, smoking and staring at him.

“What’s this, pick on the new kid night?” Andrew demanded.

“Well, if I had to guess, I’d say it was dinner. Waste not, want not. Poor thing had to die, no two ways about that, but we can still respect it. Its death can sustain us. For a little while.” He sighed. “Always for a little while.”

That flat truth blunted the edge of Andrew’s anger. “They still could have warned me,” he said.

“Barely rained last winter. Hard snow the two before that. Lost a lot of stock then, especially among the lambs.”

“So you add cruelty to cruelty? As if the world didn’t serve up enough?”

“It takes a lot of gettin’ through to live up here. This land will eat you up, son. Eat you up.” He dropped the dog-end of his cigarette and crushed it out with the toe of his boot. “Gotta do something to take the stress off. Hell, it’s why I smoke. The other stuff, too,” he

said, waving his hand at the ill-defined sins that roiled the portentous darkness. “Don’t tell me they never did nothing like that at your school.”

“Well, maybe,” he admitted. “But you’ll have to do better than that for scary stories, old man. I work with the dead for a living.”

“What tall tales?”

“Captain Jack? Ghosts in the tunnels? Scary stuff. For a kid, maybe.”

Strangely, Warren’s brow wrinkled in apparent confusion. “Who’s been telling you all that?” he asked.

Andrew recounted the evening’s discussion. As he finished, Warren took off his broad-brimmed hat and ran his calloused hand down his craggy face, making a sour face as if he’d just bit into a lemon.

“Stay off the Rez, you understand me?”

“Of course. Just like yesterday, and the day before.”

“Way I heard it, you didn’t listen so good the first time. You know why they gave them the Rez?”

“Because it was theirs to begin with?”

Warren grimaced. “You’re still young enough to think life is fair.” He sighed and took a deep breath, chewing on his words. “Everything she told you was true. But she didn’t tell you all of it. About Captain Jack.” He lit another cigarette, stared off into the blackness of the hills. “All they wanted was to go home.”

“The settlers?”

“The Modoc. They’d sent ’em up to the Klamath Reservation, but those weren’t their people. Home belonged to the white man now,

but they went anyway. The Army was waiting for them at Tule Lake.”

“I thought that lake vanished.”

“That was later. But still before the camps. It was the government men who thought of putting the camps here. Damn ’em to hell.”

“Right, wouldn’t want the government to get poking around.”

Warren stared at him for a long while.

“Folks don’t know how it is in the country,” he said. “We do things different out here. We’d be a lot better off if the government men would leave us alone.”

“Except for the farm subsidies, right?”

“They pay your wages, city boy.” He settled himself once more. “Anyway, Kintpuash—”

“Was that his real name? Captain Jack makes him sound like a joke.”

Warren shrugged. “Not to the settlers, he wasn’t. He killed General Canby and burned homesteads all along the Lost River, trying to make life hard enough the whites would up and leave. But more soldiers came instead. They drove the Modoc into the lava caves. They might have held out there for years, but Kintpuash was sold out by his men. The Left-Hand Man, they called him.”

“What, nobody bothered to ask his name?”

“As if they cared about a bunch of Indians?”

“No more than you do,” Andrew shot back. Warren continued as if he hadn’t heard. “He was their Judas. Sold them out to the Indian Agents. They hung Kintpuash and sent his body East. Denied him burial on his own land, even. The rest of them went peaceably after

that. Later, they told the government men of strange things in the deep caverns, things that were worse than what the white man could do to them.”

The silence was heavy as Warren wound down. Andrew scuffed a foot along the deck, weighing his response.

“Good try, Warren, but I’m not buying that part either. Any more than the curse of the pharaohs killed Carnarvon.”

Warren rose and put his hat back on. “I don’t really give two flips if you believe it or not. Just do what I say, and you’ll be out of here soon enough.”

Warren went inside just as wobbling footsteps tottered around the corner. Tina staggered up, sipping something pink and—from the smell—alcoholic. She put her hand on Andrew’s chest, formed her fingers into a claw. She raked them down to his waist, let them linger there. She took a sip of her drink, leaving a lipstick stain on the rim, and offered it up to him.

“If you drink there, it’s almost like a kiss,” she said, the corner of her lip tilting up in a smile. She was close enough he could feel her heat.

He held the glass out away from him and reached for the door; she stepped into the circle formed by his arms. She tilted her head up and closed her eyes.

He pushed her away.

“I’ve had enough of this for tonight,” he said.

She opened her eyes. “Enough of what?”

“Sorry, Tina, but I’m not playing anymore. Fairy tales and tricks. Why don’t you go see if Sal is interested?”

“Fairy tales?” she repeated, her voice calm and dangerous. “Is that

what you think?” She pranced away from him with tiny, skittering steps. She whirled on him, and the fury in her eye made him take an unwilling step back. “Tell you what. You know where Chimney Rock is?”

He nodded.

“Meet me up on the ridge tomorrow at noon. I’ll show you a fairy tale.”

“How come you get to be on the Rez?”

“Guess you’ll find out,” she said, slamming the door behind her.

* * *

The black basalt mass of Chimney Rock eclipsed the noon sun as Andrew stood before it, contemplating the sign warning that the land beyond was held in trust by the Modoc Indian Reservation. The wire fence it hung on was decrepit; it took no effort at all for him to slip through.

The ground here was rough and uneven, a thin scree of dirt upon masses of volcanic rock, and what low shrubs grew were scabrous and thorny. His lungs grew hot, and he glanced up to gauge his progress. There—against the glare of the sky—movement. Near a cluster of ridge-topping stones, by a lone juniper, two figures stood together. Andrew thought at first it might be Tina, and was about to wave. Then he saw, from their silhouetted profiles, that one wore a cowboy hat, the other some stranger headgear.

He ducked behind the cover offered by a strand of aspen, then began working his way uphill along the bank of the dry creek bed. He didn’t know if the others were with Tina, and until he determined more, he wanted to stay out of sight. His hand dropped to the hilt of the knife he’d decided, finally, to wear; Tina might be in danger, too.

It was tough going in the underbrush, and he soon found himself

more climbing than walking. It was impossible to be stealthy, but he hoped the trees blocked some of the sound. As he came near the crest, he moved to his left, where the trees ran along the ridge line, and looked again for the two men.

Only one was visible, moving slowly along a switchback on the far side, his cowboy hat bobbing up and down. There was no sign of Tina, and Andrew crept closer, trying to keep the rocks between them as best he could. When he popped his head back up, the man was gone.

Cursing, he worked his way down the opposing side of the hill, trying to catch up.

This was a view he’d never seen before. The landscape stretched out below him, a patchwork of green fields and hills rolling out across the valley floor—and, along the far side, rows of white hydroponic tents that stretched along the shore of the ancient lakebed.

A marijuana grow? That’s what they were hiding up here? Andrew would have laughed if it hadn’t been so pathetic. It was legal in the state, and probably soon in the country. Whatever money they’d hoped to make, the law had impoverished them. Again.

None of this was helping him find Tina. He wondered if he should return to the gate and wait; she might have been running late. In the hangover morning, she might have forgotten completely.

But he’d never get to see this again.

Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb ... he made his way along the ridgeline, studying the topography with an archaeologist’s trained eye. All this land had bubbled up from the earth below, and the pockmarks of ancient lava flows were still obvious. Then, like a stereoscopic photo, what he was seeing finally leapt out at him.

“Not this far West,” he mumbled to himself, but there was no denying the crumbling, weatherworn green slope of what must once have

been a vast earthen mound. His hands shook as he fumbled for his cell phone. A connection with the Mound Builders would make his career, and he wouldn't need to afford airfare to the Middle East.

“Hey, white boy!”

A shower of dust billowed over Andrew as Ronnie slid down the hill toward him. In his right hand he dangled a deer's head, and Andrew realized the strange headgear of the second silhouette had been antlers.

There was no way he could make it up slope before Ronnie's massive hands closed on him. He dashed into the trees, where he could easily dodge the other's slow, clumsy swings. He crept backward, using the wood for cover, looking for a place he could break and run.

“Andrew!”

Tina's voice echoed from the top of the ridge. He glanced up, searching for her, and in that moment of distraction, Ronnie fell upon him like an avalanche. His first blow knocked the breath from him, and the second shoved him backward. He stumbled, and lightning flared in his head as he cracked his skull against the limb of a juniper. He turned to run and saw more people gathered behind him, dressed in skins and staring at him through the dead eyes of animal heads.

Grasping hands snatched at him.

He tried to shove past them, but, half-stunned from Ronnie's blow, they caught him easily. He yanked his fist free and struck out, knocking one of them in the chin. That one's decaying animal face sloughed off with the blow, revealing Hank's tousled, greasy hair. He slapped Andrew hard on the ear as he wiped the blood from his lip.

“Never should have come here, city,” he snarled. He drew his blade, until another—older, and crowned with a ram's horns—laid a restraining arm upon him.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Warren said. “And god knows, we need the rain.”

“If She chose this one, she ain't much of a god.”

Warren's slap echoed across the clearing. “You mind your tongue.”

Andrew's arms were dragged behind him and he was bound with rough rope. Warren reached out and took Andrew's shirt in both hands, tearing it open to reveal his undershirt. He reached out for this as well, and in a moment of panic Andrew jerked backwards. Warren caught two fingers in the material and pulled, and the thin cotton tore.

“Wait, hey, Warren, I'm sorry—” he began, trying to fight down his rising panic. Instead, Warren appeared to lose interest in him, turning away and rummaging in his bag. Then he raised a closed fist and blew a handful of fine powder in Andrew's face.

Gagging, Andrew kicked backward, trying to escape the granular mist as he fought for breath. The fine powder—bitter as it fell upon his tongue—seemed to wring the moisture from his body. His knees buckled, but he was supported from behind by two faceless men.

Warren spent a moment studying him, then nodded and walked toward the mound as the others dragged Andrew along behind them. Warren murmured something—the cadence had the rhythm of a chant, or a lullaby—but Andrew's ears were ringing, and noises sounded like they came from far away.

“Where are we going?” he tried to ask, but his tongue wouldn't obey, and all that came out were a series of moaning grunts.

The rhythm of Warren's song was getting to him, and he found himself humming along.

Mary had a little lamb ...

He coughed, and his throat closed tighter.

They drew close to the mound, though it wavered now in the haze, blurring in Andrew's vision until it looked like it was composed of a series of terraces. He realized he was thinking of ziggurats. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, but the vision persisted.

It couldn't be a ziggurat, he realized, because ziggurats were solid, while this had a yawning cavern of a mouth toward which they were headed.

They were going underground.

Andrew kicked and bucked, but the only response was to grasp him tighter. Day gave way to the gloom of a hypostyle hall, and still they went onward, down the sloping corridor toward deeper earth. There were pictographs on the walls, ochre animals dancing to the rhythm of a music Andrew could almost hear.

He let himself sag in his captor's grip. The sudden heft of dead weight made Hank stumble, and Andrew squirmed from his grasp and dashed down the hall, blind as a newborn kitten in the cloying dark.

"Dammit! Gonna truss him like a pig when I catch him!"

Andrew's pounding feet found only air. He threw his arms before his face to break the impact.

Just before he fell, Andrew heard Warren respond: "He made his choice. Soon he'll remember his name ..."

Then the earth hit him, and black on black, the world went away.

* * *

Andrew woke in darkness, stiff from lying on the hard rock. His throat was dry as the summer prairie, his mouth thick with the bitter grit of Warren's powder. Gingerly, he felt his head. It ached, but he felt no tender spots. He rose to his knees, fighting a wave of

dizziness. After a few moments, he climbed slowly to his feet.

Short-lived hope soared and died in his chest as his cell phone flickered, then faded to permanent black. Above him, a grayish square of light hinted at a world beyond his reach. He jumped anyway, and failed. He tried again. And again.

On the third try, his foot came down on a rock and a bolt of agony shot through his ankle. He fell and lay there, his breath coming fast and loud in that small space.

Calm, he thought. *They'll hear me*. But trying to hold his breath made a fire kindle in his chest, threatening to turn into a supernova. He gasped for breath, struggling to draw anything in through the grit in his lungs.

He felt a coolness on his cheek.

Shock. I'm going into shock.

He felt it again, and realized it was a trickle of cool air tickling his face. He squinted into the gloom, raising one hand to block out the thin glow above him. There was another, feebler glow ahead.

He walked toward it, one arm extended, tentatively testing each step before putting his full weight down. Darkness surrounded him as he entered a tunnel whose roughly chiseled sides glowed faintly: red, blue, green ... he examined them. Whoever had found or built this place had covered the walls in pictograms, and luminescent fungi had colonized these exposed scratches. The figures danced and shivered with the play of light along their lines, and they depicted feathered and horned humans, antelope, bison, and ... sheep?

They must have hunted wild sheep, Andrew thought. Sheep had come with the Europeans.

The mushrooms' glow did little to light the path before him. As he put distance between him and the chamber, he thought he could make

out, below him, a faint murmuring.

“There might be a subterranean river. It would explain the tubes.” He realized he’d spoken aloud and swallowed down a moment of panic. He paused as a wave of dizziness rolled over him.

The glowing figures stretched on into the distance, becoming less distinct, a series of dots and triangles that, as he studied them, reminded him of letters.

“Hi,” the wall said.

He stumbled backward, nearly falling before he caught himself on the far wall.

“You might as well kill yourself now,” it said.

He whirled around. A face hovered before him, and though he blinked, it didn’t change the fact that he was staring at the grinning Native face of the high school mascot. It even glowed purple, each tooth in its absurdly grinning face outlined in violet, as was the feather that protruded from its headband. As he studied it, it winked at him.

“What are you?” Andrew whispered.

“Huh. The kids these days,” it said, rolling its eyes. The face ... tensed ... was the only word Andrew could think of, and popped free from the wall to hover before him in space. “They used to tell ’em a thing or two before they sent ’em down here. Name’s Captain Jack.”

Andrew shook his head. *I’m ahluclinating. Hacculinate ...* he couldn’t even pronounce the word right in his mind.

“Good guess, but no,” the other figure said as it too emerged. This one was a full human, but that didn’t help; he was still glowing, green and blue and crimson. His somber scowl eclipsed the twin suns of his eyes. Captain Jack stuck a neon tongue out at it.

“Oh, lighten up, Lefty! It’s Festival Time!”

Andrew stumbled away, dragging himself further down the tunnel. He moved faster, pushing himself along as quickly as he dared in the darkness. When he was finally out of earshot, he allowed himself to collapse, resting his cheek against the smooth stone of the chamber floor.

Kintpuash chuckled behind Andrew’s right ear. “These tunnels go on for miles, you know. Chew through the whole plateau. Maybe more than that, even. They put up that monument yonder, but this is where the real deal went down.”

“No, no,” Andrew protested. “You’re not real. I’m just reading the words on the wall.”

“Yep. In the dark. In a cave. In a new language. Under a pyramid. Makes sense to me.” He began humming, and after a moment, Andrew found himself following along.

“Mary had a little lamb, little lamb ...”

“Won’t be long now.”

Andrew craned his neck up. “You must be the Left-Hand Man.”

The figure knelt next to Andrew. The glowing lines of his body cast strange shadows on the floor. “Funny the places we think of as home. We died to get to the place they died to get away from. But in the end, we all died.” He rose once more. “So will you. Might as well make it quick, hey city?”

“Still angry, Lefty? You just need a little fun’s, all. We ain’t had nobody to play with since the camp.” He turned to Andrew. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Why don’t you tell me how to get out of here?” Andrew said.

“Already did,” the ghost of Left-Hand Man said.

“Really. Not. Helpful,” Andrew said.

“Fine then. Go on. See where it gets you.”

Andrew dragged himself further along, doing his best to ignore the thirst that gripped his throat, the dizziness that made up feel like sideways. He found himself humming to drown out the drumbeat of panic in his mind:

Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb ...

Mary had a little sin ...

“That ain’t right,” Left-Hand Man said.

“Don’t tell him!” Kintpuash said. “You’re always spoiling everything!”

“It wasn’t her sin; it was yours.”

Faint memories, like the sound of his breath, began to echo in his mind.

The water sounds were clearer now, along with a faint susurration that teased the ragged edges of his perception. He paused, listening, and the susurrus became a whispering.

Kintpuash’s head bobbed before him like a floating tobacco ad.

“The army drove us into the caves, but that was ok, because that’s where we found Her. I made a deal, see. Not like my grandpa did; none of that beads and pelts stuff for me. But we did what She asked us—”

“Including the sacrifices,” Left-Hand Man said, but Kintpuash continued over him.

“—and we listened to her secrets. That’s where I learned about the

secret tunnels. Hoo! Then we killed us some white folks. Killed ’em like flies in a bad horse summer!”

“And our own, Kintpuash.”

“And so? I brought life to this place, Lefty.”

“And death.”

The grinning face winked and nodded. “Same thing. She gets hungrier, you know. Sometimes the world turns from life to death. But you know that. And we were dead anyway. Hard enough up here. You remember that summer, Lefty? No rain for two seasons. The earth was dry, and the lambs cried out in the night.”

“We could have used the rain,” the other admitted.

“But you whites, you were like the stars in the sky. And you gotta sleep sometime.”

“We won,” Andrew said. Petulant, but Kintpuash’s manic grin was getting on his nerves.

“The war’s still goin’ on, son. The sins of the first days follow us. Sins of the father, dressed all in yellow.”

Andrew was wheezing now. The dust felt like it had dried out his insides too.

“You said ... my name ...”

“You figured it out yet?”

He furrowed his brow, trying to tease out the knowledge that seemed to linger on the edge of his awareness. Instead, he found that damned tune running through his mind.

“Mary had a little lamb ...”

Kintpuash guffawed. “That ain’t your name, it’s one of hers Try again.”

His accusation miffed Andrew. “Be quiet. You’re dead anyway. They hanged you.” Hanged? Hung? He couldn’t remember.

“So they did, so they did. But while the soul takes the shape, the water ain’t the bottle.”

“He’ll see what you mean soon enough,” Left-Hand Man said. “Unless he decides to do what’s right for once.”

“Throw himself off a cliff? Not many of those down here.”

“He’s got a knife; he could use it.”

“And waste all that life on nothing? Ain’t that right, boy? You came here to study us, didn’t you? Time to learn.”

Andrew kept crawling, and for a while there was only the darkness, and the muffled sound of his labored breath; in, out, a rhythmic rising and falling that contrasted with the path he crawled, which went only further down.

* * *

His hand hit stone, and the pain jerked him back to consciousness. He felt the solid wall before him and realized he could go no further. His head spun, and hunger gnawed his belly. He lay on the floor of the earth, too tired to kneel, and coughed in a vain attempt to clear the dust from his throat.

He tried to speak, but only a croaking whisper came:

Mary had a little sin, a little sin, a little sin ...

Mary had a little sin, she dressed it all in yellow ...

Mary? Surely it was Inanna that he loved ...

“And Isis and Astarte and all her Thousand Names,” the Left-Hand Man said.

He craned his head and saw the two faces shimmering above him; behind them, the sky filled with stars. He blinked and saw the cave roof once more. In the phosphorescent glow, he saw that it was pinpricked with thousands of small, circular openings. He laid his head down again, and caught the susurrating whisper all around him. He realized it was voices, each a whispered litany—

What’s happened with General Canby?

They took my home.

We need the rain.

They took my baby!

Why’d they put us in this camp?

We need the rain.

We’re not Japanese, we’re American.

There’s nowhere to run.

We need the rain.

And over and above them all, Left-Hand Man’s urgent insistent plea:

kill yourself kill yourself kill yourself

The whispers flowed around and past him, upwards through the openings that spread through the rock, then outward across the secret tunnels that undermined the country’s foundation.

“That was the deal she made with us,” Kintpuash said. “And I took it gladly enough. These fields grow despair.” He chuckled, and his

great purple eye winked. “And they think it’s a harvest festival!”

“Where am I?”

“This is the belly of the world, son. Or its womb; can’t really tell. And maybe they’re the same thing for Her. It gets kinda crazy, down here in the Underworld.”

“In the earliest myths, the Earth eats her children,” Andrew muttered. He coughed feebly, but the dust was part of him now. “I’m so tired ...”

“And we’ll thank you for that energy spent. There’s just one little thing we need.”

“My blood.”

“Well, ain’t you a smart one.” The face grew closer, whispered in Andrew’s ear. “She tol’ me a secret, you know. She said when she stood naked before her sister—”

“Ereshkigal.”

“Yep, Her. But She said it was her own eyes she looked into.”

Andrew nodded weakly. “I know. That’s why I ran from her. In the ... in the first city.”

The grinning face grew translucent as it faded. “Time to get moving, city.”

Rough hands grabbed him. Hank and Warren hoisted Andrew between them and dragged him toward the petroglyph of a door that had been carved on the wall. As they approached, a blackness grew from within it. They stepped through, into a larger chamber.

They began chanting in unison, their high, singsong voices strangely androgynous.

Move on toward your city, Inanna

We will take Dumuzi in your place.

“No. Do not want,” Andrew said. The words felt wrong on his thick and desiccated tongue. It hurt to form the syllables, simultaneously alien and intimate as milk. “This is not of my desiring,” he said at last.

“Do not let the priestess of heaven be put to death in the underworld! We offer you the river gift, the blood in its rising.”

“This is not of my desiring.”

“We offer you the grain-gift, the sprinkling of ashes.”

“This is not of my desiring.”

They emerged into a vast space, smelling of chill, filthy, slopping water. In the distance a lake, heavy with time and sediment, stretched to the far edges of the cavern.

Andrew chuckled. “So that’s why they never found it.”

A boat awaited at the shore. They stepped aboard the rope-lashed wood and it began to move across the water, toward an island in the center.

He heard chanting, fragments of what he knew to be Coptic, Aramaic, and even older tongues.

My queen, here is the choice of your heart

The king, your beloved bridegroom

Mary, here is your lamb.

“Let, oh let my name be returned to me,” Andrew said, for he had no

choice.

From the edges of the island, other figures gathered about the altar in the island's center. Some he recognized: the ranch hands, Ronnie, Sal. Others wore fragments of cloth that might once have been buckskin tunics or cavalry uniforms.

Andrew tried to turn away, but the genetic memory of muscles older than his own moved his feet for him, and at last he recalled his name, the one they chanted in that ancient, familiar tongue:

Walk on toward your fields, Inanna

We will take Dumuzi in your place.

Warren grasped Andrew's arm, and led him up the slope.

"He ran from Her," he announced.

"He always runs," they echoed in their sing-song litany.

I'm always running, he thought, though they weren't his memories. Running from the horror in the temple, and the bleating of the lambs in the night ... it was always night, here, and the graves went on and on ...

"Still, everything happens for a reason."

"... a reason."

"And we could use the rain," he said.

"Bring the rain, Inanna," the others echoed.

They arrived at the crest, where a stone crypt stood; before it, a stained stone slab.

There was movement from within as Tina, naked, emerged,

squirming, writhing her body in a way that shouldn't have been possible for a creature with bones. She swayed from side to side as her body wavered, dissolved, and became a cow, with the moon between her horns, then a woman again, but with wings dripping gore, and a hooved, tentacled creature that stomped its hairy feet into the earth, then Tina once more, head lolling, eyes staring into nothingness, wearing a harlot's smile.

"Father, give me the Bull of Heaven," she said, licking her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Warren forced Andrew to his knees before the altar that was the world.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the flickering form of the Left-Hand Man.

"Last chance," that apparition said.

"I can't," Andrew tried to say, but all that emerged was a guttural burble—he had no moisture left to give the air.

"You want this to keep going?"

Andrew struggled to move his arms, fighting the inert weight of his own tissue.

Tina bent over to touch a finger to Andrew's lips. Her breathing ragged, she sang:

Here is the choice of my heart

My king, my beloved bridegroom.

Though his arms were hot coals, he managed to raise his hands to the arching vault above him. As he did, his fingers brushed, then curled around the handle of his knife. He moaned through chapped lips. "Utu, you are a just god, you are a merciful god. Let me escape from

my demons, let them not hold me.”

For just one moment, he was free. He lunged forward, plunging the knife deep into Tina’s chest. She stopped, glanced down the handle, shrugged, and stepped back, dragging the knife from his hands. No blood flowed from the wound, for the land was dry, and the lambs cried out in the night.

Spent, Andrew rolled off the altar slab, collapsing into a boneless heap on the ground. Warren, Hank, and Sal crowded around him. Strong, calloused hands grasped his legs and lifted him back up. He kicked out, but his blows had no strength. Writhing, he locked eyes with Sal, cursed, and found moisture enough to spit at him.

“Et tu, Brute?”

Sal blinked his great, dark, sleepy eyes. As they sang

Walk on toward your fields, Inanna

We shall take Dumuzi in your place.

Sal angled his body so the others couldn’t see and pressed his own blade into Andrew’s palm.

“Ten years up here, and they still call me ‘New Kid.’ Said I still needed to ‘prove myself.’ The hell with them. Do the right thing, city. For once.” As Sal stepped away, Andrew thought he saw the

Left-Hand Man’s stern and solemn face flicker below that placid expression.

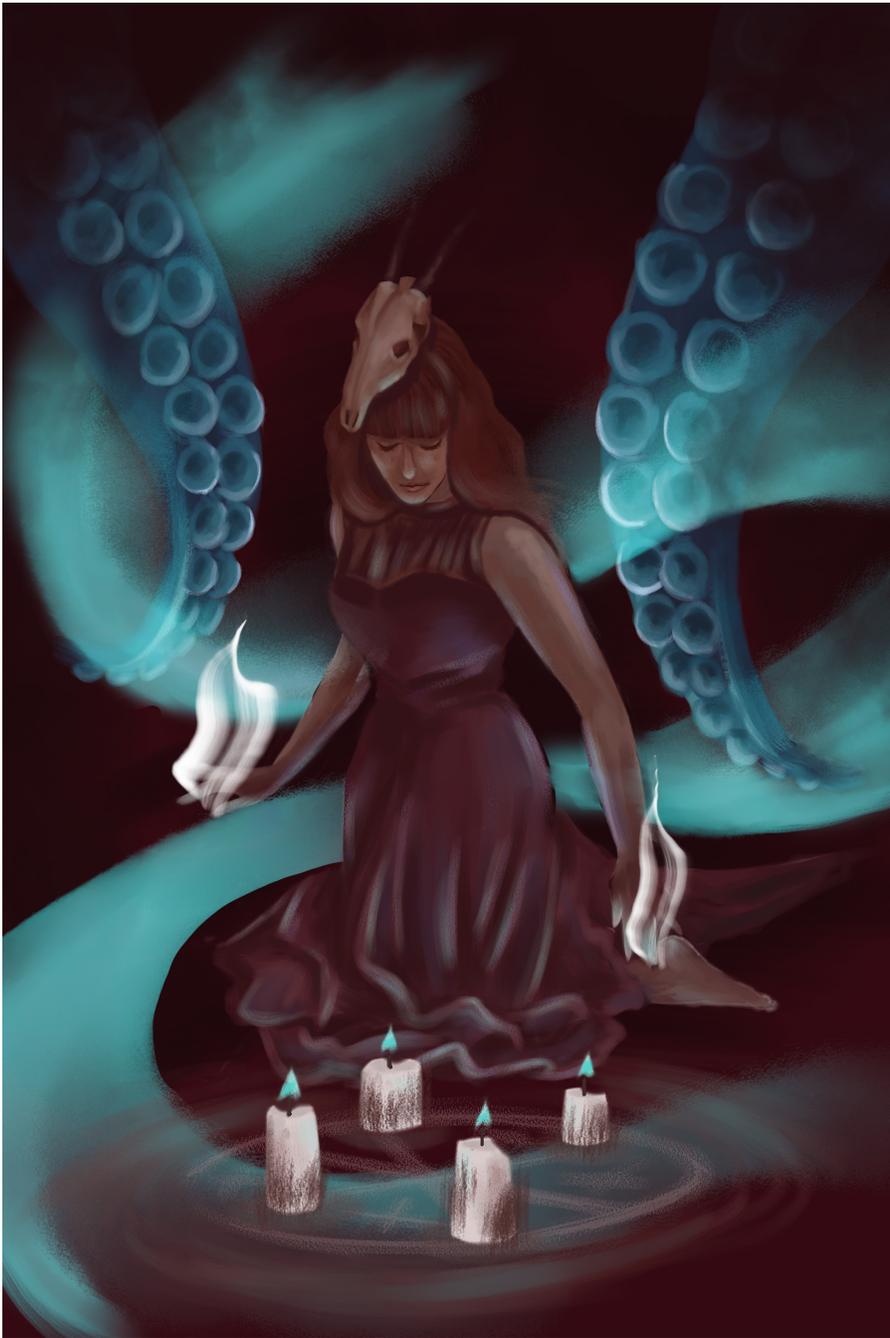
Tina bent low over him, her arms arching above his body, her body stretching hideously to eclipse his own.

He turned the blade and plunged it into his own heart.

The singing descended into wails. Tina stumbled, lurched back, and clutched her body, which tried to melt into its every form at once, sprouting tentacles from hairy breasts as hooves erupted from where her face once was. She staggered backwards, her protean form jerking her left and right as new limbs—wings, arms, tentacles—sprouted, were absorbed, and grew forth elsewhere.

“My Lady!” Warren screamed, rushing to her. As he approached, a looping tentacle snared him, lifted him on high, and hurled him into the lake. Tina turned her back on her worshippers and tottered on uncertain legs into the darkness of the crypt.

Andrew lay on the rock, surprised he felt no pain as each weakening beat of his heart spattered red geysers—feebler, now—onto his drenched clothes, from whence it pooled and dripped uselessly onto the rocks that trembled below him. He heard screaming, but he was too tired to see who it was. The cavern was quaking as it came apart, and he let the motion lull him to sleep as the tithing cup of the heartland’s fury ran finally dry.



The Summoning

by Cat Scully

The Earth Never Forgets

by Nnadi Samuel

wine, top spilt wouldn't buy the notion of cups to our tusk shells,
bus to private beasts.
we learnt web design from the wrong spiders,
thumbing our worst sites in ambush for sleep.
out there, soldier ants trade pact with world peace.
snails weaved their spineless bodies into a fork duel,
that abates with the silvery flash of knives & chopstick.
here denies gold the luxury of a pale sun,
asterisks to book the stars for the slated now, making space lords out of our loved ones.
queer as it sounds,
couples take cats for next of kin,
& bring their sons to see to their litter box condensed with milk & victuals,
& primordial plants you'd be so drawn to hoard some for bath salt & palm Sunday,
and share with the chewed garden and hairpin bend on main slum.
we all have that one pet keen on deforestation,
ripping where it did not sow:
a leverage on our honest quest for meals, riddled by throat chores.
the ambience of rusty green,
trimmed to sphagetti straps.
say a global warming, & the world is hot naked.

The Mirror Effect

by Rekha Valliappan

“A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it.”--
D.H. Lawrence

Houses should not have black light display mirrors hanging in long hallways of heavily used areas, any more than they should have twin fish carcasses or scorpion stings or blue crabs without celestial mansions drenched in zodiac water sign patterns.

Madhuri Marmiche reposes in astral memory, the last of a long line of mirror effect keepers to step outside the glass bottle. Her body is taut and energized, her skin flawless and smooth. A dwindling reminder of all that she sees is the wavelike properties in a long oval looking glass. It hangs in the wide hall of the spacious Marmiche Mansion.

The mirror is a flawless family heirloom, passed down from mother to daughter, rewired by its usefulness of talisman, star signs, and crystal ball effect, closely guarding family secrets. Reflecting off its silvered surface is a pretty picture--a section of the winding oak staircase, the cowhide rug covering a portion of the living room, a black lacquered tabletop and wall hangings across.

If she stares harder into the mirror the aberrations appear, but the sun is wedged under her eyelids--perhaps surface clouds rising as her mother had seen in blotches and stains when the constellations changed. Madhuri wants none of the old bruises, the fake sentiments, although true to her Scorpio water sign she is fixedly attracted to self-destruction, the characteristic of her mystical self. What she sees is what she wants--the material truth, the occasions of transcendence as experienced through following the undular movement of the snake, the sunlit balcony capturing a limited view of the beautiful garden as

the angle abruptly cuts off. If framing a face, hers, she would be a *Masolino* painting in the making, a *nonpareil*, feminine and delicate, harnessed as she seems to be to her refracted reflection straining out of the wall with loadstone effect.

Madhuri Marmiche is mistress of the mansion in a divinely-grounded reality of zodiac stars ingrained in black static dotting the night sky. She lives in ornate French Creole plantation style with the wealth Florin has left her. A flesh-and-blood radiant woman despite her advancing years, her only goal in life is to dig in and never relinquish her grip on that stylistic device--her peek-a-boo gateway to *Shangri-La*, her dark mirror.

Her grandma had once said, "Never part with this mirror whatever beckons, whatever you may see!" Determined and strong-willed like a stubborn guard dog she tries harder. Skipping heartbeats she beckons the mirror time after time, exactly as she has been taught. And *voila!* Like a blast of forked lightning, it works. First, her intuition grows stronger, then her perception turns long-ranged, finally her animal magnetism spools rigid, which assures her success. Florin walks into her life. The rest follows. Some goals they say stretch into permanence. This one does, driving the fashionable lady of the mansion into euphoric stupor--the dark magic dynamics in the polished surfaces of a family heirloom holding her life in place in suspended animation like chalazae twin strands, long after her marriage ends on a sour note, long after even her life is meant to end with no visible succor.

That she is lonely and single is a well-known fact. That the scorpion is her star sign is a familiar ploy shared by all lovers of red, maroon, and black. That she collects from obscure corners of the globe all

manner of strange calendrical and heliacal artifacts is a dubious but popular story. That she is a rosy woman in fading bloom is a regular favorite her friends enjoy circulating. That she is periodically dependent on an old mirror is a transcendent certainty. Her house buzzes with people, false choices, and gossip.

She has no other blind spots--none but her mirror, in age far older than she, which is its physical effect; in hidden stories far conspiratorial than she, which is its reflective effect; in deliverance far astute than she, which is its cumulative effect. Each morning that she awakens steamed up with the mania and intensity that drives her unhinged for what the day will deliver, be it practical day-to-day work, bills, invoices, shopping lists, fashion magazines, or dismal news of global disasters, family setbacks, it is the mirror that delivers the rest. Within moments her equilibrium settles to afternoon sunlight brilliantly flashing in drifts, swaying palms mimicking a desert island, her beauteous garden lush with green plants, the soothing sea at dusk. And she is queen of her world again. Pleasurable and driven by ennui, deep and mysterious--her water sign.

Occasionally and far between communication arrives to hex her daily routine, announcements of death, ghostly movements from her homeland far away. Her day turns dark. Death is inevitable, she knows. Not even her mirror can mirror otherwise. Of late these mind-chipping communiques have been increasing in frequency. Her folks back home. It throws her off momentarily, her elevated feeling of a high, when it suddenly plummets and she summarily dismisses them from her mind. Unfortunately she can turn vindictive. Otherwise she least expects a tsunami to hit her that way.

Then comes the enhanced ecliptic orbit when the Sun transits *Scorpius*. Madhuri, thrown into whoops of privileged cycle upon cycle boredom, madly re-decorates her house. A makeover of upholstery, floors, ceiling and walls--from pink leather lounge to claw-foot tubs. Re-modeling lasts several months. But what is a few more months for the fulfillment she awaits? She feels a new warmth creeping through her skin follicles. Nothing can destroy her thrumming flesh heavy and sensual, like wine pouring out of a

jeweled goblet. The feeling is like a starburst of holiday season.

There is heavy trampling of feet up to the shingled roof. She has carefully selected her colors through the mirror images she connects, filled with magic, from the petal pink rose and green outdoors of summer, in earthy shades of kale--yes, the veggie, liberally backsplashed with scorpion tints and sprinkled in vivid tones of lapis blue and eggshell orange. *New! New! Serpens! Serpens!* Moon-like and death-stalker, like the hairy pink pumpkins her garden delivers! Like the hairy yellow arachnids her rocky landscape unearths! Only the mirror in the hall is unchanged, hanging rigid on the wall, just the teeniest bit clouded. Fluorescent. Black static. Instead, in her craving for the new, she chooses more brassware and browns and bronze to match the copper edges of her oval mirror, and on a whim proclaims her undying love for this mirror with a sting--a handwritten love-note tucked secretly behind, unseen.

Almost imperceptibly at first, swaying compulsively, winding down the designated view of the cosmos, her dream crumbles. It could not be for lack of planning. Her reasoning powers are absolute, her will and determination total. But her sky atlas takes a stinger, collapsing her peaches-and-cream life to an abrupt halt. The dizzying manner in which it occurs in a rush of movement is least expected, putting a strain, like a dark hand of reproach, to scorch her mirrored obsession. An unforeseen clumsy tumble by one of the overweight beefy construction workers triggers a rivet's loosening jolt from off its moorings on the wall, causing the elegant heirloom to dismantle under its own weight.

Without the stone mantelpiece in place to break its fall, having been removed for the renovations, it lands awkwardly onto the marble flooring, fracturing into a cascade of silver shards. It is as if subterranean shades secretly bubbling in the mirror for a thousand years have at last found release. Forever is too long a lifetime, whenever that may be according to the zodiac. Madhuri has never known fear.

How often had Florin castigated her, "If you don't leave him, I'll

break the mirror." She had not given up Ted, not then, and the looking glass crumbles in synchronized wine drops spilling on a snowy white carpet, in red claw aggression emerging from under half-buried logs. Gone is the feeling that she has grown wings. Gone is the feeling of inherited magnificence. Gone is the feeling that she has four pairs of eyes in rich mahogany color that see all things. Struggling, she is seized by a darker triple-striped reality.

Frantic, at her wit's end, Madhuri yells for Lily, her day maid, the pool of workers, the gardeners who are composting the leaves. All rush to her aid. To no avail. None can put back her precious mirror. The sound of the loud crash travels in tugs, is heard everywhere, the further it goes. Together with the hired help she does all she must to ward off the dark *thing* that must reside in the broken mirror, the evil which will run over, the black light which has come loose. She must contain it or forever doom herself.

She changes all her draperies to black, the good luck color shading the many windows. She fills every room with tiny vials of amber drinkables, the other good luck color. Maroon incense candles fill every square foot of space in every room. She breaks into disruptive siren song, the frenzy pillaging her peaceful daily routine. She feels permanently robbed of sleep, restless, unsettled. One part of her bruises her very soul till she is left with a terrible hollow ache. The other part of her points skywards to the sun-spots in the *Serpens* constellation, that she is still Madhuri. And yet there is neither stardust nor moon-dust to wrap into her emotional euphoria, fury, or turmoil. "Never let the mirror crack! Above all never let the mirror break!" her grandma has long ago cautioned, without explaining why. It is from Lily who is babbling crazily that she learns a bitter truth, "A shattered mirror traps one's soul." But her soul has left to the starry heavens, wounded and in shock, traveling light years away. She has heard it call from the sun, from the moon, from *Scorpius*, the day of the first aftereffects. She credits lack of tranquility, no peace of mind, for these madness stories.

Embittered and worn, she takes to digging into her attic, wearing her old toquilla palm wide-brim hats she finds tucked in a dusty corner, a

hand-me-down from her beautiful mother of the water elemental trigon, same as she, as if by shading her eyes she is shading what she can no longer see in the mirror. She is a woman consumed, struggling helplessly with uncertainty and dread. Unable to bear the strange influences any longer, she grinds the broken mirror fragments into fine silica dust using her grandmother's old pestle and grindstone, that has never been used for the culinary purposes for which it is intended.

She selects a suitable spot in her stylishly manicured garden. Using picks and shovels a deep hole is dug in the soft earth, since winter has not arrived to harden the soil. She who has never known what fear is must now face fear, which works in her as a poison. With her many helpers Madhuri buries her magic mirror deep into the earth, consigning the last of the silvered shards under the make-shift graveyard of her old apple tree. Whatever darkness resides in the burrowed mirror beds, the darkness that mysteriously stole her mother and grandma away are also buried beneath the encrustation. She will now never know. Work complete, she shrinks away, shattered at the prospect of blotting out the mirror, the throb of her inner beauty shriveling to nothingness.

Wearily sitting down in a daze, the mistress of Marmiche stares blankly at the empty space on the wall. How resolute her mirror had hung in the busiest hall of the house, real togetherness clinging to it as if its very life were bonded to the plaster, even when Florin was no longer a part of her life, nor Ted. Snatches of disbelief trammel her psyche at the magnitude of what has occurred after decades, way past her mother's and grandma's lifetimes. They were the real mirror's keepers in a way she could never be. She cannot fathom her life ahead. How would she cope? Who would she turn to? What of the celestial atlas that had always guided her? What of Scorpio? More seances? She feels vulnerable. A scream of pure passion is rising from her throat. The sensation is unadulterated--raw. Her lungs seem to claw open again and again. A stinger deadlier than any she has ever known is stabbing her again and again with its bulb of pure poison.

This cannot be her wall, so out of tune, glaring at her mockingly. She must tear the house down. Impulsively she reaches out, touching the empty space, running her fingers lightly over, as if in worship. Having recourse to no other remedy, she coaxes conversation out of the grayness aging from the dusky light. Soon she captures in the space on her wall her same pink roses in bloom, her French windows, the trellis, the sunlit balcony, the artful curve of balustrade. She sees motionless movement, Florin leaving, her brief fling with Ted. Her mother's face on the head of a sunflower. It is as if the artificial and ephemeral are being subtly fused—infused by the binding threads that stretch into the once silvered surface, now embedded into the wall. She sees every nuance of light in ecstasy, and more telling, she fixates on her own *nonpareil* ravishing sensuality, the one that drove men mad, speaking to it, touching it, tamping it down, soaking up her own exotic charm in a fractured chorus, *a capella*.

Gradually, with the broken pieces out of the way, it is only a matter of time for the replacement looking glass to arrive. Anyone who knows Madhuri well enough will immediately relate to this logical process in her thinking. Time was bad. It must be dispensed with. The silver lining in the superficial moments of her life has revealed itself. She is a woman literally heartbroken, but she is also a woman who will much rather move on, however bruised she may be. She has the strength of self-importance to see herself through. She will not let her bewilderment be her funeral. She puts seven years of cruel luck out of her mind, laying the follies and presumptions aside, trading the possibilities of ill consequence for the greater purpose of having a real mirror hanging once again in the hall. No more darkness, just mirrored reflections of starlight.

It cannot be an ordinary looking glass. She will scour the earth like a planet spinning in air for its replacement. She will reach impossible places where the best looking glasses are made. From Venice to Murano, from Bali to Rajasthan, she will travel the world in search of a garden-in-flames landscaped mirror, to mirror the one she has lost. And when she is done voyaging, she will custom order her ornate masterpiece—that will combine the silver and silica in rare craftsmanship of dizzying proportions, to compact a one-of-a-kind

looking glass fit for an ageless woman of consequence--a-a-a *Urania!* There, she's said it, it's out! Alive, forever! It will have to be done sooner rather than later. A wild eagerness uplifts her spirits. The old euphoria comes creeping in. She feels her blood running, the tremble of excitement spreading.

Lily brings her a cup of unsweetened *masala chai*. She sips mechanically at the steaming hot tea, lost in contemplation of the tea hill farms in Darjeeling, the land of the red scorpions, as red as the tea. Tears rarely reflect in her doe-shaped dark eyes. But when they do, they swim like dewdrops on a black orchid. “Like a fawn in summer rain,” Florin used to say in happier times, when he admired her sultry beauty, when there was no talk of separation and the urge to leave did not exist. Or if it did, talk was so scattered as to be nonexistent. Strangely, Ted, for want of something to say, makes a similar observation. If ever she was a Florentine woman of substance, a real woman of Florence where the best paintings lay, how differently the matter of her eyes and face would have ended--on a work of art restored forever, as a face in the mirror, at the crossroads of destinies, unable to die. Loving Ted, not of her sun sign, how dearly he had loved her!

Only she knows how hooked she is into her wondrous old mirror bordered with rows of twin fish, emperor scorpions and blue crabs in rich copper, the three water signs. How Florin despised it--her evil device of dark, still water, lying in wait to entrap him. One time through some ruse he tricked her into getting rid of it. It was the day their former house burnt to the ground, every room charred to bits, except the mirror. None could explain how the mirror had survived. Florin thought the object evil. He thought its strange longevity tied to her a double evil. He could not get rid of a vacuous vanity; neither it seemed could she, and she a law of the mirror unto herself.

In time Florin no longer pictured his wife's exquisiteness. With her glorifying the mirror daily relationship between the couple deteriorated. Later with Ted it grew worse, although with her strong following of social media friends to echo her every remark, she was a rock star, renowned for her glistening skin, cascading tumble of curls,

posed mockery and arboreal splendor. Unfortunately both Florin and Ted saw her in multiples of disheveled, crumpled pink petals, in mirror images of broken shards. It was surreal.

One day Lily comes in running frantically to inform her with great alarm etched on her expressive countenance. Someone has tossed broken mirror pieces on Madhuri's side of the dividing fence. The pieces of broken glass appear similar to her buried mirror, and also appear to have lain there for several months. Some are just as deeply buried as her own. Madhuri immediately voices fierce displeasure, quarrelling vigorously with all her neighbors over the southern and northern wall. A slanging-match ensues. Neighbors swear they have no broken mirrors in their homes. Never did. In fact, strange as it sounds, there are no mirrors broken or otherwise in a ten-mile radius. All have made sure. From that day a strange round of fresh bad luck commences, their permanence so ugly and self-implicating Madhuri is in a new quandary. But such is the path of the constellations.

She takes many unusual steps to ward off the renewed attacks. She often wonders about subsequent developments. She can no longer casually dismiss any of it. She suspects her neighbors of playing dirty. She does not know why her thoughts are morbid, except she must attain a stilling if worse consequences not rush at her. What follows in rapid sequence is hard to grasp, even for one as steeped in celestial consultation as she is with Scorpio. One time it is a brush with the law in two separate incidents. Each incident lasts several months of fines, court appearances. Accusations take nasty turns. She resorts to spells, voodoo permutations.

More spells later, with wooden crosses, iron nails, petals pressed into wax paper, holograms redesigned to curtail external interferences, she suffers three killer bee stings which see her in hospital. One turns acute. The sting is of the notorious blue scorpion, although initially not suspected. Her face swells, her neck bloats, the swelling spreads downwards, her spine tingles, resulting in leg paralysis. But she has only the friendliest of bees buzzing each summer among her potted magnolias and glory roses, producing only the sweetest of *madhu*--"honey" her namesake, chosen by her mother and grandma for the

color they share with the scorpion. They could never harm her. Not so say the *zotavola* bees, a dreaded hybrid species larger than coconut crabs rife that summer in many gardens, gouging her with stings. She has no idea what she has done to her broken mirror to deserve such harm. The bees are relentless, even in death. So is the avenging blue scorpion.

Madhuri sobs her heart out. None of this has happened before, or if it has, there has always been Florin to take care of the unusual. But worse is to follow. She cuts her knee, then takes another fall and gashes her throat, deep and bloody. She almost does not make it. She has no clear recollection of how or when, or if she does, is reluctant to. A large mirrored shard is found by her side. It looks familiar. It lies face up, glowing full-blown cloudy yellow, the black light dazzling in a swirl of stars. No evidence emerges whether her wounds are self-inflicted or perpetrated by an unknown outsider. Her household falls silent. So do the neighbors.

She loses her confidence then, although she does not falter in her resolve. She is a *Scorpius* after all--brave under attack, oblivious to conscious judgment. She continues in her determination to release the ghosts, or whatever is messing about with her life. Never one to let disillusion humiliate her consciousness, she re-buries the newfound mirror pieces under the same old apple tree graveyard where her former broken mirror is buried. But then the apple tree dies. It takes a few days. She feels betrayed. Her gardeners suggest re-digging up the crushed glass and re-re-burying all of the mirrored dust in a fresh new location--the spreading oak being the chosen spot, overhanging with Spanish moss, that beckons tipsily. Fearing for the life of her ancient oak, that it may suffer the same ill-fate as the apple tree, she thrusts the thought aside. Over-stimulated by *feng shui* and other potent considerations, as a last resort she turns to the bottom of her garden waterfall as the final resting place, the one that feeds her *koi* pond of one-of-a-kind golden red *arowana*. But then her goldfish may die. The workers, in fear, slowly leave.

In reality, a dampened Madhuri, hampered by her martyrdom, heart bleeding from the old breakage from which she is struggling to

recover, fighting to regain her old *mojo*, has been living down her bitter pill of seven years low servitude cosmic sentence, unable to steer mirror-ward. She needs to let go, say her friends, the faithful throngs on FaceBook--the same way she let go of Florin, of Ted, ultimately of her mother and grandma.

Without wasting a single moment longer, putting aside wiccans and spells, *zen* routines and *feng shui* activators, she places the order for a brand new mirror with blue butterflies and maroon scorpions in quartz to off-set the ill-luck karmic juju gripping not only her, but chillingly the entire neighborhood. A butterfly transmigration, a Scorpio good luck, the very thing. In a sense to also combat the ill-effects of the killer bees running riot that season like a mad contagion.

When the mosaic mirror arrives carefully concealed in several layers of foam and bubble wrap, it is cleverly sealed in suspended layers of safety animation, the work of several lapidaries and a data and goods processing crew of mavericks, which has taken many months in the making and delivering. She is filled with an excitement and a renewed optimism such as she has never felt before. Her euphoria is once again at fever- pitch. The craftsmanship of the replacement is superb. She need have no qualms. She need no longer dwell on her old mirror, lying in a silvered, albeit shriveled heap, despite how dreadfully and desperately she misses it, worse than anything she has known, and may always miss it. This will do. Her world will set right. The permanence of her life span, her flight to the stars will resume. No doubt of it. No more bad luck to brood on.

She can go about her daily routine with eagerness and hope, her daily tasks, her devotion to her goals with comfort and devotion, footprints functionary--gathering armfuls of fresh sweet-smelling roses and lavender from a welcoming garden. Her spirits unspool, uplift. Wrestling with the latency underlying its glitter she sets hereditary superstition aside, thoughts of her mother and grandma aside, and gracefully yields her inner womanhood into the new mirror.

Her neck stretches forward. Fine hands their fingertips a shade of rich

crimson beat a light tattoo on the blue butterflies crowding the edges. True to form and skirting the matter of *forever-and-ever* to a distant corner of her mind, she deliberately executes the mirror walkthrough, so alive she is trembling in every fiber of her being.

She hangs the new looking glass in the very same exact angle on the wall in the main hallway of her spacious Marmiche mansion, exactly where the old mirror had previously hung, not a fraction out of place. The scorpions artfully lean into the butterflies, slender and devastating. The size and displacement of water gray overtones in the quality of the heavy leaded glass is the very same, looks the very same--silver and exact. Almost a twin of the former, one could say. Except that its gilded edge is no longer copper, and the twin fishes and blue crabs have been replaced by overlapping butterflies in blue to match the emperor scorpions, each tiny layered sliver of glass in the mosaic catching the flaming light, setting off many suns, simultaneously, down to the brilliant outdoors. She is stunned. She accepts that the molten mirage will endure. Forever. One way or the other it must endure. She is a keeper. Her mirror is reborn, and so is she. The extreme excitement grows liquid, no longer illusory.

For a long time she stands transfixed to the spot, staring in wonder, shaking like a harp string played by *Urania*. She sets aside all tendrils of alternating misery she has been battling of late, absorbed by the heightened gusts of nervous exhilaration choking her every breath, by the sheer brilliance of the piece, looking like a fine piece of rarest sculpture. Such a pure magnificence the mirror possesses, her happiness is white-hot. And in the reflecting pitiless glow that the new mirror casts upon her she sees nothing but her own flushed womanliness, ornamental and demure, the concentrated essence of a scorpion unmatched, liquid-glowing back. In times like these she is relaxed. There is a wonderful youthful softness about her the mirror seems to capture.

She draws nearer to watch that loveliness grow larger, as she is used to. She steps away to watch her shapely form grow smaller, and then flit past again, quivering in unholy joy--a dainty blue butterfly in flight alighting on a trembling autumn leaf or the still tip of a

scorpion's tail. It freaks her out--her unconscious persuasion teetering, as if she has alighted frail and mysterious in a different reality on a broken flower stalk.

The defect at first imperceptible to discern in the obsidian quality of the Venetian finish is a hairline crack so fine, the misconception is hardly noticeable at all. It appears to be a mere figment of the imagination, running the entire length of the long oval mirror, and seems by some mistaken knowledge to occur every eleven minutes. Or so it appears by Madhuri's exhaustive, time-tested astrological calculations as drawn in the natal charts. The horoscope produces brilliant insights, realistic analysis of all major journeys of her life, marriage, love, health, all consistently accurate. But now this--*Urania's* mirror, steadfast as a muse has adopted a peculiar planetary position. *That's it!*

Once again she loses all sense of judgment when under attack. The new mirror has taken eleven months to arrive. This is common knowledge. The old mirror has taken eleven hundred days to stay buried. This fact is also common knowledge but critical to examine. Authenticity is everything, as those around her will say. So absorbed is she in whatever she is witnessing through the surface glassiness, the mechanism of mystification grows rhapsodic. Just her way to get steadily sarcastic, her most visible personality trait under compulsion.

Her mental state cannot get any precisely stranger or precisely clearer. She is past being baffled. Clearly, even the new looking glass is cursed. She breaks into a cold sweat that oozes, soaks into her outer shell. Her legs turn to rubber. She crumples in a heap, tears spilling in waves. But what is it she is seeing that functions in a jumble of such regularity she is driven to a fever of despair? *It cannot be!*

Her new exoskeleton turns soft. Hair follicles wither along the line of her epidermis. She pulls herself to full height, facing the mirror. The

process of sclerotisation is occurring even as she moves. Her outer skin is hardening at an uncontrollable rate. So that her reflection rather than being unaffected by distance and rather than staying constant in size as one might expect from a normal mirror, when she moves away instead of growing smaller her figure grows rotund and larger, and when she draws closer instead of growing larger she turns jaded and smaller. And out of the unusual fractured movement in the mirror grows a steady fluorescence, which gradually blots and returns, shining in ribbons.

A new craving comes over her. Outstripped by the smoke-on-mirrors approximation effect and with nothing to do for it, a motionless Madhuri Marmiche pulsates in elongated strokes in time with the ebb and flow of the mirror, letting in the black light. She is past flirting, past euphoric dream, past layered disillusion. She is precise. She is looking into a wall of a thousand mirrors just as her mother and grandma had before her, trapped in the gleams of the old, trapped in the new, the one she has stepped into. She examines her new sclerite with indifference. A thousand eyes look back, effacing the very little visible gleams, distilling what she sees.

Plagued by her sensations she is devoured into the cracked part of the whole. The fracture swallows her up. This will intensify and change in her next instar, when her exoskeleton sheds and she assumes a new form. A secret ephemera sparkles darkly bent along the length of the crack, glowing like a blurred sun, bursting to emerge out of the mirror. She dissolves into its refractive error. Even an insect must grow wings out of a grub to flutter free, its passage complete--a butterfly in blue. Unconsciously, unknown to her, that is what the mirror is mirroring, in and out, a replication of her own signals. *In! Out! In! Out!* Fluorescence complete in the black light display, the dusky scorpion's reddish complexion glows a brilliant blue.

Houses should not have black light display mirrors hanging in long hallways of heavily used areas.

Coalescence

by Anne Carly Abad

To keep a semblance
of a shape, it's necessary
to piece things together,
amalgam of memories
of how things were, of how they should be.
Dolphin. It won't hurt
to give it fur
to let it smile with bovine teeth.
Words are just words
fluid, like everything else that failed
to come up for air.

That thought dissolving
into a flurry of bubbles,
we all agree that stars
might have been round too
and buoyant, like debris,
like lost leaves clinging
to a tint of green.

We stick to each other,
little globs that we are,
tears and sea salt mingling,
no sense of when or where
the ocean ends.
Our feet can be anything
that feels solid enough,
the wreckage of a tree
uprooted by the storm surge,
the horn of a house
that tried to keep afloat.

Flesh or metal.
Soft or hard.
In a world of water
everything is mud.



Drowning by Fariel Shafee

Syntax

by Jay Caselberg

I watch you
Lying next to me
You touch bright places
In the web of memories
I reach out
Hesitating
Not daring yet to touch
I fear
That flesh leaves bone
Parting
As we once did
Meant to be together
And yet...

My hand withdraws
From that sunken cheek
Denying its urge
To trace the shape
Of what was once there
Long gone now
As too are you
Though here you are

The City

by Max Sheridan

When the boy first saw the sick man swallow iron, he waited five long hours with the others for him to shit out a nail. The sick man didn't look good to swallow a runny egg, he looked like a dying animal, but the nail eventually came, and the boy lost his two dollars. It was a lot of money to lose on the routes. The boy himself never carried more than five in his socks.

It took the man ten minutes to pack up his kit. In another ten he'd found the last dinette on the road out of town and ambled up to a free stool at the counter. He swung his legs up one at a time, felt his gut where the nails were made. He looked up at where the air conditioning wasn't blowing through his personal vent in the drop down ceiling, wondering when the last time was it had blown for anyone.

The boy stood a few minutes in the temperate sun before joining the man at the counter. He ordered a Sadat citrus drink for five cents and began playing with a defunct fingerprint scanner someone had left behind. He wondered if it was a toy.

Next to the boy sat a decrepit Korean woman addicted to the industrial sweetener Zeet. In a booth behind him, two crows, one in a long dark jacket missing sleeves, the other with only sleeves. They were both sucking Zeet.

When the sick man stood to leave, the boy didn't want to go. He still had half his Sadat left. He pondered the senseless wastage, but for just a moment. He was soon on his feet and following the man out the door. The man was already moving at a clip over the asphalt that cut through the tall new grass. The asphalt glistened like fat on a bone.

"You walk fast for a sick man," the boy said. "Too fast. You sure

you're not one of them things?"

"One of them things with brains you mean?" the man said without breaking his stride. "You're following me."

"I just lost two dollars on you."

"You were the fool to bet it. I told you what I could do."

"Doesn't mean I have to believe you."

"But you did. Any man that bets against a thing like that secretly pines for it to be true. You wanted to see me shit out a nail and lose all your money. Probably you wanted to see me die."

Hours ago the boy had thought of that. The other loners in their gathered-together outfits had probably wished the same. But they'd lost, and they hadn't killed the man either.

"You're lucky is what you are," the boy said.

"Lucky they didn't cut me open and look for the iron?" The man had stopped moving. The boy too. A drone flew by overhead at the level of the old electricity poles, sky-colored, noiseless. Higher up, an orange relief plane, an old bomber paid for when men still believed in life on Earth as unmoving allegiances to bloodland and genealogies and fought and fought only to bloody them both. It gave the man hope to know that they were still being watched.

"It only looks that way," the man said of the tall, sweet grass, which for some reason had mesmerized the boy.

“Why?”

The man got moving again. “I don’t know. After all that hotness, we got coolness. The sun don’t burn no more. Something’s happening in the City is what I think it is.”

“You know where the City is?” the boy asked.

“I don’t. You want to bet against me again?”

“I want you to learn me how you do it.”

“I can’t do that,” the man said.

“I got five dollars in my sock.”

“Minus the two I’ve got, and the five cents for your Sadat. You shouldn’t tell anybody where you keep your money.”

“I don’t tell anybody.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“You ever seen a toy?”

The man shot the boy a glance. His one hand moved to his gut as the pain ripped through it. “Where do you get your money from?” he asked the boy.

“The circuses.”

“Kin?”

The boy shook his head.

“You really never seen a toy?” the man asked.

If the boy had said he’d never seen a man shake another man’s hand in friendship, it wouldn’t have bothered him much. But a toy? “I’m heading down old Route 50 until I find a bus,” the man said. “Soon’s I find a bus, I’m riding out to the next fair grounds. They’ve got a pageant out in Thisbe. You’re welcome to come with me that far.”

The boy looked down the road. He looked up at the sun. He didn’t know anything about directions. He didn’t even know if the man was moving east or west.

“You got to pay to ride?” he asked, but the man didn’t hear, or if he had, his only response was to pick up his pace.

* * *

The bus came just before dark. It was a sleek red Huanghai from a place called Saudi Arabia. Inside, soundless advertisements dropped like playing cards across the seatbacks for the travelers to wonder at, screenless optical apparitions. Products available only in the City or on the circus black markets or no longer available, available long ago. The bus smelled of Zeet.

These City-subsidized buses ran endlessly, day and night, on fuel reserves thought to run deeper than any vein in the ocean. Mad wealth controlled by men and women who had never seen the inside of a bus. There was no food sold aboard the bus and no food allowed. But for the fasting dervishes who sat in the back stinking, praying for days on end, rarely would a paying customer ride for more than four hours.

The boy paid his ten cents, then the man. The man made sure the boy was safely in his seat before he sat himself. He watched the boy watching the screens spit out their absurd luxuries.

The boy said, “What’s that? Is that a toy?”

“A hang-glider,” the man said. “It’s not a toy.”

“It looks like a toy. Where are they?”

“Israel. That’s what it says. Can’t you read English?”

The boy gave the man a blank look and said, “Is that part of the City? What’s that?”

It was a woman’s bare leg. An advertisement for a depilatory from half a century ago. “I guess you haven’t seen one of those either,” the man said. “You had a mother?”

“I don’t imagine.”

“What’s your earliest memory?”

“Soap.”

“Soap?” The man set his seat back. The boy did the same.

“I’d like to touch one of them legs though,” the boy said.

“One day you might.”

Eventually they fell asleep. Come morning they were well past Thisbe and had to backtrack on a road with no buses. They walked behind a file of loners and travelling salesmen and a large ragged family leading a camel hauling their possessions. None spoke a language recognizable to the boy or the man. They fell in lock-step up front, the protocol. The newcomers always walked up front. It was up to you to know whether you’d fallen in with cutthroats. If you yourself were one, try attacking a mob at your back.

The boy looked back once and said to the man, “That’s the crow from the dinette.”

“There were two,” said the man.

“He’s got a whole jacket now.”

“Means you don’t want to mess with him. Don’t turn around again.”

They stopped for lunch on the roadside and the man spoke of his art through gestures and sign language. But no one could afford to wait the five hours required for him to void a nail. No bets were placed. The camel caravan, Afghans or Uzbeks or Turks from the north, gestured back that they’d seen something like it before. Their women were covered from the man’s gaze.

“A whole piece of iron,” the man gestured. “I eat it and this is what comes out.” He passed around a clean nail, a nail he’d shat out and washed himself.

The camel herders thought this was funny, what the man did for money. They laughed at the pantomime of the nail coming out. Then a little boy who spoke the man’s language said, “We’ve seen a man swallow fire and spit out a glass bird. We wouldn’t like to see a nail and only a nail.”

“Where did you see that?” the man asked.

“Many nights ago,” the boy said.

You people will never get there, the man thought. They’ll never let you into the City.

And yet they came from nights and nights away, flew in from everywhere that used to be, their lives behind them already dissolved like red clay in the rains. With the City providing the gas subsidies to fuel the buses and planes, where could you not go?

And yet every place was the same. Or worse. They said this used to be

America. The man knew this to be true the same way he knew his art. It was the pain that told him. The City he knew less of. It might have been anywhere, on any continent, but most flocked here, to join the incessant processions, this lurking from pageant to pageant, measuring their progress against the fattening of moons they tallied and then forgot. Might be, the man thought, they were walking in circles.

They walked twenty miles that day and then camped out in the woods by the road. The man and boy paid their fifteen cents a piece and were invited to join in a meal of black-eyed peas and rank squirrel fat. Hunks of good, three-day-old sourdough bread rumored to have come from a City-subsidized bakehouse rounded out their dinner. The wayfarers passed out a ball of silk ties they'd found in a ditch along the road, which most used for napkins. The boy stuffed his in his pocket for later.

The man was feeling ornery, having lost out on the good money he'd seen in this group, and lashed out at the boy.

“What are you doing that for?” he said.

“It's nice.”

“It's not nice. It's useless.”

“It's like a toy.”

“It's not a toy. Men used to wear these things around their necks. That's all. You see these socks I'm wearing? Would you want to collect them?”

“What kind of men?”

“Important men.”

“They still do?”

“Maybe.”

“Where? The City?”

But honestly the man didn't know. He'd only seen ties in the advertisements on the buses, and once on a flight to St. Louis. He said, “Yes, in the City.”

When night fell, the Uzbeks staged a shadow theater. It was an older man they watched, an infirm man. He acted out a great dust cloud, then lost himself in the cloud, then coughed his way out of it. He mimicked the great looming hull of an Army aircraft, scratching out the letters in the dirt. Then his arrival in the night in a mysterious land, his family with him. He was robbed of his money somewhere by a man with a shootable, then he killed the man who'd robbed him. Stabbed him with a primitive implement of staggering sharpness. Mimicking still, he dropped in the grass as if dead, and he didn't get up.

In the morning the old man lay where he'd fallen in the night, across his face a purplish cast, brown ants marching in and out of his ears. None of his kin mourned the old man's passing. They stripped him of his clothes and turned him over in the grass so that his bare buttocks faced the gentle rays of the sun.

“They take your clothes when you die? Just like that?” The boy was lying on his back on his pallet, a long green stem of wheat in his teeth. The man began to scrape together some wood for a breakfast fire.

“I don't think it's always like that,” the man said.

“It's scary.”

“You didn't wonder about it too long.”

“Even your friends?”

“Those people weren't his friends.”

“They were his family.”

“They might not have been.”

“When I die, I won’t even have anybody to steal my clothes.”

The man thought about that and knew it to be true.

“Someone will,” he said.

Out there in the murmuring dawn, in between their fire and the other fires, the crow appeared.

The man stood quickly, as if he’d never known pain. He reached into his pocket for his guild card, held it out for the crow to see. No one shot artists. The City was dead against it, or so he’d heard. About the only thing a man could not do to another man outside on the routes.

The crow said he was just there to speak among his own. He moved closer until the man could feel his cold breath, smell it. It smelled of Zeet. The man moved aside to let the crow sit nearer the fire, watching the crow’s sleeves.

“You’re heading to Thisbe?” the man said. “You have a concession?”

“I’m not an artist,” the crow said. He tossed a rock at the fire, a sizeable one. The man bent into the heat with a thick stick to knock it out, as if he were playing some primitive version of croquet with a flaming wicket. The crow lifted his jaw and a flame jumped across it like a scar. “It wasn’t our fault,” he said.

“How could it be your fault?” the man said. “Why do you speak of fault?”

“People blame.”

The man looked at the crow.

“I could check your code for you,” the crow said. “And the boy’s.”

How many times had the man heard this line in canteens and on buses and roads in between?

“What does it matter?” he said.

“You’re on your way to the City,” the crow said. “Most artists are.”

“I’m on my way to Thisbe. To the pageant.”

“It happens,” the crow continued. “You save your credits for years and you think you’re ready to be accepted and you aren’t because some sonofabitch has been stealing off your code.”

“Those codes have been dead for years,” the man said. “We collect money now. What do you take me for?”

The man knew he’d misspoken, he’d told the boy as much, but it was already too late.

“Men kill men for less,” the crow said.

They eyed each other. The crow sprang first. Went at the boy with the dire hunger of a wolf in a snow-bound month. His knife was no small thing. It was gruesome, toothed. Barbaric, the man thought. This man is nothing more than an animal, but he kills for money. He was on the crow’s back so fast the boy saw nothing, even as he burst the crow’s jugular vein with a sharpened nail and recoiled to pounce again, his elbows raised to fend off phantom attackers.

The crow choked on the hot flow of his own blood for two long minutes before gurgling out his last, the man and boy watching. When his eyes wore the glassiness of death, the man dragged the body backwards into the treeline. A boy at the next fire watched. His father, scraping together a fire of his own, kept his eyes low on the building heat.

“Let’s go,” the man said, and he grabbed the boy by the arm and they went.

A mile down the road, the boy said, “I never seen a dead body before.”

The man didn’t believe it. Couldn’t. He’d stepped over as many corpses as piles of dog shit at the circuses. He’d seen men killed before his very eyes while he was digesting iron on stage and no one thought to do a thing.

“You’ve seen death,” he told the boy. “You saw that old man die last night.”

“A dead killed body is what I mean,” the boy said.

The man slung his bag over his shoulder. Toys, women, dead bodies. What had the boy seen?

The road stretched ahead northeast. They walked the whole morning without stopping. At noon a long vehicle went by on the busless road. They were surrounded by spears of unripe wheat grown taller than a man, wheat that was green and would be for as long as the seasons refused to turn. It was a two-lane blacktop that looked narrower boxed in by the wheat.

When the vehicle had passed, the boy said, “You said there weren’t any busses on this road.”

“So you know what a bus is.”

“We got on one yesterday.”

“Not like that one.” The man adjusted the bag and pointed ahead. “They aren’t going where we’re headed anyway.”

When they were more than halfway to Thisbe by the man’s calculations, they sat for lunch. The man unpacked a tobacco pouch whose original function held no meaning for him. Inside were eight or nine lavender-colored meal chips he’d bought at the last circus, dense and unappetizing. God knew what they were made of but they

could get you by a day. “Don’t ask what’s in it,” he said to the boy, handing him one of the chips. “You won’t want to chew it, but you’ve got to. You’ve got to chew it for a while to release the nutrients.”

The child’s chewing was just like the man’s, difficult, time-consuming. He was looking up at the blue oneness of sky, the wind rushing at the wheat. But the wheat would stay green, the man knew, and for all future lunches these ungodly chips. A convulsion brought the man to his elbows. He’d lain back to chew like the boy and the pain in his stomach had shot him up like a spring bent to snapping.

It was low in his stomach that he clutched, where some evil and whimsical pinhead of pain tortured him. He rocked himself where he sat, moaning. When the pain finally passed, he was wan and the oily beads of sweat on his forehead and at his temples made the boy uncomfortable. The boy spat his chip out.

“It wasn’t the chip,” the man said.

“I don’t care. I’ll get something to eat at the circus or at the next dinette.” The boy helped the man up. Once he was standing straight, the man screwed open his thermos and took a sip of water. He gave the boy a sip.

They walked five more miles up the road and around a wall of tall leaning wheat. There the man stopped. The vehicle that had passed them earlier was parked in the middle of the road just up ahead, around it a macabre team of bewigged technicians at work in suits stolen from abandoned closets, graves and worse, the bloody lump of fauna at their bare feet a dead fact, their elbows pumping and pulling, stripping like men gutting fish.

When they were finished, only a dark stain remained. Near it lay an aluminum box jumped open off its hinges. A relief drop fallen off-target. Lucky only one wayfarer had been hit. The meal chips spilled out of the busted coffer, lavender, gold, green. Others were lost in the deep wheat. Still others were crushed to powder, like amoebic dolls

the stuffing had been let out of.

Their cutting instruments made strange sounds in the otherwise perfect quiet and now the silence rang out. One of their number—the man would not call them men—his eyes fathomless holes, was now looking back at where the man and boy stood. In those eyes there was nothing that lived as the man knew living. He pulled the boy back and out of sight. In a moment the vehicle's engine began to throb. It glided off again with little coughing.

“That box hit a wild hog,” the boy said, sniffing at the burnt diesel in the air.

But it wasn't a hog that the air drop had hit and the man made sure they waited another hour before walking again.

* * *

The girl allotting concessions in Thisbe had been born to a methanol eater and had two thumbs but no fingers. They'd come from the steppes of Russia early into the wandering, alcohol-poisoned, delirious, obstinate, their drunkenness akin to a religious ecstasy. They would gladly drink what an automobile wouldn't.

Her eyes were high and wide-set, her nose had no septum. She would reproduce too, the man knew; her body was ripe and desirable. She had no trouble taking the man's money or giving him his lot and section number, a feat for many of them.

The man led the boy to where he would sit for the next six days on a wooden platform above his audience, in between Princess Devadi, a hermaphrodite, and a dervish who could channel the dead. He would sit there filling his stomach with iron and then voiding it. There was no reason to put his sign up tonight, they'd walked too far. He led the boy to the tent so they could eat.

In the tents you couldn't guess at what you were eating even by analogy. You were told only how many parts protein you consumed

so you wouldn't starve. There were labels, names, but these were only transliterations, the optical residue of dialects and languages whose only record upon the earth was kept by living speaking voices. At the pageants and circuses the Tower of Babel was slowly being rebuilt.

The man found his meal sweet. He sipped at his wheat milk to kill the taste of what he ate. The boy too. When they finished with their plates, they ate wheat cakes fried in buffalo lard.

“Are those people coming to the pageant?” the boy asked, his mouth full of the tough new wheat he was trying to grind down and swallow.

“What people?”

“Those people that butchered the hog.”

The man regarded the boy. For whose sake was he pretending now?

“That wasn't a hog.”

The boy stopped chewing.

“They don't kill what they eat either,” the man said. “They're scavengers. They never kill.”

“You've seen them before?”

“I have.”

“They ever bother you?”

“I don't let them.”

“Why do they care if you're alive or dead?”

“Why do vultures?” the man said. “We've all become animals.” He

wasn't used to talking while he ate, and had no convenient explanation for how the boy had come to be alive at all these past eleven years either, he not knowing so many things. The man collected the remaining wheat cakes. He put two in his coat pocket and gave four to the boy.

"Are you going to learn me that trick?" the boy asked.

"It's not a trick," the man said. "It's biology." He took the boy's hand with the wheat cakes still in it, drew it to his chest, led it down. "I was born with two stomachs just like Princess Devadi was born with two sexes."

"That's why you're sick?"

"I don't know."

"You've got two whole stomachs?"

"One of them," the man said, "it's smaller, like an appendage. Lower down. It's tough like an old piece of leather. Empties right out into my garbage shoot."

"But you turn that iron into nails."

The man didn't say whether he did or didn't. "I have to guide that piece of iron into the right stomach," he said. "Else I'm in trouble. After that—" But why was he telling the boy any of this? It wasn't anything he could understand or profit from. All the talking did was revive the pain. He laid both his palms flat on the table and braced himself for it to come.

"You must have got that extra stomach of yours from your daddy," the boy said.

"That's what a doctor told me."

"I didn't get nothing."

"You got your goodness from your daddy," the man said. "He must have been a good man." He finished his wheat milk standing and waited for the boy to do the same. "Come," he said. "I'll buy you a carob sweet for dessert."

In the morning the man went out to look for scrap metal. On his way back to the concession, he bought a woolen sweater for the boy. Crouching over the same table, he found a Mattel View-Master hidden among the rags. It held a single reel.

Modern Conveniences: Marvels of the 21st Century.

The woman behind the table didn't speak the man's language and they bargained with sticks in the dirt. Her face was swollen and stolid and the man wondered if she'd ever in her life known physical love. The man paid two dollars for both the machine and the stereogram.

He searched the pageant grounds for the rest of the morning for a guild-certified homeopath, but only found a Swede with a medicine for stomach cramps.

"I've seen you here before," the Swede said, handing the man a small bottle of a corrupt-looking dark green liquid. "You swallow what you've got in that bag of yours."

"I always sterilize first," the man said.

The Swede laughed.

The man did not.

The Swede said, "You say you're having stomach pain. Have you ever heard of a vacuum cleaner? No? Look at this." The Swede drew an approximation of a vacuum cleaner on the flyleaf of a book he kept on his table, its pages yellowed and brittle to the point of

cracking. The man was more interested in their viability as reading matter than in what the Swede was sketching for him. It had been nights and nights since he'd last seen a book.

“Once this bag rips,” the Swede said, “all the dust seeps out. Yours is a species of charlatanry I have never before encountered, but I have seen you swallow iron and I have seen the nails come out. Think of this bag the next time you open your mouth for money.”

The man was supposed to mix five to ten drops of the Swede's liquid into his wheat milk three times a day for a month. He consumed the entire vial at lunch and then went to find the boy at the concession. He waited until late evening, seven o'clock by the sun.

The boy was light-headed and there was rancid lipstick smeared across his cheek when he finally returned. His pockets bulged with small coins. The man laid his gifts aside. “You've been drinking boza.”

The boy collapsed on his rented foam pallet next to the man, his eyes glassy with the hidden places he'd almost seen. “She kissed me on the cheek.”

“When a girl kisses you on the cheek, watch out,” the man said. “It means she can see what's happening behind your back. I figure you keep your money in your socks. Most do. Better you keep it in your pockets like this so they won't have to take off your shoes to rob you.”

“She told me to come back tonight.”

“It's her job.”

“You ever touched a woman's naked leg?”

The man turned on his pallet to face the boy.

“Boy, do you think I was never young? What's this?” It was a

puckered scar on the man's neck beneath the ear cut not as expertly as the man's work on the crow. A serrated blade wielded by a drunkard.

“I saw her leg,” the boy said.

The man wondered if it had made him happy to finally see something.

They were quiet a moment. Then the man said, “I've been walking the pageant routes for years by myself. No one bothers me because I don't walk around with my pockets leaking silver.”

“You're little,” the boy said. “Maybe they don't bother little people.”

“I'm an artist.”

“You won't get into the City without money.”

“You make me one promise,” the man said. “Don't drink boza past seven in the evening. You need to be quick on your toes if you want to collect money for me.”

The man found the sweater and the View-Master and he gave them to the boy.

“This is a toy.”

* * *

For two whole hours before his performance the man writhed in terrible pain. Beyond the tents, the prairie had grown lush in the winterless years of the wandering. He lay on his side watching the lake, and beyond it the great fence unbuilt, a stitch of it having survived and gathered a beachhead of trash blown in from how far no one knew.

For those two hours he shook like an epileptic. He cursed his Creator

well, and when it was over and he'd almost shat out his spine and innards into the dark crawling grass, he vowed he would not go back to the Swede ever again.

Princess Devadi had drawn numbers tonight, her barker a Somali pirate, a double-amputee with fanged coffee cans cupping his leg stumps. Try getting close to that man's silver. The rims of his cans, upon which he hobbled, were fitted with the incisors of such marine life as had washed inland when the oceans baked, or so he shouted at the crowd. The man had seen this show before, years ago. The dervish, wallowing upon his silken pillows, aroused less curiosity.

The man mounted the steps to his platform, noticing a loose bracket here, a stripped screw there that would have to be replaced. He tested his weight as he went. When he was seated upon his chair, he gestured at the boy.

The boy's breath was bad but betrayed no fresh boza. Behind them the man's sign was in place. No words, just a painting of the man's head in profile ingesting a series of metal objects. Bullets, fingerprint scanners, hub caps, chicken wire. Beneath it, a mason jar filled with sparkling iron nails.

"This will take a while," the man told the boy. "Most of them will fall asleep. Some won't. You just make sure all the money goes into this jar and that none goes out."

They'd taken in forty-five dollars when the man was finished late in the night. It was a mythical fortune for the boy, enough to live well on for over a year. Six nights of that and how could the man not get into the City? The Somali pirate hadn't collected much more. The boy lay on his back with the voided screw in his pants pocket, goggling at the View-Master.

"What's this say?"

The man had forgotten the boy couldn't read. It was difficult for him

to get to his elbows.

"Convenience."

His whole left side was numb. He'd eaten three meal chips to correct the misfortunes visited upon him by the Swede. Somehow they'd stayed down. The boy clicked the machine again.

"This?"

"A toaster."

The boy stared blankly at the toaster.

"For wheat cakes," the man said. "Some time ago, I don't know when, when there were cities all over the world, not just one, men lived in between walls." The words sounded strange to the man, and tragic. He said, "Instead of frying wheat in a pan, they got their bread readymade from some place and this is how they cooked it."

But the boy had already flipped to a thermostat.

"A toy?"

The man had never seen one.

"Yes."

The next day the man found an old friend of his, Fresno Long, haggling over a stretched alligator hide at a skinner's booth. When their meeting was over, the seller lay dead upon his wares, his common law wife struggling to release the salvageable merchandise from beneath the corpse and its leaking blood. The two old friends sat for a boza at a Weigur's stall.

Long's father had been a methanol eater and Long had been born with shins no taller than squatting ducks. His torso, by comparison, was normal-sized and so ungainly. To compensate, Long walked on

stilts fashioned from sturdy kumquat root, in long pants year-round. Long had once saved the man's life, sabering open a greedy pimp's belly and kicking out the intestines like stubborn mandarins hanging from a branch, the very pimp who had given the man his scar.

"I killed a crow twenty miles south towards the bus," the man said.

Long was sitting facing the direction of the skinner's booth. Perhaps the woman had a lover who would come for him wielding a gutting knife.

"Are you coming from the east?" Long said. "There's a camp, a town, west of here two days with the bus. North and west beyond the wheat."

"The desert," the man said.

"Beyond the desert," Long said. "Clean water. Lakes. You leave your shootables at the fence. Knives are collected. Have you ever seen a room with a roof over it? They make them out of silicone and mud brick."

"I've heard of this place," the man said.

"It's not the City," Fresno Long said.

"To you maybe not, to others yes."

Long shrugged.

"The pageants are getting dangerous."

"You just murdered a man over an alligator hide."

"This is what I mean."

They drank their boza and then Long ordered another round, emptied his mug and set off the way they'd come to see what had become of

the dead skinner's possessions.

The man wandered off into the thick midday traffic of bodies and carts and motor engines and other less explicable machines of transit, bumping into holograms as into blood-and-bone wayfarers, the women covered, the men dressed in what they could find. The advertisements flared at the strolling traffic, soundless, pleasing, pantomiming goods and services that showed the tables upon which they resided to be the travesties of commerce they were. These men, Turks and Levantines and North Africans, sat behind their counters in shiny suits worn thin, their hard black shoes shiny too, as if they hadn't gotten them off dead men and licked them to a shine.

Vacations in Cuba Town here, spent electrical equipment there, virgin brides, lottery tickets promising entry to the City, assisted suicide. This was one avenue among hundreds, the whole stretching too far for the eye to comprehend. The man had been told, and sometimes believed, that like the Great Wall of China, the Thisbe Pageant could be seen from outer space.

It was early evening when he was back at the concession. The boy hadn't returned yet. When he did, much later, the man was already seated on his chair, an hour into his digesting. The boy was drunk on boza and shoeless, accosting spectators with the jar he hadn't remembered to fill.

Most sat on rugs they'd brought themselves, some stood. The near constant noise of shootables spitting at the night should have been enough for the boy to know not to push these people who had already been driven mad generations ago by the New World. The man couldn't speak while the iron was inside him, but he seethed quietly.

Later that night when he was done and the crowds dispersed, he stood over the boy, who had fallen asleep clutching the money jar to his chest. The anger in him said he should slit the boy's throat quickly so that he wouldn't suffer worse when he was on his own again. There was always activity at the pageant, at all hours of the night and day, but where the man was the concessions were all closed. Likely no

one would see or hear him.

And so he stood, until his senses returned. Instead of killing the boy, he covered his emaciated body with an extra blanket he'd brought back that day, a fine derclon quilt that would have fed them both for a month.

* * *

They were up early folding their pallets in silence. At breakfast the man plied the boy with wheat cakes. He moved four egg rations onto the boy's plate and saw that he swallowed a pint of goat's milk. Still the boy wouldn't speak.

"I told you not to trust a girl who kissed you on the cheek." The man put his finger to the scar on his neck. He stretched it out for the boy to see how it stayed white and how close it was to the vein that pumped life from the heart. "You promised me you wouldn't get drunk," he said.

"He put a blade to my throat."

"I don't know why he didn't cut it."

"I didn't do anything but kiss her."

"He shouldn't have taken your shoes," the man said. "We'll have a new pair made today, this morning."

When they finished their breakfast, the man told the boy to wait and he went off into the dirt lot behind the kitchens and fell to his knees and retched. His food came back up, bile but no blood that he could see. He poured over the mess like a man examining his stools for parasites.

When he stood again, the boy was there. The boy untwisted the cap to the man's thermos. The man sipped and they left the canteen. "If

you get drunk again when you're supposed to be collecting my money," the man said, "I'll sell you to a Tuareg for a dollar."

As they rounded the corner of the avenue, the man recognized the Weigur boza seller from the day before and he bought the boy a fresh wheat milk. He thought the boy looked healthier, stouter, after his breakfast, and at the same time he knew this to be impossible. The boy was having just the opposite thoughts about the man.

"You're sick," the boy said.

"You knew that."

"You're not going to die."

"I don't know."

"You need medicine."

"I had some."

"You need more. I see doctors everywhere I look."

"Which is why I stay clear of them," the man said.

The boy pointed up ahead at the skinner's stall. Hanging from a hook where Fresno Long's alligator hide had been the day before was Fresno Long's head. Long's own hide hung nearby, cured but not painted. The skinner woman stood behind the stall in her greasy apron, offering cured and uncured leather that had been stained not a day ago by her husband's blood. Her eyes narrowed. She recognized him.

The man looked around for whoever had done this to his friend Fresno Long. He didn't see anyone else he could kill, if not the woman. He passed the stall without returning the skinner woman's gaze, then lost himself with the boy in the pageant traffic.

The man repeated himself so the boy wouldn't misunderstand him.

"But we've got four nights left," the boy said. "The City." He was near to tears.

The man looked over at the sleeping dervish and lowered his voice. Princess Devadi he knew he couldn't trust, her Somali bandit even less. Both were off the lot at five in the evening, the princess drinking boza, the black cripple likely having his half a body serviced.

"You can't walk the way you are," the boy tried again.

"There's a bus closer ahead than behind."

"The hogs."

"I told you."

"That other bus."

The boy was still frightened by what he'd seen walking just seventy-two hours with the man. The man thought for a moment that the blame might be his. Violence was never a singularity but two events drawing towards each other for the ruin of both over time. The passing years had done nothing to mellow his idiocy then. Only the joy of the spectacle had faded. He felt his scar, then fell to the ground on his side, his knees raised tight to his chest.

When the pain released him, he lay on his back in the dirt panting. He would spend just one more night here, collect a bit more to make up for what they'd lost the night before, then leave. He didn't want his own hide to be the next one hanging from the skinner woman's hooks. He crawled to his pallet and lay there.

"You were raised at the circus. You never left," he said to the boy.

"My daddy left me with an old lady," the boy said.

"One of ours?"

The boy nodded.

"My earliest memory is of walking," the man said. "I held my father's hand. I shouldn't have."

"I remember seeing snow once."

"An advertisement," the man said. "There is no snow. Not anymore."

"In the mountains there's snow."

The man looked at the boy.

"The rowan pines were covered two foot in it," the boy said.

The man owed his life to his wits and his gift, and yet somehow he hadn't seen this coming. He looked more closely at the boy. The throbbing in his gut was constant now, his jaw held shut by it.

"They brought you from across the sea," he said.

"You remember the snow too?" the boy asked.

"No."

"Anything?"

"I told you," the man said.

"You remember the routes."

"Bears remember routes. Their feet walk. Dogs."

"Why did your daddy leave you?" the boy asked.

Because there is no love left in this world, the man thought, only pain.

“You’re not going to die,” the boy said.

“I don’t want to die,” the man said.

* * *

The man sat six hours and the nail wouldn’t come. Seven hours. Eight. Instead of writhing or falling to the dirt from the pain, he’d become the midnight sun completing its journey from death into life.

Already daylight sat crisp on the horizon. The pain was lord, God’s punishment for hope. The wheat moaned, life under the tent began to rise again to its sacred futility. The crowd camped out at the man’s concession had begun to call for money. Soon they would be calling for blood.

A gas blower was the first to agitate, the skin around his mouth no prettier than a rust-stained pipe from a lifetime of tapping the shale beds with just his lips. No hair left on his face or head either, just patches of it. A pitiable sight anywhere else, but here, now, dangerous as the gas he sucked from the ground.

Drunk on boza, he approached the platform with arms raised, stumbling, foolish. The man called down to the boy from his platform. He told him to give the gas blower his money.

“You’ll need more than that,” the gas blower growled back.

It was true, and the man had it, but he would need the morning to collect it. He stood, and immediately was bent in two by the pain. Such an impulsive and consistent force living within his body was still a mystery to the man. In between waves of nausea he took note of the crowd. There were six others awake besides the gas blower.

The man hobbled down from the platform to show the gas blower his

guild card. The gas blower shoved it aside. The man gestured at the jar. At his sign. He made the man understand that he would leave the boy here while he went to find the rest of what he owed.

But still the man wouldn’t listen. He grabbed at the boy’s balled fists petulantly, like a child. The man shook his head.

“One hour,” he told the gas blower.

The gas blower reached for his belt where he kept a paring knife, and the man could only wonder at the inscrutable greed that had drawn them together in bloodshed from across the routes of the wandering, where man’s only ambition, his only function left, was a day’s more walking. His right fist rose and a ragged edge of unworked metal flew against the grain of the new day. He unloosened the gas blower’s vocal chords first. Then swinging downwards he opened his trachea so that the flaps of his gullet gaped.

The man’s wiry arms pulsed with a dire violence he hated even more than walking itself, the saddest thing he knew among days and days of sadness.

The pain in his stomach swam in it, got lost. He pantomimed wildly at the mostly sleeping crowd, blood-soaked, raving. He pointed up at the sky, new as the man’s slit throat, and laughed in its face when it could produce no snow. Then he ripped the money jar from the boy’s hands and showered the wayfarers with coins. If they were awake, they scrambled at what had fallen, stepping upon the sleeping.

The boy was afraid when the man took him by the hand and led him to the edge of the concession. Two blows from the man’s jagged metal cut a triangle of canvas out of the tent. They pushed through it. On the other side an emptiness the man hadn’t expected. Nothing there. Just a line of untrodden grass waist-high.

It was an hour before they cleared the tent city, another hour before

they stopped looking back over their shoulders. The man could walk no further. He had the boy help him into the concealing wheat.

They went in slowly, listening for wild hogs. They kept going until they couldn't see the road anymore. Thirsty, the man reached for the bag at his shoulder, realizing as the pain brought him low that he'd left it at the concession. He closed his eyes and didn't open them again for two days.

* * *

He woke with the gas blower's bad breath in his nostrils. His dreams had been steeped in the gas blower's blood. He got to his elbows, then his knees. Soon he was walking in tight circles. In his gut an emptiness like the deserted area behind the tent. A place that didn't exist.

It was twenty miles to the bus and the boy would need more help than he would. He gathered some heads of new wheat and began to grind them down into something he could paste together with his saliva. His pants and shirt felt loose on his frame as he worked his jaw.

The boy woke to the sound of the man's grinding. He contemplated the man as if he were a machine like the View-Master he'd left behind in the dirt.

"Bad chicken," the man said.

It meant nothing to the boy.

"A bird," the man explained. "Like a vulture but smaller."

"You ate one?"

"Might have. Whatever it was, it poisoned me. Eat this."

The boy took the wheat. He put it in his mouth.

"Chew," the man said.

"I can't."

"Try. We have twenty miles left us before the bus."

The boy began to chew.

"How far to the City?" he asked.

The man looked up at the sun. There was warmth, but he had no doubt it was sinking away from them. "There is no city as far as I know," he said.

The boy wasn't troubled by the man's news. He looked where the man was looking and said, "We don't have any money."

"All along the routes I've got money buried."

"The hogs'll dig it up."

"Places where there are no hogs."

"The people."

"I bury it good."

"One day you won't remember."

"I won't need to," the man said. "Watch good and put it in your head where I show you. You think of how many years I was eating iron and imagine what I've buried."

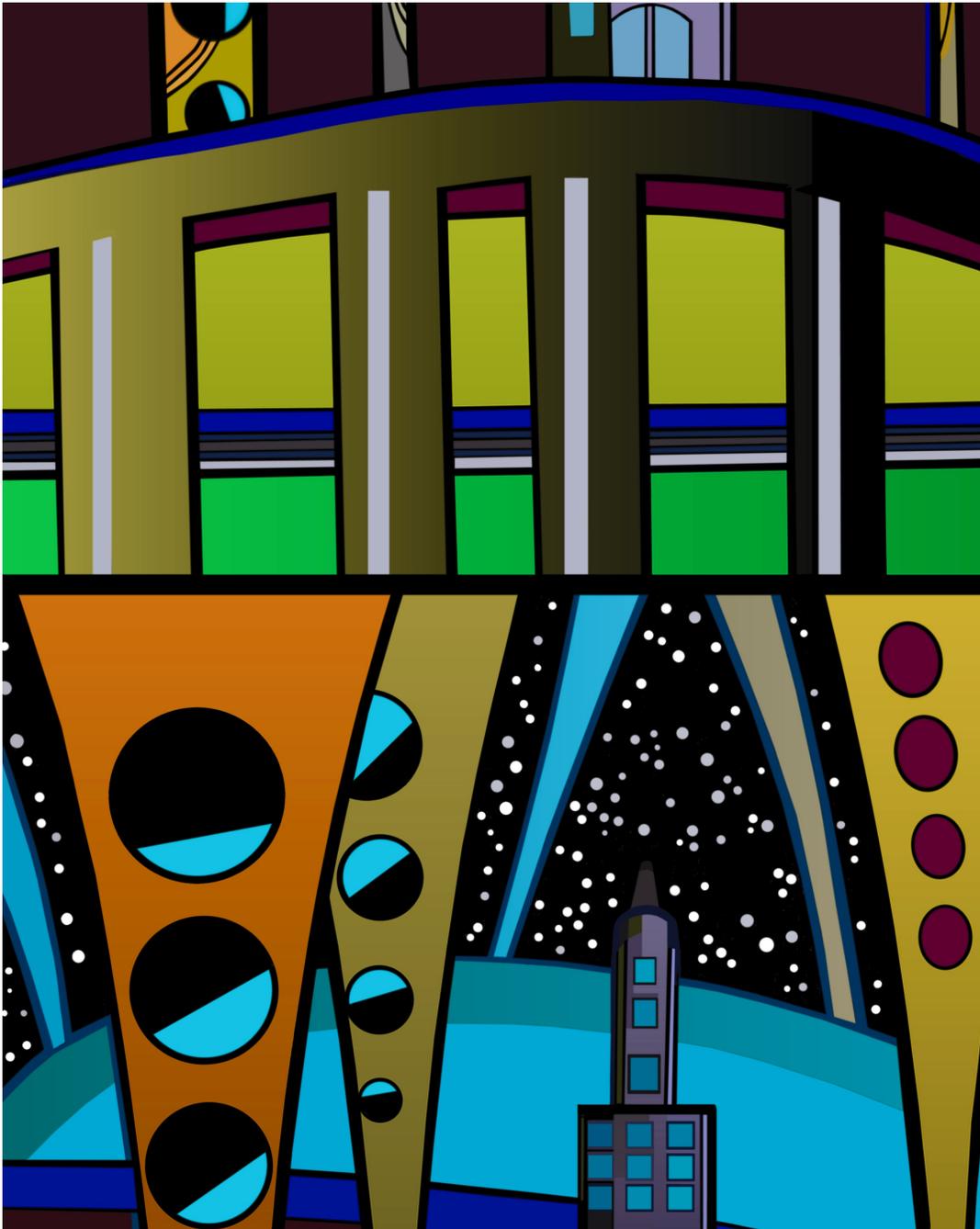
The man took the boy's hand and they left the wheat for the road.

When they found the bus towards the end of the day, the driver was one who spoke their language, one of their own. Today they rode for free.

As the bus pulled west to Fresno Long's camp of silicone and mud brick, the man told the bus driver the boy's story of seeing snow on the rowan pines in the mountains across the sea.

The driver nodded. Many wayfarers from the home country told the same story.

And so they rode, sharing the driver's meal chips, far into the afternoon and through the night. The bus filled and emptied and by the next dawn the man and boy were alone again.



The Outpost

by Denny E. Marshall

Neon Vandals

by Avra Margariti

Bobby watches the news over his grandma's shoulder:
the last tree in their city is dying
but the government funds will be spent
on yet another skyscraper.

He calls Ravi, whose father is an artist
and will give them buckets of neon paint for free.

Lorelei is all too giddy to supply the gloves and bandannas
from her personal collection.

It's on tonight, Maria texts her friends from neighboring
schools and cities.

This is a protest.

The teenagers pour out into the streets, their brushes dripping
technicolor on steel and concrete. Flowers, boughs, foliage,
everything blooming in time to their rapid heartbeats.

The night is still young, the moon winking her assent.

They will keep on laughing and shushing each other, kissing and bickering,
and they will not rest until every drop of paint has been used
and every city is a glowing forest.

Heading for Home

by Peter J. King

I'm sitting in a city square, so nondescript
it could be anywhere, and is.

Once I've drunk this coffee I shall gather
my belongings and set off again down
one of all the avenues that radiate from here.

Perhaps I'll find myself between tall buildings,
looming over narrow streets
like redwoods over needled paths, their plainness
finding counterparts down in the clothes
of those who crowd between them.

Or there'll be limestone edifices, friezes carved
in strange and slightly sinister though abstract shapes,
the people dressed in grey and green and beige —
the men in kilts, the women trailing gowns of taffeta,
with one arm bare and hennaed.

Once I wandered through a maze of wooden
ziggurats with varnished pediments
and brightly painted porticoes; not a soul in view,
but sometimes, from the corner of my eye, I glimpsed
a small and slinking shape slide out of sight.

At other times I've come across a street
that could have been in London, Paris, Athens,
Ýstanbul — except for some small detail out of place:

an oddly canted bench, an old advertisement,
a child's doll, or a street musician's animal associate.

Whatever city I discover, though,
with its distinctive buildings, people, customs,
signs in languages of every kind and script —
whatever vehicles I dodge and public transport
that I ride, all paid with local currencies
that turn up in my pockets or my wallet —
at the end of every day I find
I'm entering this square.

Each night I dine in one of three or four
small restaurants; I sit and have a nightcap
in this same café. I sleep alone in a hotel
that's cheap but clean, and eat my
breakfast out in this café again.

And every morning, once I've had a coffee
and collected up my things,
I set off, taking one from all the avenues
that lead out from this square,
which could lead anywhere,
and do.

The Edge of Doom

by Karen Mandell

The massive iron door clanged shut behind her, and its echo reverberated down the flagstone hall. Lulu's ears hurt, but such a small price to pay for the chance to get inside the prison. She'd paid off prison guards, wardens, matrons, waylaying them on their way home from the prison. A couple of her friend Idra's sapphires had served her purpose, and she'd sold them for a fistful of bills. That was the easy part.

A beetle-browed guard—one she didn't know—demanded her papers. She handed them over, keeping a placid, amiable, but confident look on her face. She hoped she achieved that; over the years, she'd trained herself on maximizing the use of facial expressions, raising one's eyebrows when meeting someone (she'd done that just now, signifying openness and a willingness to greet the other), blinking a bit more often than usual, displaying likely acquiescence to what the other had to offer. Simple things. Hopefully effective. Especially here.

He held on to her papers when he'd finishing reading them, and she looked him in the eye. She waited for his pupils to dilate—meaning he was willing to hear what she had to say—and when they did, she said she hoped her papers were in order.

“They're correct,” he said. “As far as I can see. But I haven't been informed why you're here.” Lulu said she was incredibly sorry; she had an appointment to take the prisoner Blaise Reiss home to her family. She'd been informed by the Government that Blaise was to be released today, and the bottom paper was the officially granted release application. He stiffened his chin. A befuddled look came into his eyes.

“The pages are jumbled—the release paper should have been on top,”

he scowled. “You'll have to talk to the Administrator. Take a seat on the chair down the hall.” It could have been worse; he could have thrown her out altogether. After all, most of the documents she'd given him had been forged and doctored. She hadn't expected to be let in on the first try. She sat on the none-too-clean chair, trying not to put her hands on the armrests. She didn't want to feel the dried sweat of anxious souls who knew their fate would be determined within these walls. This administrative part of the prison was square and squat, with low ceilings and dim lighting. Utilitarian, unadorned, no bronze busts of former wardens or statues of the goddess of justice. Lead, deadened. She sat back, intending to look blameless. Just visiting a prison made you feel guilty. Of course she was guilty—under the eyes of the law. All kinds of fake identities, hers and the people she was charged to help, thefts, small and larger, anything that could be sold or bartered.

She sat there for a long time. She knew the longer she waited the more imperious the Administrator would be. She'd been working underground for years, since she'd carried messages in her school backpack. She was recruited because of her face, not for especially good looks, unfortunately, since beauty would have served her well. Her face was mobile, they told her, with emotions flitting across it at will. You wanted angry, she'd give you angry. Shyness, with the slight duck of her head, fine by her.

Her mother had been an actress who'd bequeathed her the ability to call down all the emotions befitting a stage actress, with the addition of wide spaced green eyes, flaming auburn hair, a lissome figure. Her mother had played mostly on community stages. She'd lacked something, a sharp intelligence that would tell her who was coming up and who was going down, which director to play up to, which to

glide away from. Thinking only of the part, an Ophelia, a Cordelia, all arts no smarts. From her father she'd gotten her shrewdness, his lackluster hazel eyes, his foolish hair like grizzled corn cobs, his long, thin-lipped face.

She'd realized that street smarts could take the place of beauty. Her mother taught her to smooth, tone, highlight, dab on, cover, reveal so that she too could appear beautiful—or withered as the case might require.

“You’ll be a wonderful actress,” her mother had said. “You have physical beauty—no, it’s not only because I’m your mother—but you have a spirit flaming up, making your eyes glow with passion or despair. A life force, swirling up from the earth ...”

“And popping out of my eyeballs like a cartoon character,” Lulu finished for her. “But all right, I’ll apply to acting school.” Her mother looked so radiant when she was pleased. And it was so easy to make her mother believe her.

Her father was not so malleable. “Ridiculous,” he said. “You’re going to take direction? Please. You’d only be happy if you were the head of a battalion.” Lulu had no choice in the end, which infuriated her. It took her a while to realize that nobody but her parents cared for what she thought. The Government shut down the theaters, citing moral and political degradation. Plus a drain on the Government’s pockets at a time of possible war. They had funded the theaters, although the people were still aware enough to know the cash came from their taxes. Now that money was going to be used for other things, to protect the nation, for munitions and fortified prisons. Later the Government realized it didn’t have to give reasons for anything.

Without school Lulu rode aimlessly around on her bike with her girlfriends, commiserating with each other for not being able to see their crushes or other girls who lived too far away. They went to the stores for their mothers, stealing the obligatory piece of gum or chocolate, until the stores ran out of candy, then fruits, fresh

vegetables, meat, milk. Families with boys were lucky, because most of them had few qualms about stoning squirrels, who’d become as tame as puppies over the years, folding their paws on the tummies, expecting a handout. The girls broke into two factions, those who thought the boys who didn’t hunt were darling and sweet and poetic, and those who thought the hunters were manly and sexy.

“Both those types of boys are crazy,” Lulu said. The girls had left their bikes piled up on the uncut grass of the local park, while they sat in the shade of a hundred-year oak. “Merely romantic guys some of you are gaga about are just setting themselves up to starve. And the other he-men types you’d be sick of in a day—no soul left to consider the stars or the little universes inside us.” Lulu talked like that in those days—pragmatic yet thinking herself soulful.

Coraline, her at-the-moment best friend, said that Lulu should just let the girls chitchat. “My parents went on a camping trip once with their friends and they didn’t bring enough food. So there they were miles from a store, and they had to make do with the scraps they had left. Their way of coping--talking about food, they told me, the best meals they’d had, their favorite restaurants. They couldn’t help it. And we can’t stop talking about boys.” The other girls screamed their approval. Some jumped up, linked arms, and swirled around until they fell breathless on the ground.

“I was just saying that making heroes of one group of guys or another ...” Lulu stopped. Two women, perhaps mother and daughter, were walking on the path below. Arm in arm, each clutching a parasol, they wore long dresses, an older style, patterned with sprigs of flowers. The girls watched them, eager to observe new faces. “Genteel poverty,” Lulu said. “Old aristocratic family, no money.”

“How do you know?” Selma asked. “You’ve met them before?”

“No, from books, silly. We used to have tons of them. I hid a few, but don’t ever repeat that. Cross your heart.”

“Hope to die,” Selma said. All the girls solemnly repeated the phrase.

“Just kidding,” Lulu said, smiling the way that brought out her dimples. But of course she wasn’t.

The women walked up the hill, closer to them, the young one graceful with strong strides, the older one huffing but not too much. Her daughter was watching out for her, and she settled down on a bench nestled under an old beech. They talked about the beech, how it must be at least a hundred and fifty years old, but still so healthy. The girls could hear them, so probably the women could hear them as well, but they didn’t care. They were harmless, obviously.

“Two old maids,” Coraline said, with a shrug of a shoulder that meant *she* wouldn’t be one.

Lulu didn’t comment on the stupidity of the remark. She was the straggler when the girls picked up their bikes and walked them down to the road. She glanced back at the women, and the older one nodded her head. She wouldn’t mind talking to them.

That happened sooner than she’d thought—the next morning when her mother had commissioned her to find flour in one of the shops. There wasn’t any, the grocer said, sold out. They say a new shipment will come next week. Or the next. His chins were crumpled onto his neck like stale doughnuts. He turned to the next customer, continuing his round of regrets. She kept her head down as she walked outside. She knew her mother still had a store of foodstuffs in the cellar, crated up to keep out the rats who were getting hungry too. But you had to go out every day in case something came in. She knew the government was breaking down, her father speaking to her quietly when her mother was in another room. He didn’t want to upset her mother, whom he thought was fragile and nervous. Of course her mother knew whatever was common knowledge, but they’d felt the need to protect her. An actress, you know, her father would always sum up.

She wasn’t watching where she was going, her thoughts sidetracking her, and bumped into someone outside the shop’s door. Both of the visiting ladies waved off her apologies, and each looped an arm

through hers. “So nice to see someone we recognize,” she said, adding that she was Anna and her friend was Dagmar. Anna was the younger of the two. Lulu guessed by about a dozen years. They steered her to the café/bar next door and pushed open the door, its bell tinkling their arrival. Besides the manager, they were the only ones in the place. The women ordered three lemonades, and after the bartender mixed them, using a too-bright yellow powder, he walked out and took a cigarette from his back pocket.

“We’ve been dying to meet you,” Anna said. “Me and Dagmar.”

“You were? Do you need a babysitter? But you don’t live around here.” Lulu was confused and flattered. She stared into two pairs of olive-green eyes.

“We’ve met your father. At meetings.”

Maybe they were recruiters from a college, but then they’d know that colleges in the entire Southeast had been put on extended intersession. Until finances in the region improved. And the Government found replacements for the teachers who’d been fired for holding unacceptable views. Judging by their dated dresses, these women were remnants of a distant past.

“As you know—being your father’s daughter—the Government is crumbling, and the Guard found just the opening they needed to gain control of not only the Southeast but soon the entire country. We’re part of a third group that wants to bring down both these groups.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re very misguided. What can two women, out of touch I’m afraid, actually do?” Things hadn’t been disastrous yet in their town, but shortages were getting worse. Lulu couldn’t overlook that. She felt she left childhood, stepped across the line into an age she couldn’t name.

“We just want to look harmless,” Anna said. “So people look at us as odd and dotty.” She ran her fingers through her frizzy curls. Her fingers were too thin and fragile to be a threat to anyone.

“We’d like you to work with us,” Dagmar said. She might have been the older of the two, but she appeared sturdier than Anna, her voice deeper, forceful. Lulu couldn’t hold her stare.

“Carrying messages,” Anna said. Arms crossed, she caressed her pointy elbows, as if soothing herself and Lulu. “You’ll receive a sealed envelope from time to time. *Voilà*.” She took one out of her pocket, square, addressed in discreet handwriting, and handed it to Lulu. “You never open it, just deliver it to the address. Any specifics, like slip under side door, are written in pencil under the address. That’s it. For now. Simple, right?”

“Is this dangerous? Why should I do anything for you? You haven’t told me a thing that would make me want to help you.”

“These are dangerous times. Both the Government and the Guards fighting them are in a power grab. Neither have plans to work for the average person. Look around—a decayed city, hungry people. There are no newspapers to tell you the facts now, but your age group didn’t read them much anyway.”

“I did,” Lulu said.

“That’s why we chose you.”

“And me riding my bike around can do any good?” The earth had always turned, spinning Lulu with it, but now she realized how precarious life is on the planet. She had to hold on and not fly off like dust in the wind. She’d lost her composure. She was breathing too fast. Unsettled.

“There was a saying, years and years ago,” Anna said. “*War is not good for children and other living things*. Your part in this requires no planning, just being discreet.” Lulu felt a pang of disappointment. Do you already want to do more? she chided herself. Anna stood up, smoothing the bodice of her bizarre dress. Dagmar’s dress hitched up when she stood—she was lean and rangy, her collar bones rising from her hollow chest. Lulu stared at their boots—tooled leather with

sterling snakes climbing up the sides and steel-capped toes. Fighting boots.

Dagmar nodded. “Some more old words, *One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you.*”

“Over me?” Lulu said.

“No. You’re with us, a partisan.”

For years Lulu thought about getting identical boots when she pedaled furiously down back roads, certain she was followed; when she sweet-talked and big-eyed her way out of situations that had every indication of going south; when she pulled a partisan out of waist deep mud, catching her foot on a sunken log and breaking myriad small bones. She was still limping when she traded a rosewood cane with a gold horsehead knob (found in a decayed manor house housing six Government deserters dead drunk on the floor) for a sister pair of tooled leather, steel-capped boots that just about fit. She’d been carrying that injury for years now, still having to soak her foot before her ankle pulsed with pain.

* * *

Her foot was acting up now from too much sitting on the prison bench. It was ridiculous, waiting so long for the Administrator. She had perfected the art of raging inside while maintaining a pleasant half smile and placid eyes. She had to stand up and stretch out her ankle, so she might as well knock on the Administrator’s door. She never failed to feel a little sick when surmising what cruel, ego-driven men were doing behind closed doors. Nonetheless she found herself knocking, and then turning the handle. She poked her head inside. “Excuse me sir, but perhaps ...”

Lunging up from his desk, his eyes bulging, his nose a map of veins, he screamed in the Guards’ language. She usually understood enough of his language to get by; she’d even decoded their encrypted messages. But now his words tumbled out of her head like

children's blocks. She was utterly taken aback by the viciousness of his tone. She was a fool to be thrown off guard. She should have predicted his outrage. He was in charge and nobody would enter his space without his explicit permission. She'd probably have to pay him double now. She made profuse excuses, bowing her head, and closed the door silently behind her. Back to the bench, where she sat with her hands in prayer position beneath her chin. That's how he would see her when he came out. Remorseful, contrite. If he deigned to come out. She thoroughly, heartily hated him and all the world's cruel egoists.

Of course when he opened his door an hour later she was demure, bowing her head, playing total subordination. The goal here being the release of the girl. Just because she'd been notified that the prison would release her didn't mean success was guaranteed. What she wanted was in and out. An unfortunate expression. She grimaced as she followed his fat buttocks into his office.

"Sir, I'm here for the release of Blaise Semel," Lulu said. She pulled out the official-enough forms from her bag, now in the right order, and handed them across the mahogany desk looming between them. The Administrator scowled at the forms, tossing them down when he was done. The office was tricked out in cushy leather chairs, freshly painted cream walls, copies of masterpieces on the wall. Or maybe they were the real thing, looted from the houses of the formerly well off. Lulu hadn't been asked to sit down, but she did now, unobtrusively sliding onto the buttery leather. "As you can see," she said, nodding at the papers, "today is set for her release. As you can see, she attested under oath that she would never participate in further protests against those in authority."

He scowled as if she'd questioned his ability to read through a document. Back to submission. "Thank you for your help, sir."

"I only release those who have shown their cooperation and have been rehabilitated." He interlaced his stubby fingers, nails neat and manicured. He grimaced—maybe he thought it was a smile—exposing white veneers and gold molars.

Lulu reached into her bag again, pulling out a velvet bag and giving it to him. "I believe in cooperation also." He took out a sapphire cabochon, held it up to the grated window.

"And if I need more? More cooperation?"

"Naturally that would depend on how successfully we concluded this transaction. I have my contacts." Her contacts were in a burlap bag, precious gems her agent Isolde had sweet-talked from a sympathetic general and his daughter-in-law.

"There are other ways of cooperating." The old guy was soliciting her. Flirting. He was horrid, of course, but he could have flung her to the ground and straddled her by now if he'd had a mind to. "We'll meet again." He stared at her. His eyelashes were white over murky light eyes. "In some capacity." He pressed a button on his desk and spoke into a handset. The language of the Guards, but again mostly unintelligible to her. She'd need to go back to studying it, especially since the Guards already controlled cities in the Northeast and Northwest. Full out war between the Guards and the Government was inevitable. And she wanted both sides destroyed, each determined to grab whatever land and possessions the people still had, crush their souls and spirit and intelligence. She and the other Resistance fighters had put together their cadres for subverting the efforts of the other two sides, not equals, of course, in strength or numbers, but underminers. Boring and destroying like boll weevils into the heart of their operations.

Lulu felt fear rise in her throat—maybe the Administrator was having Blaise *cooperate*—when he came in, a reedy girl beside him. She wore blue cotton pants and a long-sleeved top, grungy and crumpled. Lulu homed in on Blaise's eyes. Whatever she had gone through here, her eyes were still alive. Time to leave before the Administrator changed his mind or extracted demands. She took Blaise by the arm and led her to the door. Lulu felt the girl's arm tremble. She had to keep Blaise upright.

Outside, Blaise's eyes watered from the shreds of sunlight that poked

through the bleary sky. “Where’s my baby?” she said, grabbing Lulu’s shoulder. “Where is she?”

“With Isolde, the girl you gave her to at the rally. She’s bringing her to your mother. Like you told her to do.”

“Has she been sick? Is she safe? You’re not lying to me, are you?” Blaise looked miserable, her tears streaking tracks down her grimy cheeks. Lulu did what she should have done as soon as they got outside. She hugged her tightly, pressed her cheek to Blaise’s and whispered that the baby was *safe and sound safe and sound safe and sound*. When Blaise jerked away, Lulu crooned *easy, easy*, like settling a horse who had reared up in fright. Why should she believe Lulu, a stranger? Lulu was not really a comforter. Not for the first time, Lulu doubted that she had the common touch, the ability to soothe and comfort. She was better at organizing, determining who’d be better at placing bombs on tracks or recruiting new activists, or rounding up food, shelter, medicine. But especially now, when hostilities between the Guards and the Government had ignited, and both groups were intent on eliminating anyone who defied them, people needed those who could console. Nurture. She wasn’t sure she had it in her.

I’m inadequate, she thought. She needed to shake off the malaise that she knew gripped all of them, dullness of spirit alternating with panic. Sometimes your own self is the enemy. She steered Blaise to a red brick apartment building. Inside, leaves and dirt had piled up in the drafty entry. “Second floor,” Lulu said.

“Raul,” Blaise said. “Is he released too? Where is he?”

“We don’t know,” Lulu said. “Our people went to the men’s prison, but they had no record of him. Maybe he escaped. We’ll keep trying. So many are lost. We’ll have to get you home without him. I’m sorry we don’t have a better result.” Inside a shabby apartment right off the landing, Lulu pulled out a change of clothes, towel, soap, bread, and cheese and told Blaise they’d leave as soon as Blaise washed up and ate something.

Sitting at the kitchen table a few minutes later, Lulu watched Blaise eat, both crying and chewing. Her red hair startling against her bloodless face. She was ravenous. Lulu gave her a chance to compose herself—if that was even possible. “Were you hurt at the prison? We can give you medicine—we commandeered a small supply this week.”

“All the guards were women. So getting pregnant wasn’t possible. They did other things. But I got off with just some bruises. Others fared worse.”

“We’ll have to walk to the station. Are you up to it?” Although staying in the apartment wasn’t an option.

“I’ll do anything. I have to get home.”

“Of course. If anyone asks, you’re my daughter, we’ve been visiting your aunt Isole. But volunteer nothing.”

It was a long walk to the station on the edge of the city, instead of the central one only a few blocks away. Lulu couldn’t risk seeing anyone who knew her from her large apartment complex. There her role was busybody, sitting on the steps outside, bantering, giving advice. Not holding the arm of an unfamiliar young woman. The buildings became more rundown as they walked closer to the outskirts. Bands of kids roamed the streets looking for a little money, excitement, drugs, whatever was available that day. Lulu and Blaise had a beat-up cloth bag, no jewelry, workaday clothes. The kids had more profitable marks in mind.

Blaise asked for a drink or a piece of fruit. Grit had settled on their shoes and clothes. They entered a small grocery, mostly a counter with boxes of potatoes, apples, beets on the floor. The stands that had once held newspapers—plaques indicating *The Times*, *The Globe*, *The Post* still screwed into the metal—now housed thin bundles of kindling wood. Garden tools, rakes, hoes, shovels, stood rusting quietly along the wall perpendicular to the counter. This would be a good time to have a garden, Lulu thought, with food supplies so unpredictable. But

the yards in this neighborhood were small, packed hard with pebbly dirt, airless. No earthworms making a home there, barely weeds.

They stood at the end of the line, just inside the door. The clerk moved slowly, even though the orders were small. A slightly built man came in and shoved the door closed, hard so that the potato crate lurched and a couple spuds bounced off. A woman on the way out grabbed a couple rolling along the floor and stuffed them in her bag. Nobody much noticed, since the door slammer took everyone's attention. At first Lulu thought he looked anodyne--middle height, ordinary looks, clean shaven. Maybe it was the wind that pulled the door closed so abruptly. But as he strode to the front of the line, she felt a twinge of apprehension. His supple leather shoes, his cashmere coat and gloves were out of place in this desolate neighborhood. His light eyes looked through her as if she were a shadow, an apparition. Mean, cruel, they scared her; he'd be relentless if anyone came up against him. Lulu felt his menace, an unpredictability about him. She moved closer to Blaise.

On his way to the front he bumped into an elderly woman with a walker, knocking her down, and Blaise helped her up. Yes, it was admirable that Blaise had a good heart, but Lulu didn't want any attention shifted to her and Blaise. They had to remain anonymous, faceless. Though Blaise was formally released (with the help of a flawless sapphire), she could be pulled back in any time now that she had a record.

"You," he said to the shopkeeper, "I need you to put motor oil in my car."

"I don't usually sell motor oil," the man said.

"Find some," the man said.

The shopkeeper went into the back and brought out a rusty can. "Where's your car, sir?" he said.

"The Daimler up the street." Everyone swizzled their necks, looking

at the red car a couple doors down. With its white hood, white walled tires, and large front grill, it was an antique that was meticulously kept up.

"As if they never saw a car before," he said to the shopkeeper. He placed his well-groomed hands on the counter so that his rings glinted under the weak overhead light. "We need stiffer penalties for ragtag lots like these," he said, jerking his head at the people in line. "No reason for them to live. A drain on the Government."

Even the most uninformed knew that the Government hadn't distributed food or other provisions since the emergence of swamp fever months back. Its hands were tied temporarily, the Government had said at the time, fighting the fever, even though now the fever was over. Lulu needed to react as she had been trained to do with sadistic, nihilistic people—commiserating, speaking levelly, making minimal eye contact until they could be contained.

Before she could say anything, Blaise got out of line and went up to the man, slow, unthreatening. Of course she was unthreatening, an unarmed girl. Lulu put her hand on Blaise's shoulder to move her aside. She wouldn't budge.

"Leave them alone. They've done nothing." Blaise was standing inches from him now, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

"You'll come with me to the station," he said, a half-smile narrowing his lips. "The sergeant will want to meet with you."

Blaise pushed him, hard, her fists tight knots. He'll kill Blaise now, Lulu thought. And then everybody else. She looked at the men and women, still standing in line, and shouted run, go out. No one moved; fear, panic, terror had rooted them in place as surely as if they'd been glued to the plank floor. She heard the thump behind her; amazingly, Blaise had knocked the man down, flat on his back. The back of his head hit the blade of one of the hoes lined against the side wall. The man wheezed like a bellow, gasped. His heels kicked the floor a half dozen times, stopped. Lulu kneeled down to touch his neck. Nothing.

She stared at Blaise. Everybody did.

Lulu grabbed her hand and pulled Blaise outside. The tremendous strength Blaise had displayed ebbed now, her lips pale as her skin. “What happened in there?” Lulu asked, though she didn’t expect Blaise to answer. Half running beside Lulu was as much as she could do. They made it to the station without Blaise falling in a heap. Lulu had bought the tickets the day before. That was normal procedure so there’d be no last-minute fiddling for bills or coins at the window—or being told that money had been devalued again and she’d need to fish twice as much out of her purse. It was the night train they were waiting for, chosen in case things didn’t go according to plan. They hadn’t gone according to plan—nowhere near—and there was a good chance the police would burst into the station. They’d let you go only if you gave them a good enough bribe, and Lulu had prepared for that. Lulu, the mistress of all contingencies, except when a girl went wild on her watch.

They sat on the wooden bench farthest from the station door. Lulu pulled out a thin woolen shawl from her bag. A green and brown paisley, it was the kind the old *bubbies* had worn for eons. An item that was as familiar and unobtrusive as a chipped teapot. She draped it over both of them, and Lulu pulled Blaise’s head down on her shoulder. A mother and her teenage daughter weary from travelling.

“I killed him,” Blaise whispered. She wouldn’t look at Lulu. “I didn’t mean to.”

“What would’ve happened if he hadn’t smashed his head? He’d jump up and kill you and probably the rest of us.”

“I reached a breaking point. I just went at him. If that’s an excuse.”

“It’s an excuse. Justified? I don’t know. You’re no saint.”

“Am I supposed to be?”

“No. You’ve been imprisoned. It’s taken an unspeakable toll on you.

But it hasn’t destroyed your sense of justice--just brought it closer to the surface.”

“Is there hope for me? I’m going to drag this ... what I did around with me for the rest of my life. Now I do belong in prison.” Blaise stood up, muscles in her face and arms clenched. Lulu pulled her back down to the bench, held her tight.

“You’re not a cold-blooded killer. You said you didn’t mean to kill him. These are extraordinary times, and the old rules don’t apply.”

“They apply,” Blaise said.

“Yes, I suppose they do. Even now, at the edge of doom.”

“I just want my baby to live. Be happy, laugh, be kind. That won’t happen, will it? At the edge of doom.” Tears streaked a path from her cheeks to her chin. She was exhausted, purple blotches like bruises under her eyes. “The edge of doom sounds like the saddest poem.”

“It is from a poem, written ages ago. About love. *Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks but bears it out even to the edge of doom.*”

“What does it mean?”

“That love doesn’t change, even to the end of your life. Even now.”

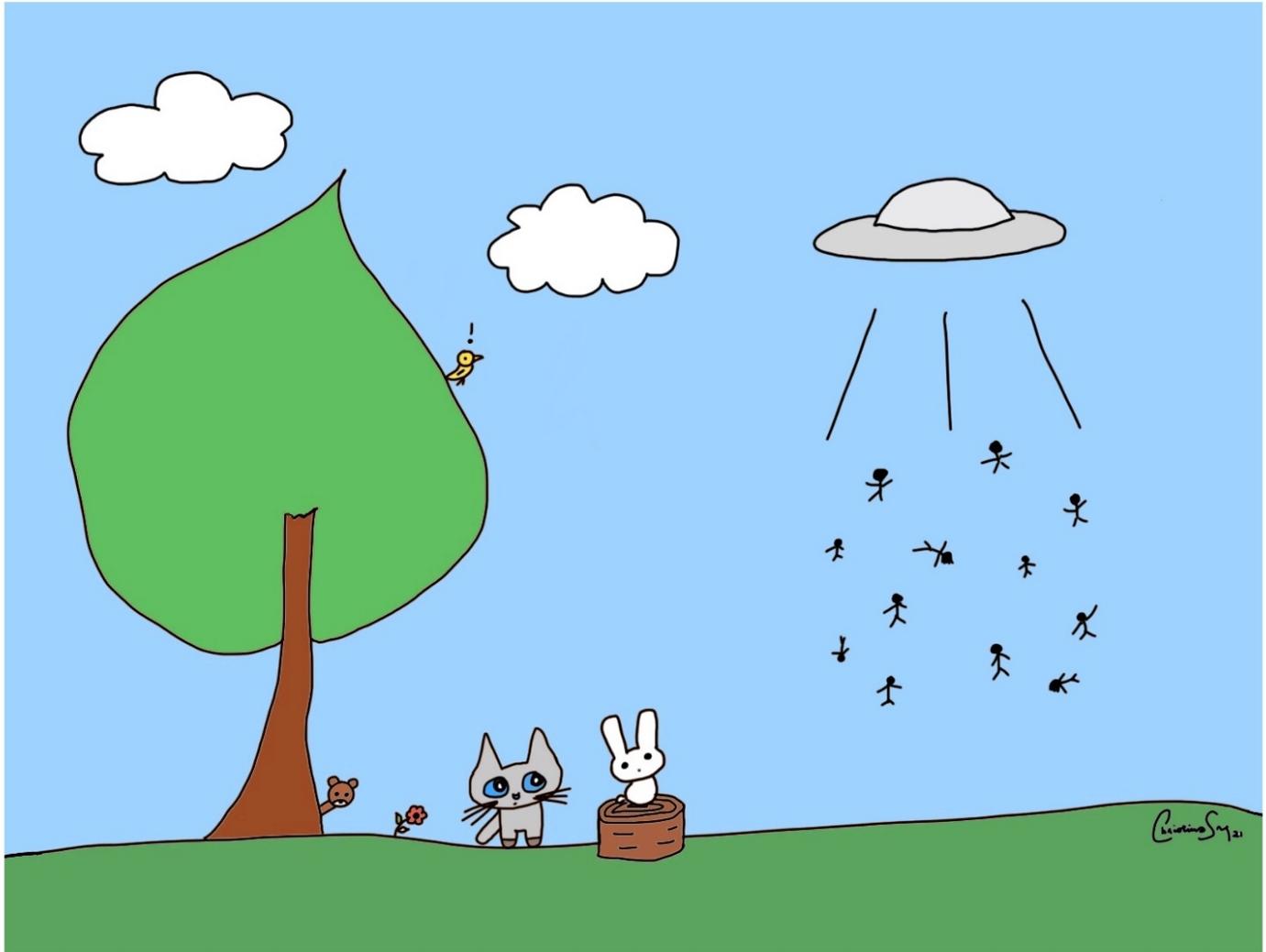
“Did that happen to you?”

“Yes. I’ve loved people, still do even though they’re mostly gone.”

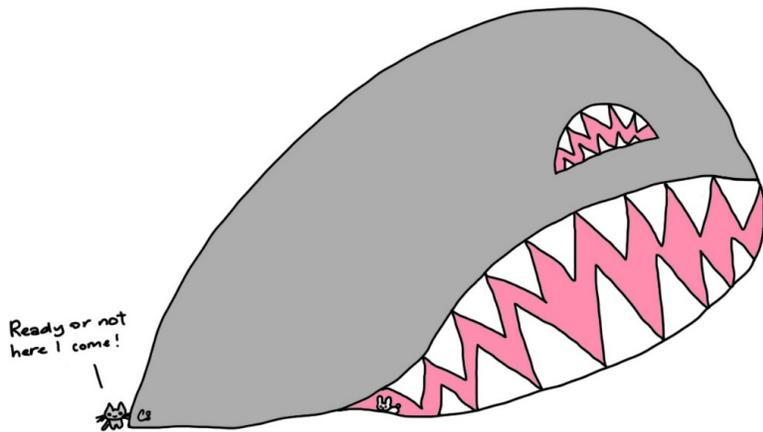
Lulu and Blaise fell silent, waiting for the train. It was eerily still in the station, no one frantically rushing in or out trying to stay clear of danger. As if there were a truce in this city. Even hope.

Ironies

by Christina Sng



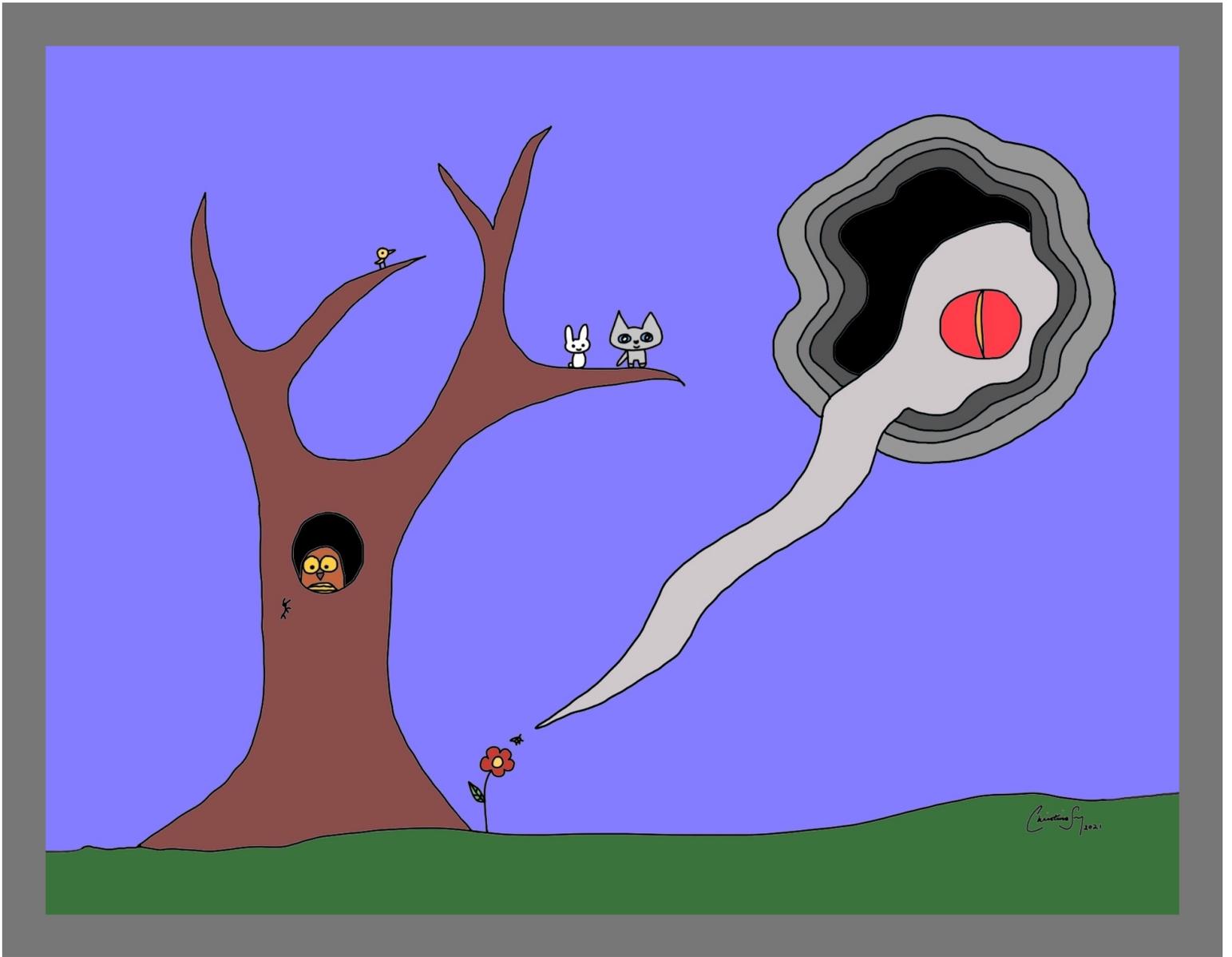
"The Humans are Flying"



“Play Does Not Cease During War”



“I Hold a Cloud”



“They’re Here”

Pleasant Valley

by Nick Scorza

God save me, they've stuck me with another mouthy one.

In the passenger seat Ian goes on about his theory of everything, which he's been doing since we left the motel this morning. He's an anarcho-syndicalist, against both corporations and governments. "Property is theft," et cetera. I try to tell him I heard it all before. I lived through the sixties when boys thought talk like that would get them in your pants. Instead I'm focused on the asshole ahead of us doing fifty in the left lane like a middle finger to all that's holy.

"Worker-owned collectives, that's what everything should be," Ian says. "Labor should earn you a share of ownership."

His left arm is sleeved in tattoos so new they almost shine, whorls of blue-black reflecting the light. I can't help it; they make me think of the tattoos I saw on my youngest son. Tattoos of a different sort, done with an ink pen in a prison yard. Matty had tried to hide them, but I'd caught sight of one peeking from the edge of his sleeve—like the bottom loop of an S, but all in hard right angles. I could guess what the rest of the shape was, and he knew as soon as I saw.

"You ought to be ashamed," I said. "Your grandfather almost died fighting that and everything it stands for."

His face flushed, shame quickly boiling over to the same rage that landed him in prison.

"It's not like that, mom. I had to. You don't know—"

He couldn't finish the sentence. There were already tears in my eyes,

and before I could protest the guard had called the visit done.

Ian is still going on about the workers' utopia as I pass mister fifty in the fast lane on the right with a little wave.

I shouldn't be too hard on Ian. He's young and his folks probably have money, and at least he didn't become another banker or lawyer. Instead he's found a cause like some folks find Jesus and now he's got to tell the world. He never asks what I am, which is just as well. There's not really a word for it. I do what I do because it's what I come from. Used to be everyone I knew was in a union—not anymore.

The GPS on Ian's phone pipes up, telling us to take the next exit.

"Alma Gutierrez," says Ian. "She's the one that called us. I have a good feeling about this."

We've organized in Florida before, but it's not easy thanks to Right to Work laws. When we succeed it's because some of these nursing homes treat their staff so bad everyone pays their union dues, even though the law says they don't have to.

I feel a plane taking off not far from us, and the car shakes as it passes overhead. We're driving through a neighborhood that's all tiny houses in little square lots—the kind of place it's easy to picture from above even when you're on the ground.

We pull up to the right address, a little one-story house just like all the others. As we step out of the car another plane takes off at the airport nearby, and this time we hear the roar as it passes overhead.

I knock on the door and a pretty little girl lets us in. She looks at us nervously while I hear someone speaking Spanish from the kitchen.

Ian surprises me by answering fluently. I can only understand a word or two ... *Hello, it's Ian and Denise, from the union* ... Ms. Gutierrez appears, and her daughter quickly runs to stand beside her. She's young, but I can already tell she's not the type to let this sort of work beat her down, which is good for all of us. She says something else to Ian, I think asking where he learned Spanish, and he tells her *estudié en España*. He speaks very well, but with an exaggerated lisp Ms. Gutierrez clearly finds hilarious. When she sees my expression she switches to English.

"Thank you for coming. I'm ... I'm sorry that you came all this way. Things have changed at the home, and I don't think the time is right for a union."

Ian looks like he's about to argue. I put a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I say. "Employers may offer to make things better, but they don't always follow through. A union is a way to keep management accountable."

Ms. Gutierrez frowns. Judging from her face it doesn't look like they promised her anything.

"Did anyone threaten you?"

She shakes her head.

"I'm sorry you came all this way. Can I get you some water, or coffee?"

We say no and thank her, and for a moment it looks like she's going to change her mind. Then she sends her daughter to go watch TV and walks us toward the door. Just as she's about to shut it, she leans her head out. She speaks in an urgent whisper.

"I'm sorry, really, but if I go through with this they'll move me to the old house."

Then she shuts the door.

"I can't believe this," Ian says as we drive off. "That's retaliation. It's illegal."

"We don't even know what that means, 'the old house.'"

"You saw her face. She was terrified. We should call the lawyers, take them to court ..."

I let Ian vent as we drive to the next address. He knows how hard it is to prove retaliation in a case like this, how much the courts down here favor employers, especially in the retirement industry. I let him keep at it until he calms down. I used to be that angry once.

On the highway in Florida you sometimes see pools of light up ahead, like a slick of water reflecting the sun back at you. It's a trick of the heat, a mirage like out in the desert. They vanish when you get close enough, and it's just more road, with no water but the humid air. I keep the AC on full blast in the car. I hate the way the heat here sticks to you and won't let go till you can't stand to be in your own skin. It's no wonder Ponce de Leon went nuts out here, crashing through the swamps looking for the fountain of youth.

The next name on the list is Belinda Jones—according to Alma, she's the one who helped her put the whole list together. I hope she's still on board, but when we ring her bell there's no answer, and a stack of mail piled up behind her screen door. It doesn't look like anyone's been here in days.

"Maybe she's on vacation," Ian says, which only makes it worse.

No one is home at the next house either, and at the one after a woman

opens the door halfway, only to shut it in our faces. Some people don't like unions, I get that—hell, I don't always like them and I work for one—but those people usually want to tell you why before they shut the door.

As we drive off to the next name on our list, I notice a black sedan behind us. It follows us off the highway, and I think *who the hell is driving a car like that in this neighborhood?* Just before we get to our destination, it makes a left turn. I try to tell myself it's nothing.

At the next house the old woman who answers speaks very little English. Ian chats with her in Spanish, and I get faintly hopeful in my ignorance, but once he gets to the specifics, she gets fearful like the others, asking us politely but firmly to leave.

La casa vieja. Even I know what that means.

These old folks homes make me think of my own mother, before she went. She'd always been hard, but something had soured in her at the end, and she'd spit at the nurse who cared for her. When I came to see her, I could tell she didn't remember her own daughter. Out in the hall I hugged that nurse and told her how sorry I was.

Over dinner Ian is restless, tapping away on his phone. The only choices near our motel are burgers or chicken, both greasy chains and of course non-union. Ian takes hungry bites of his cheeseburger when he manages to take his eyes off his phone.

“Whatever this old house is, they don't list it on the website. They have three locations, all pretty much the same—nice flower arrangement at the front for all the kids visiting their old parents, but every corner cut behind the scenes ...”

He shows me pictures from their website, the same bland reception

rooms and sunny sample bedrooms. There's a quote at the bottom of their website, “Life Eternal in that Pleasant Valley,” which sounds biblical but I've never heard it before. None of the places look sparkling new, but I can't see any of them being called “the old house,” apart from the fact they're all old folks' homes. I try not to think about how long I'll be able to last before landing in a place like that. I hope a damn long while.

I've seen all kinds of labor abuses, up to and including folks being roughed up for trying to unionize, but I've never seen fear like I saw in those women's faces. It makes me think of the old old days, when they used to hire Pinkertons to break up strikes, or torch our meeting halls while a meeting was in session. A slow shiver like a trickle of cold water runs down my spine, and I'm ready to phone my boss and call this campaign off.

I'm about to say as much to Ian, but one look in his eyes and I know it won't do any good.

“I want to nail these bastards,” he says. “Forget organizing for a minute; I say we call the state inspector.”

He goes on like that for the rest of dinner. I know the fire that's just lit up under him. I was young once too, and ready to fight. These days I count anything that makes folks' lives a bit better a victory. You hardly ever see the bad ones marched out in handcuffs, and even if you do they rarely stay that way for long. That's just how it is.

We walk back to our rooms through a night as black and hot as road tar. I say good night to Ian, who looks like he won't get much sleep, still burning with righteous fury. He's about Tanner's age—the age Tanner was, I mean. He's totally unlike my oldest was, more like Matty with his temper, but being around him so much makes me think of things I try to keep well-buried.

Back in my room I crank the air until it's like an icebox and yank all the covers out from the edges of the bed—I can't sleep tucked in like a mummy. I turn the TV up loud enough I won't have to hear any

fucking or fighting from the rooms next door. I try not to think of my two boys. Tanner on the last day before he was redeployed, looking relieved, almost happy to be going back to that damn desert. Matty trying to look hard, trying to cover how scared he was in that visitation room. Two beautiful boys caught up in the two great machines they invented for young men with no money, and a mother who's got to keep going without them, though some days she'd rather just lie down and not get up.

I think sometimes we're being tested, like God tested Abraham, but we're ignoring the ram in the bushes and offering up our children instead.

"I called my friend in the research department last night," Ian says. "Pleasant Valley advertises three homes on their website, but they have four homes registered with the state. John Pleasant, that's really the owner's name—can you believe it?—inherited the business from his parents. Get this, the last location is his family's house."

Ian's motor mouth is in third gear, but for once I'm interested. I've seen a lot of shit in my life, but never something like this. When she contacted us, Ms. Gutierrez mentioned unpaid overtime, pay checks skimmed for mystery fees, long shifts with no breaks—nothing unheard of, sad to say. Now I'm wondering what else is going on in those homes.

"They've got deep roots in the community, probably connections in politics," he says.

That's bad news, but hardly a surprise. I can't count the number of southern towns I've seen where being a big employer pretty much makes you lord of the manor.

"I say we go over there," Ian says, "We could pretend we're looking for a relative."

I tell him it's sweet of him to not suggest I pose as his grandma. I

don't have to mention what he's suggesting is illegal and they'd love any excuse to send us packing.

We try two more of the names Ms. Gutierrez originally gave us, and get two more doors slammed in our faces, and I'm ready to pack it all in again.

"Let's go back to Ms. Gutierrez one last time," Ian says. "If she tells us to get lost, we leave and tip off the state."

The black sedan from yesterday is back in the mirror. This time I get a look at the license plate—"PLSNT"—and suddenly I'm fighting a wave of panic. They follow us for another three miles, and just as I'm about to tell Ian they take an exit behind us. It's not till then that I realize I've been holding my breath.

Ms. Gutierrez's house is just like we left it the other day. We knock on her door and there's no answer. The air outside the car is thick as gelatin, and we're suspended in it like marshmallows in ambrosia. Did I mention how much I love Florida?

"That's it," I say. "Let's head back."

"No," Ian frowns.

"You heard her yesterday. There's nothing we can do. This happens sometimes, and it's sad, but that's life, kid."

"I'm not a kid, Denise, and it's only life because you let it be. If we want things to change, we have to draw a line."

He's trying to sound calm, but I can hear the rage sputtering in him like a bad engine. Maybe I'm edgy from the car that's been following us, or maybe I'm mad about this all going bust, but Ian's really getting to me. As if we've been doing nothing till he showed up. All we needed was a college kid with a few Noam Chomsky books to show the rest of us idiots the way. I can't listen to one more goddamn word.

“You work for a union, but you never worked a union job. After this you’ll probably go to law school. You don’t know what it’s like to need it. Sometimes all you can do is hold on to what you have.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Ian says, but I can tell I’ve hit a nerve. He’s shaking with anger, just like Matty would sometimes, with no clue how to let it out. I suddenly feel bad. I shouldn’t have been so nasty. He’s about to storm off when the door opens behind him.

“Please,” says Ms. Gutierrez, “I said I can’t help you.”

She should be furious with us, but instead she’s afraid.

“We’re sorry to bother you,” I say. “We were just leaving.”

Ian is silent but I can still see the fury in him, and I’m afraid he’ll snap at her. Ms. Gutierrez just looks at him, though, and for a moment we’re all silent.

“Belinda Jones,” she says. “They moved her to the old house. I haven’t seen her since. Now please, leave me alone.”

Ian takes a deep breath. When we turn to leave his voice is calm.

“I’m sorry, Denise. I shouldn’t have said that. If you don’t mind, could I drive back?”

As he drives I remember the stack of mail piled up at Belinda Jones’ home. I try to look her up on my phone. Maybe there’s something we can find to give the inspector, or a journalist. Nothing is coming up, just a social media page with her name and photo. The last post is from a young niece, asking where her auntie is. I wonder who would miss me if I just disappeared, with Tanner gone and Matty locked away? I guess Ian would raise a stink.

“Do you think it’s haunted?” he says as we drive.

“What, the old house?”

I don’t even know how to answer a question like that, not that Ian waits for an answer.

“I was thinking—they’re always mansions, aren’t they?”

“What?”

“Haunted houses. They’re either mansions or castles, or maybe fancy hotels. Like only the rich get to haunt the living. Cheap houses get torn down and paved over, and the people just get forgotten. Either that, or there’s a whole lot of homeless ghosts.”

As we drive I try not to think of all the people who die badly without big houses. If there were homeless ghosts, they’d cover the earth like a gray ocean. I think I catch a glimpse of the black sedan again, a few cars behind us, but when I look back it’s gone.

Then Ian takes a sudden exit, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“I just want to look at it, just take a peek.”

“No way. I can think of a million reasons that’s a terrible idea. Take us back to the highway.”

Ian isn’t listening, and I don’t think I can change his mind, any more than I can overpower a 26-year-old man, even if he’s acting like a little boy. The neighborhood we’re in is the polar opposite of the one before—all hedges, long driveways, and wrought iron gates.

“I’m not losing my job for this—”

“Relax, it’ll be fine.”

I pray it’s locked up like Fort Knox, but when we get there the gate

hangs open and the driveway is empty. Ian eases the car through over my protests. When we pull up to it, I'm surprised to see nothing but a house—bigger than most, but no trace of gargoyles or ominous decay. Like so many of the homes out here it's built in a fake Spanish style, with arched windows above the doorway and columns on either side. It's even got the obligatory rows of palm trees out front. The walls are painted a sandy yellow color, and the whole place looks well-cared-for. Except it's totally deserted. There are no other cars in the long driveway, no seniors sunning themselves in the front yard. Ian stops the car and gets out, ignoring my protests.

“We'll just take a quick look.”

The front door is unlocked, and there's no sign of a reception desk. My first thought is it looks more like a museum than a retirement home. The floors are marble and the walls are covered by that thick, inlaid wallpaper I think is called damask. Dust motes play in a shaft of light from a high window, but every surface looks like it's just been polished clean.

As soon as I step over the threshold, the shock of icy air raises gooseflesh on my skin. It's as cold as the freezer aisle of the grocery store.

“I thought older folks were supposed to like it warm,” I say.

Portraits line the walls, a row of hard-eyed men in suits of progressively older style. They all have the same motto at the bottom, “Life Eternal in that Pleasant Valley.”

“Hello?” Ian calls out. There is no answer.

I follow him into the next room. The walls here are all lined with bookcases, except for a massive painting—Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, naked in that sexless way of old paintings, but instead of just an apple they're sharing fruit from two trees whose branches intertwine, mirroring their arms as they offer the forbidden fruit to each other. The tree of knowledge and the tree of eternal life—

I remember that from Catechism, but Sister Mary Therese never told us much about the other tree.

I'm trying to think of how to get Ian out of here as quickly as possible. Getting caught would mean no end of bad things for us, but that's not all. I hate this place. I hate that we haven't seen a single person, yet it feels like we're not alone, like whoever else is here is always just one room away. Ian pulls a book off the shelf and flips through it, then sets it down on an end table.

“Anything interesting?”

“It's about Ancient Egypt.”

“Ok, that's enough. Time to go,” I say. “We've had our look.”

Then, somewhere further in the house, we hear what sounds like a television. Ian sets off toward it before I can stop him.

Each of the rooms we pass through is richly furnished, immaculately clean, and unoccupied. Each time we open a door I get the feeling someone is on the other side, only to find another empty room with plush antique couches and paintings in gilded frames.

Deeper in the house I find Ian standing in a doorway looking at two hunched figures watching a Disney cartoon on a flatscreen TV. The pair sunken into the couch are the oldest people I have ever seen, so old I cannot guess their age or gender. They sit perfectly still, faint smiles on their lips while on the screen dancing cups and teapots sing as they serve the heroine her dinner.

“Hello, can I speak to someone who works here?” Ian says. “Do you know a Belinda Jones?”

At first, there is no response, and I wonder how many drugs they have these people on. Then, slowly, they turn their heads to face us. Their mouths are slack, their cheeks sunken, but their eyes are hard and alive.

“We’re sorry to have bothered you,” I say. “Just looking for someone who works here.”

At that their lips draw up into faint grins, but their eyes do not change. I pull Ian back, and this time he comes with me.

“This is wrong,” he says.

“We’ll tell the authorities,” I say, for all the good I think it’ll do.

As we walk back into the library with the painting of Adam and Eve I see the book Ian put on the end table has been placed carefully back on the shelf. I look around, but there’s no trace of who might have cleaned up after us.

I’ve been on the verge of panic since we came in the door, but then I hear something that threatens to tip me over the edge—another car pulling into the driveway. Without looking, I know it’s the black sedan.

“Shit,” I say. “Just—just let me do the talking ...”

I have no idea what I’m going to say, I just know it’ll be easier if Ian doesn’t shoot his mouth off. The door opens. Mr. Pleasant walks in, followed by a tall, pale man with a neck like a phone pole. I can’t say what I was expecting John Pleasant to look like, but it sure as hell isn’t the slender, twitchy man in front of me. He’s about as thin as an exclamation point. He’s wearing an old winter coat over a rumpled suit, and he’s still shivering in the house’s AC. To be honest, he looks more like the guys you see at the methadone clinic than the heir of a successful retirement home business.

“I’m sorry for the intrusion,” I say, “we can explain—”

“It’s not necessary,” he says. “Denise McDonnell and Ian Wells of Health and Home Workers Local 263, right? I hope you’ve seen the kind of honest family business we run here. I mean that literally, our staff are family too. Everyone has an important role to play, and we

take their needs very seriously.”

Pleasant sounds confident, and his smile is almost friendly, but I can tell he doesn’t like this place much more than I do. Maybe it brings back bad memories. The pictures of his ancestors line the walls around us, all staring down with the same hard eyes.

“We understand,” I say. “We were just on our way out.”

“Nonsense,” says Pleasant. “Stay, I’ll give you a tour. I want you to know I’m fully cooperating. Maybe then you’ll believe my employees when they say they’ve reconsidered a union.”

Pleasant keeps talking as he takes us back through the rooms we’ve seen, as if he’s afraid to let the silence of this place linger too long. His bodyguard walks silently behind him, though he never takes his eyes off Ian or me.

“I want you to know I’m pro-union,” Pleasant says. “My dad wasn’t, but he’s not in charge anymore. It’s just I think organized labor is a better fit with big employers, and my staff happen to agree ... We’re different. We’re a family.”

“What about the staff here?” says Ian. “It’s not listed on your website, and no one seemed to want to be transferred here.”

“Residence here is by invitation only. It’s mostly my literal family and their friends. They only need a small, handpicked staff, people we know will be with us long term.”

“How about Belinda Jones?” I say. “Does she work here?”

“She’s here. She’s very professional, like everyone at the old house. You barely notice they’re even here, and the place is spotless.”

I want to press him further, demand to speak to her, and I can tell Ian is thinking the same thing. Before we can ask, a grandfather clock chimes from somewhere deeper in the house.

“Dinner time!” Pleasant says. “You’ll stay, of course. The food here is good—it is at all Pleasant Valley properties, I eat our meals all the time.”

I get the feeling he doesn’t spend much time at this particular location.

The clock’s low chime echoes through the house as Pleasant leads us into a formal dining room dominated by a long, polished table. It’s already been set with bowls of steaming soup, with no trace of who did the setting. One by one, the residents file in. Some are merely old, while others are aged almost beyond recognition—stooped, shambling shapes, loose skin on shrunken frames—yet they all make their way to the table and sit down without assistance. Pleasant sits at the head, beckoning Ian and me to join him.

“Sorry, could I use the restroom?” Ian says.

For a moment I think Pleasant is going to refuse, then he nods and turns to his bodyguard.

“Could you show him where it is?”

I join Pleasant at the table. He takes a spoonful of soup, blowing on it to cool it, when in unison all of the residents’ eyes turn toward him. Their expressions do not change, but I can feel the weight of their gaze like a physical thing, though their eyes are just dark marbles in the folds of their skin.

“Oh right,” he says. “Of course, how could I forget?”

Pleasant bows his head and clasps his hands together. I’m reminded, absurdly, of a little boy at bedtime prayer.

“Lord, in your mercy you made us in your image. In your wisdom you tested our faith in the wilderness. In your justice you provide the faithful with those who serve, and by your grace you call your elect to life eternal in that pleasant valley. Amen.”

This seems to satisfy the residents, and slowly they begin to slurp their soup.

“I want you to know I’m not a bad guy,” Pleasant says. “I try to run a decent business and take care of my people. It’s hard, you understand? People live longer these days, and costs keep going up ...”

I can’t believe he cares what I think of him, even a little. I can see the guilt in his downcast eyes, his mouth that won’t stop moving. I almost feel sorry for him, but guilt is a funny thing; it makes some people fall all over themselves trying to make things right, while in others it curdles into something foul, and they’ll lash out at anything that threatens to upset the story they tell themselves—the story where they’re the real victim.

I feel a strange hand touch mine and I jump—the touch is as cold as a plunge into an icy river, and I feel my flesh go numb. The hand belongs to the resident sitting next to me, and when I look over his coal-hard eyes are peering into mine from their cavernous sockets.

“D-dad! What are you doing?” Pleasant all but jumps out of his seat. Then he looks around, and I follow his eyes and sees the bodyguard standing in the doorway.

“Where is he? You were supposed to be fucking watching him!”

The bodyguard just nods, and the two of them run off after Ian, leaving me with nothing but the residents and their staring eyes for company. My right arm is still numb. Slowly, I stand up, flexing my fingers until the feeling begins to return. Their eyes follow me, but they make no move to stop me as I head for the door. This has all gone to hell already, but maybe I can stop Ian from doing something that gets him hurt.

The door that leads back the way I came will not open, so I try another, a small door on the other side of the room. It opens easily. I walk down the long hallway on the other side, trying to think of what

I'll say when they catch me.

“Denise, come here!” I hear Ian’s voice from a doorway, and I hurry over.

“What the hell do you think you’re—”

He stops me with a finger to his lips and points. This room is empty save for a single rough wooden cabinet. It’s old, and out of place next to all the fake-Versailles stuff they have everywhere else. The cabinet door hangs open, and Ian points to a bunch of knotted leather cords hanging from hooks. At the end of each is a photograph. Most of them look like they’ve been clipped from laminated ID cards. I recognize one of the photos—Belinda Jones. The cords move slightly, as if stirred by a breeze I can’t feel.

Ian whirls around, and there’s a sudden burst of light and the pop of an old flash bulb. I turn and see Pleasant with a Polaroid camera. Ian rubs his eyes from the flash.

“It didn’t have to be like this,” Pleasant says. He points the camera at me, but Ian steps in to block him, though he’s still half-blind.

“Get out of here!” Ian doesn’t turn his head, but his words are meant for me.

He reaches for the camera as Pleasant tries to take another picture. Pleasant’s bodyguard rushes in, grabbing Ian by the collar.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shout.

“Don’t worry about me,” Ian shouts, “get help!”

I see Pleasant raising the camera again, trying to get a picture of me. I don’t understand any of this, but somehow I know I don’t want my photo swinging next to the others in that cabinet. I put a hand in front of my face and run for the door.

Ian, hold on. I'll be back for you, I swear.

My heart is hammering in my chest. It feels like the house is fighting me—doors stick in their frames, carpets bunch up to trip me, and behind I hear the heavy footfalls of Pleasant’s bodyguard. Finally, I find myself at the entrance. I run to the door and yank on it, but it’s locked up tight. I can feel tears on my cheeks, hot in the hellish cold of the house.

“No ...” I say. “Please ...”

Even now, there is a little part of my brain that notes how stupid I am, pleading with a house. The guard is almost here. Then there is a low groan like the house settling. A shudder runs through the door, and when I try it again, it opens.

* * *

At the police station, a bored officer takes my statement. When I yell and demand action, he gets his sergeant, who phones the Pleasant Valley main office.

“They say everything is fine, your friend left shortly after you did.” He says this like he’s trying to soothe a crazy person. “They’re declining to press charges for unlawful entry.”

When I demand they investigate the property, he asks me to leave before they decide to press charges anyway.

My boss lets me stay a few days longer to look for Ian. I call his cell phone over and over, sitting out by the pool in the dingy motel courtyard because I can’t stand the air conditioning anymore. I can still feel those icy fingers on the back of my hand. Now I let the heat wrap me up like a blanket, and I still can’t get warm.

After days of no answer on the phone, and no other word, I force myself to drive past that house once more. The gate is shut tight, and

I start shivering just looking at it. I stay and watch for as long as I can, until the shadows grow long and the light starts to soften, but no one goes in or out. Back at the motel, I try to sleep.

In my dream, I see those pictures on their leather cords, swaying softly without a breeze. I feel the house whispering all around me. John Pleasant's voice is in my ear, droning on as his form shrinks and sags before me, aging but never dying. "Who will care for us?" he says. "Who will serve ..."

I am running through the rooms, searching for Ian, for Belinda Jones, for a way out. The house fights me. The house fights itself. I hammer on the door, but it will not let me out. I cry out for help.

And in my dream, I am answered.

All of the homeless ghosts are there to hear me. All the murdered girls rise up from the ditches and the shallow graves, all the missing ones march out from the deep woods. All the dead boys laid low by

cops, by violence older than they ever were, go marching out together. The soldiers come home from the deserts and the jungles in grim, silent ranks, and I strain to see my Tanner among them.

An army of the forgotten marches on the house, all the poor that died too young, with no one to remember. Ahead run the children, flitting like little gray fireflies.

Others join them, shadows from distant days. The laborers lost to cholera, the fishermen drowned at sea; the slaves rise up a ragged army from the fields. Old unmarked graves give up their nameless dead. They march like a gray tide, a ghost sea engulfing the land. And when they get to the old house they stop and make a circle.

A song rises up from them then, a wordless wail that carries all the fury of years spent lost in cold and fog, all the rage of lives too short. They stand around the house and cry out until their hearts are empty, and they sing that house to splinters.

Woman/Wolf

by Marge Simon



Hand-Me-Down Days

by Andrew Dunn

She always is but isn't you know." In Blanton County people used that saying every now and again, never paying any mind to wonder where it came from. That saying was a hand-me-down from years gone by, just like the things mom packaged me in before she sent me off to school.

Faded jeans with patches stitched over holes in the knees. Corduroy trousers for picture day I told her didn't fit, they were too big, but mom insisted, "You'll grow into them in time." Mom was always saying things like that.

"She always is but isn't you know." Hand-me-down words patiently waiting for their resurrection from a tomb of the colloquial. They had a meaning, a real one, that would be restored when they were spoken just right. But by our nature, these days we are wont to take words like those and emphasize the parts we care about—the "is" and the "isn't"—because these days being is what defines our lives.

And so do the things we put on every morning, the things I dressed in each morning, things my older cousins had outgrown. Button-up shirts with long sleeves and collared short-sleeves with stripes and alligators where there weren't any on shirts other kids wore.

Mom soothed, "Other kids will never know," but she never could bring herself to say the rest, that they were my cousins' old clothes. She always tried to lift my spirits before I headed down gravel to catch the bus.

Other kids knew, from the moment I hauled myself on board and settled into the first empty vinyl bench-seat I could find, I could tell they did. It was in the way they pretended not to see me and then

eyed me in middle school hallways, or said things that lacked my name but still packed a potent sting. Other kids knew. I could feel it as I lived, wrapped up tight in hand-me-downs cousins had long outgrown.

I waited for the school bus by a row of mailboxes set in a wood frame where our gravel road met asphalt that led to town, and across from a snake of railroad tracks that mirrored August back dull. Asphalt took me to places where I was the outcast, the poor kid from back in the hollows with different hair, shoes dusted the color of gravel, swallowed up in hand-me-downs. I wished each day would be better, but deep down, knew it couldn't be so.

A drifter, sauntering slow by the tracks, came into view. I reckoned the tracks were the way he escaped the places asphalt wanted to take him; freight cars must have been his temporary saviors granting quick getaways and momentary reprieves from his own version of living as the outcast.

The old drifter tried to steady his gait once he saw me. "She always is but isn't you know. You heah me boy?" He lectured stern, hoarse, through the putrid stink of last night's liquor, his face and hands leathery and deeply lined from a life lived hard. I imagined each line deep and, at its bottom, a collection of memories he couldn't escape by hopping the next train.

"You heah me son?" the drifter hollered. He'd stopped walking and instead stood there, skin and bones, swaying uneasy. "Listen heah. *She* always is, but isn't *you know*."

I shook my head, confused.

He cackled at me, wagging his crooked finger, “You got to wake up at first light if’n you aim to find her. But you have to know *how* to look for her. You have to know *you want* to find her.”

“Find who?” I asked, standing there in hand-me-downs as the low school bus groan stole its way into our conversation from a ways down the road.

The old drifter wobbled as he turned his head to see how close the bus was, and then continued on along his way, never answering my question even though I called out to him over and over. Maybe it was wrong of me, the pupil, to question him, the teacher, even if that teacher would soon be crouched low in a freight car lumbering its way far from coal mines and clapboard.

I woke while the sky was still dark on a Thursday morning, dressed in faded jeans and flannel to ward off October’s chill, and stepped out into the backyard.

“She always is, but isn’t you know.” I didn’t get it right at first. I had to move emphasis and rest among the syllables, and change the ways my lips and tongue modulated each component that in sum formed the body of the mantra.

“*She* always is, but isn’t *you know*.” It wasn’t about “is” or “isn’t,” or being. It was about her and I, and knowing. What I knew that morning as the first hint of light colored the sky was that I needed her, and I understood what it felt like to need, living as me and mom did at the end of a gravel road.

She curled like a wisp of smoke when she grew up out of earth as dawn pulled up the dew into a low mist that smelled clean and made me wonder what heaven was like. As she rose in the air she clothed

herself in the green of grass, gold and auburn that drifted down from autumn trees; the last wildflowers that bloomed before first frost ringed bracelets on her wrists and a crown for her head.

And the old drifter’s lecture made sense, if only for a moment: *She* is always there, but you have to know *you want* her to be. If you don’t? Then you’ll never see her right there before your very own eyes.

Angel? Fairy? Spirit? None of those things crossed my mind right then, because nothing much mattered except for her resplendent awakening, framed as it was in prisms of dawn that shone strident through the trees.

“*She* always is,” I whispered, my breath grey in the morning clear, as her form grew larger and reached higher, into a new day’s sky and beyond.

Inside white clapboard the sounds of mom beginning her day filtered into the air: she would do her level-best to get me off to school before she went over to the mine, hoping for overtime if they’d give it to her and the claxon that would declare resurrection from the din of machinery when her day’s work there was through. That was mom, doing what she always did, every day of her life I could remember.

I watched the last wisp of her drift up into pale sky and then headed toward the back door. “*She* always is.” There would be a hand-me-down pair of pants and shirt waiting for me—another hand-me-down day was beginning—but for once I wasn’t swallowed up, a captive of its mores.

No. I was bigger than that, reaching higher, you know?

Target with Four Faces

by Garrett Rowlan

1

Night: Perez walked through lazy, luminous drizzle, rendered by streetlights into slow falling points. To either side of him, through the shut windows of houses and apartments, flickering TVs pulsed like buried hearts.

He passed the wet hoods of parked cars. One was occupied. It was a black car with a woman sitting in the front seat. Her eyes cut to him. Her glance was vengeful, he thought, looking away. Behind her, rain swept down a gutter.

He felt her eyes follow him. She hates but she doesn't know me. But then he felt she did know him, somehow. In onehundred yards, the street dead-ended. He looked back. The black car had gone. He had not heard the engine.

Climbing a chain-link fence, Perez made only the slightest rattle. On the other side, he took the bag and ascended a narrow, wet, slippery hillside. Eventually, he reached a point where city lights spread below in a concentric pattern, crosshatched at intersections. Here, however, it was quiet and dark. Fifty feet up, he vaulted a second fence, and beyond he saw the house.

He had some misgivings. He had liked the Washingtons. This was just business, he told himself. Just like they had let him go four weeks ago; that was business too.

They had praised his efficiency and discretion, frowned on those qualities when applied to the way money disappeared in his presence. "I'm not a thief," Perez said, when they gave him his notice.

"Then what are you?" Jonah Washington had asked. Jonah's glance scrutinized. Getting no answer, he looked away. "It was always a temporary position," he said. He stroked and smoothed the red silk robe he wore. "Other than that, Carol is sufficient for our needs."

"I bet she is." Perez knew the favors she had granted her employer. He knew because she had granted them to him, too. The phone rang, and Perez had used the opportunity of Jonah's diverted attention to reach down and pocket two quarters on the desktop. He left the room, packed, and left.

Now, two weeks later, he returned, carrying a black bag. He passed the swimming pool, its surface twitching in the drizzle. Reaching the back door, away from the security light, he used a screwdriver to pop the wire screen with its two connecting hasps. The loosened screen sagged outward. He pushed it upward, buckling the frame enough to stick his hand under the sash and loosen the bottom jalousie slat from its flange. The opened aperture was wide enough to stick his arm in, up to the elbow, and flip the bolt lock. He opened the door. He had almost warned the Washingtons regarding the penetrability of this side of the house, but he had decided against it.

Waving his flashlight, he passed through the back porch and into the kitchen. Lightning flashed close, illuminating the sink and stove and the breakfast nook with its bay windows. The wine cellar was to his right. A sound came from there. A rat, perhaps, but whether with four legs or two, he didn't know. "Hello?" His whisper chased his penlight down worn steps. He reminded himself that the rheumatic house often creaked, and that Carol was out with the Washingtons, driving them to dinner at the agreed-upon hour. Or so she had said.

He turned down the hallway. To his left was the large, framed reproduction that occupied one wall, a target of alternate blue and yellow rings with four faces, or partial faces—only the chin, mouth, and nose visible—above. The wide, severe mouths and the occluded eyes reminded him of certain judges he had stood before.

“Jasper Johns,” Mildred Washington had told him, identifying the artist. “The original is worth millions.”

Perez didn’t see how. It gave him the creeps, perhaps because it reminded him of the feeling of being a target himself, right now.

Turning, he went down the short hall that led into the front room where the walls were high, the carpet was thick, and the Diebold safe waited. A couple of wall sconces were still on, creating arcs of illumination, one across a painting of Mrs. Washington, the house’s owner. A handsome woman in her fifties, wheelchair-bound, she was depicted wearing a gray serge dress and a checkered coat and holding a rifle at present arms. Her stern expression resembled her look when he’d driven her to the shooting range two months ago.

“How many shots do you see?” she asked, when he retrieved the target and gave it to her. She waited in her wheelchair.

“Four,” Perez said.

She shook her head, hard notches forming at the edges of her thin mouth. “It’s only one shot, the one that hit the center.” She tapped the bullet hole. “That’s the only one that counts. The others are only imperfections.”

“Only the bull’s eye counts,” he’d said. “Only the bull’s eye is real, is that what you mean?”

“Blank,” she said.

“What?”

“The center of the target is called a blank ... in archery, that is.” She leaned forward. “I like the idea. One shot with four phases, and the one that hits the blank is perfection, an artistry refined to its essence, which is zero, the center.” Her finger rested on the punctured paper with a delicate ease like a lover’s skin.

Waving the flashlight, the gun in his pocket, his gaze returned to the painting in which her eyes looked slightly to the left, as if in warning.

A light came on. Perez turned. Thickset, silver-haired Jonah Washington, his gun pointed, entered the room.

“Here you are, Mr. Perez,” he said, stepping forward. “Just in time to find me a widower.”

He fired. Perez managed a few steps down the hall—some vague notion of escape—before he collapsed close to the Jasper Johns. Lying on his back, Perez turned away from Jonah’s expression, which was sympathetic, and looked at the picture. Jonah followed his gaze.

“Which of the four faces is you?” Jonah asked. He got no answer. He didn’t expect one.

2.

Carol entered the hallway. “It’s done,” Jonah said.

“We got a problem,” Carol said.

“What?”

“He can’t shoot her dead when she’s already dead.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard the footsteps and I heard Perez fall and when I looked over

at her, she was slumped over. Heart attack? Or maybe we put the gag too tight.”

“Jesus Christ,” he said, “you dumb fucking hillbilly.”

Carol looked at him, choked down her loathing, reminded herself that it was all for the money and the property in that calculated future when she was Jonah’s widow, when she would have *possession*, when she would know, finally, that her life was not simply a passive series of phases; that her existence had not been a palimpsest of poses, layered incarnations that *had happened* to her, all beginning in that trailer park with her mother.

She glanced at the Johns painting. She had never liked it: creepy, and more so now. It was telling her, somehow, in its circles and half-hidden faces, that she would always belong to the outermost ring, the edges of things. And Jonah’s expression, the frown on his lips, seemed to push her out of his life, his promise to marry her already forgotten. She would never get the chance to be his widow.

“We’ll shoot her,” Jonah said. He made a vague gesture, as if that would clear him after the autopsy. “And when the police arrive, what are you going to tell them?”

He looked at her as if he were looking at an idiot.

“The burglar shot Mrs. Washington,” she said.

3.

Mollified, Jonah pointed at the basement, where Mrs. Washington waited with her wrists bound.

“Go fetch her,” Jonah said, holstering the gun. As she left, Jonah reached down and touched Perez’s face. He looked, really *looked*, at Perez, as if only in the stillness of death did that face disclose a

secret, something that revealed more than Perez’s ironic expression of servitude. His lips were on the verge of opening and speaking something important, something that would explain the perpetual, wry set of his servant’s visage; but Perez said nothing.

What did Mildred say? One of her frequent grim observations. The truth was at the center, the blank. The truth was nothing.

He looked down. He felt as if he knew Perez from somewhere and their relationship was considerably different from that of master and servant. The same people but their relation expanded, somehow, into other strata of lives only half-glimpsed ...

Like the night Perez had died, Jonah recalled. It was another Perez, another death. Opening the door, Jonah had kissed him.

“Be careful,” Jonah said. He remembered how he had felt, embracing Perez inside that house, his home in another life, a place vague yet vivid, a ghost house. “She’s crazy.”

“It’s why I married her.” Perez had touched the gun in his pocket. “She keeps me on my toes.”

Jonah remembered closing the door and hearing the sound of Perez’s footsteps on wet pavement, just before the shot. Jonah ran outside. Perez lay on his side, still holding the pistol he had fired. In the street, Mildred, or someone like her, reclined coffin-ready, on her back, arms at her side, the gun in her right hand.

But that was crazy ... she hadn’t been paralyzed in a shootout. What had Mildred said about the bullet that had shattered her spine? “It was a hunting accident,” she had maintained, though she had never been an outdoors type, except for having Carol wheel her around the neighborhood.

For comfort, he thought of the house, only now the estate’s circular boundaries made him feel as if the grounds and the house at their

center were part of a series of concentric spheres. Their space oppressed him; the farther they went out, the deeper he felt in the bulls' eye, the blank.

Thoughts of Carol did not help. "We get married, right," she said. Murder as barter, almost as if it were something she knew from before. She had hard eyes, like someone haggling. "Married as soon as we can. Otherwise ..."

"Otherwise?" he'd said.

"I might get my story mixed up."

He'd deal with her later, deal with her and get free of her threats, not to mention her grammatical dissonance, her cigarettes, her Missouri accent stripped of its music by the California sun. And there was her possible treachery. She could be untying Mildred now. There had always been a suspicious undercurrent to their relationship, a wobble in the line that separated mistress and servant. They could have cooked up a deal. Mildred always thought one step ahead. She was clever; he gave her credit there. He almost wished she could be here when the cops came. She would be useful in the matter of her own murder.

They had shared a life together, one whose reality she questioned. "Where do our thoughts come from, Jonah?" She had wheeled toward the breakfast table, the way they had done for years: conversations over coffee, though in fact he had no concrete memory of those times, only partial memories imbricated like facing mirrors.

"I don't know," he said.

"I feel ... as if our thoughts are *thought for us*, as if I don't want what I really want, but am expected to want."

"And who does the expecting?"

"As you know," her expression grew coy, "I've done a bit of writing.

When you put down multiple drafts of a story you create characters that you change, you change their past to suit the plot. And maybe you suit yourself. You *become* them. That's how I feel. I feel we are being written, Jonah. We're characters."

"You're losing me there."

"Don't you ever feel that we were different people at different times and places?"

Just then he heard a sound from below. It sounded like something breaking.

"Carol?" he asked.

From down the curving hall he heard the sound of the wheelchair turning. He heard the squeak of one obstinate gear. The long shadow of a seated person flowed into the hallway and stopped at his feet. At first, the shadow had no source, but when he blinked he saw Mildred there, holding the gun on him.

4.

As Carol walked up the basement steps, Mildred Washington moved her arms and shoulders but not her lifeless legs. There was a knife she remembered in a drawer. She managed to open it and take the knife and with a right finger strong from pulling a trigger managed to hold the knife firm enough to saw her left hand free and with that hand take the dull knife and rub enough to slice the right hand free just as the overhead footsteps came her way. She put the knife aside. It would make things messy, and so she pulled a bottle from the wine rack. A glance at its label showed a supermarket-purchased brand, sufficient in terms of heft and expendable in terms of price.

Carol returned, opening the door above and walking slowly down the dark stairs. "Go fetch," she muttered to herself, "like I was some kind of dog."

When the girl reached the bottom of the stairs, Mildred reached up and swung, stunned the girl. A second blow cracked bottle and head. Carol slumped.

The girl was not educated, Mildred reflected, bringing the bottle a third and final time on her head, but she wasn't stupid, either. She was like all of us, caught in concentric circles, surrounding a blank.

As the blood pooled, she took the service elevator upstairs, and as she rolled down the hall, she noticed that each turn of the wheel was facilitated by a swath of resistant space that fell into black, as if it were being highlighted before deletion. Her hand steadied the gun, aimed at his gut for maximum impact. It produced in Jonah a confessional mood.

"I apologize," he said. With Perez crumpled at his feet, she didn't know who he was apologizing to. "I haven't been the best husband in some ways. I caused problems in my marriage."

She made a mitigating gesture with the gun, a shrug in steel. "Well, what marriage doesn't have its ups and downs?"

"Carol's just a servant. It really doesn't mean anything."

"She was your lover."

"I'd call that a euphemism," he said. "An element of romance to describe something that was rather sordid. It meant nothing."

"Oh, honestly!" she said, pulling the trigger.

She rolled forward, stopping beside the two fallen bodies. She looked up at the painting. She saw the frowning mouths not as visages of evil. Rather, the incomplete faces suggested things poorly done, like drafts of stories that never mesh, drafts written to escape the inward suck of emptiness, of blankness. It was happening now. Already she felt that the house had disappeared except for its essentials, the hallway and the hanging picture. She looked at its four faces and then turned the wheelchair around so that the shot, if her logistics were right, would exit the back of her head and enter the wall in the center of the target. She opened her mouth and looked up into sky-less black. As she pulled the trigger, the blackness rushed toward her, the world imploding, all space vanishing as it narrowed to a single point, a last burst of light, and a blank.

The Emerging Man

by Carl Scharwath



The Promise

by Jessa Forest

When I woke it was not from sleep but a dreamless poison. The fog was thick when we stopped, and it must have crept in and thickened when we were too weak to stand or notice, too weak to get away; smothering us like an insidious, sentient tide, all cold hunger and keen thirst.

Barrow, lying next to me, did not rise and never would again. Her younger brother, Potter, whimpered softly in the cold crook of her arm.

“Pyre,” Coffin’s choked, coughing voice floated above me like sunshine above a storm. “Can you walk, Pyre?”

There was a frightful urgency in his voice, and I stretched my spine and flexed my knees experimentally. Pain bloomed from the joints outward, like the fog had decided it liked me better than the tunnels and had come inside when I breathed.

That is how fog works, after all. If it didn’t get your lungs first, it got your legs. It gets your arms too, but you don’t use your arms as much when you’re traveling the tunnels.

The ones who came before us, the very first, had to dig as they went. The fog rolled their bones back to us, splintered and dissolving like pages of the old books Gallows insisted on bringing with us.

Gallows died two nights ago. Her books died with her.

Gallows knew a lot about dead things. And she was the only person I knew who came back from the tunnels alive; she was special. She was the one who told us what the fog did, but despite all her

knowledge she couldn’t tell us why.

When Gallows picked up the bones of the very next and breathed in the fog, she coughed her lungs up in big red clots and painted nearly an arm’s length of the tunnel wall from floor to ceiling with her blood. When the fog rolled her back to us, she said she wanted to try again.

She said she was proud.

But proud of what? Proud to die only a few feet from the door? Not much of an adventure. Not much help to the very next to come after.

In the tunnels there is no true night.

We know night from the memories of the very first and those who came before them. They didn’t know night wouldn’t work in the tunnels. They didn’t think they’d need the tunnels long enough to worry about night not working.

I rolled onto my side and pushed myself up onto my screaming knees. My wrists hurt too, but I could stretch and pull them while I walked. They would feel better soon. The knees, though ... those were a problem. I lifted one foot and crouched in a sort of lunge. I tried to put weight on my front foot and push myself up.

I screamed and fell on my side. The darkness of something far more sinister than sleep reared up to swallow me. Then Coffin’s hands were on my shoulders, shaking me hard.

“You can’t lie down, Pyre. You gotta try again!”

Potter sunk down with me, sobbing quietly.

“No, Coffin,” I grit my teeth through the pain. “It’s no use. I’m done. You take Potter and go. You get to the outside.”

“Not without you.”

“All three of us’ll die,” .” I shook my head, “you You can’t carry Potter and me. You two go.”

I felt Potter’s spidery arms around my waist, felt his warm breath under my chin, his tears wetting my neck.

“Hey!” I said. “Don’t you cry! Moisture and the fog’ll blind you.”

I wiped at his face. His eyes felt swollen from crying all night, which told me it was too late.

“Then it’s settled, we all die here, together,” Coffin said.

I felt him sit down behind me, stretch his legs out on either side of mine and cradle me the same way Barrow used to hold Potter. He was the tallest of us, and as he folded his body around mine,; I felt like I was being eaten, but not in a bad way.

If I had a choice, I would lie in Coffin’s arms forever. But I didn’t. And I couldn’t let them stay.

I tried pushing Coffin away, but the effect of the fog locked my elbow and spine in its soft, misty teeth and tore another scream from my throat.

“Hey, hey,” Coffin whispered softly, his lips brushing my temple. “Stop thrashing.”

“You gotta get up,” I said, fighting my own tears. “You gotta be the chance the rest of us don’t have.”

“I’m not leaving you, Pyre,” he said.

“How many of us were there? 10? 15? How many’s left? We can’t be like the very first, we promised.”

“Who’d we promise, Pyre?”

“Everybody!”

“Yeah,” Coffin sighed. “And they don’t care anymore.”

Potter slid out of my arms and lay his tiny body down next to our legs. He tucked his face into Coffin’s thigh to blot out this last little piece of the world. The shakes started soft, but soon his entire body was vibrating as the fog ate at him from the inside. I bent forward, trying to keep his head from hitting the tunnel floor, but Coffin wrapped his arms around me again and pulled us away from him.

“What?” I cried. “Gotta help!”

“Not gonna do any good,” Coffin said.

“It’ll do me good,” I hissed, but I couldn’t pull away.

“I should leave you,” Coffin said. “But you’re so stupid you’d screw up your own death.”

“I would not,” I said, tears choking my throat. I could see more clearly. That meant the fog was pulling away, rolling back into the deeper parts of the tunnels. But it was already too late; the reprieve wouldn’t save Potter. His wrecked little body curled in on itself like a dead flower.

Gallows kept dead flowers pressed inside the pages of her books.

Potter was as dead as she was now.

“You feel like trying to walk again?” Coffin asked when the silence got too heavy.

Sometimes the silence was worse than the fog.

“I can try,” I whispered. But I didn’t move.

I didn’t want to look at Potter’s body anymore. Or Barrow’s. Or Mori’s. The little husk of Potter’s body twisted back towards the long trail of bodies we’d left behind. Eventually the fog would get thick again, it would roll them all back to where we’d started.

It would be like they’d never left.

“How long do you think the very next will wait?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Coffin chuckle-coughed. His chest felt hollow, like his heart was a giant bead in a rattle. But he wasn’t shaking yet, he just sounded like he was. “Maybe another day-week thing. What did they call it?”

“A month?” I asked. “I don’t remember. I never relished reading much.”

“Yeah,” Coffin’s chest rattled. “Because you’re stupid.”

“Says one who can’t remember words,” .” I laughed too. My ribs cracked.

“Quiet down,” he said.

I wanted to hit him. I tried to hit him. A heavy ripping sound came

from right inside my shoulder, and then my arm hung limp at my side.

Coffin hugged me tighter, and I braced for the pain, but it didn’t come. All I could feel were his arms around me.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” I said, amazed.

“It won’t,” Coffin said, pressing his lips to my neck, “I promise.”

“Don’t,” I warned him, “don’t make promises you know you’re gonna break.”

Coffin coughed. I smelled his blood and felt the thick, warm frothiness of it drip down my cheek. Moisture mixing with the fog will blind you. But I didn’t mind it if blindness came from him.

“Yeah,” he sniffed.

I felt him pull away slightly, but one arm was still tight around my waist. I felt his hand crawl up my broken shoulder, felt his brittle fingers tighten at my neck.

“But you won’t know I did.”

And he was right.

Great Beast

by John Grey

The great beast
smacks evolution
against the ropes
with talons of steel,
demolishes the landscape,
rapes mountain and underground,
crushes civilization
then marches on its broken bones,
mashes forests, fields,
cities, lakes, oceans,
into the bleak abyss
of its insatiable maw,
then, rampaging
from east to west,
north to south,
stamps down on the remnants,
with massive feet,
giant indifference,
until it's the last
living thing on Earth,
the last thing
to set in motion
its own starvation.

by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

The beer of the future isn't what it is today... It's all artificial.

With the next generation flavors, however, the taste isn't that much different.

No malt or hops are grown on Mars, so imported "real" beer from Earth is quite expensive and normally only available at classier places.



MONDO MECO PAGE 77 20040916 © JESPER NORDQVIST



NOTES

Sorry for the lo-quality screens... It is so.





NOTES

Ooh.. I like this page a lot... too bad it's not very necessary for the plot...

Tones, tones, beautiful night toones...





MONDO MECO PAGE 79 20041006 © JESPER NORDQVIST

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

Jemma has retrieved both her old facial form and hairdo... good going, girl ^^

Hope you're not falling asleep... I have actually planned for the future now.





NOTES

Those overalls are made with the "no seams" form pressing technique, to be able to make airtight if need be.

They may, however, be pressed in a somewhat larger form than our heroines...

I like this page, it's got good looks. Jill's body in the first frame might just be the best looking female body I've ever drawn...

...So I covered it in an overall :-





MONDO MECHO PAGE 81 20041021 © JESPER NORDQVIST

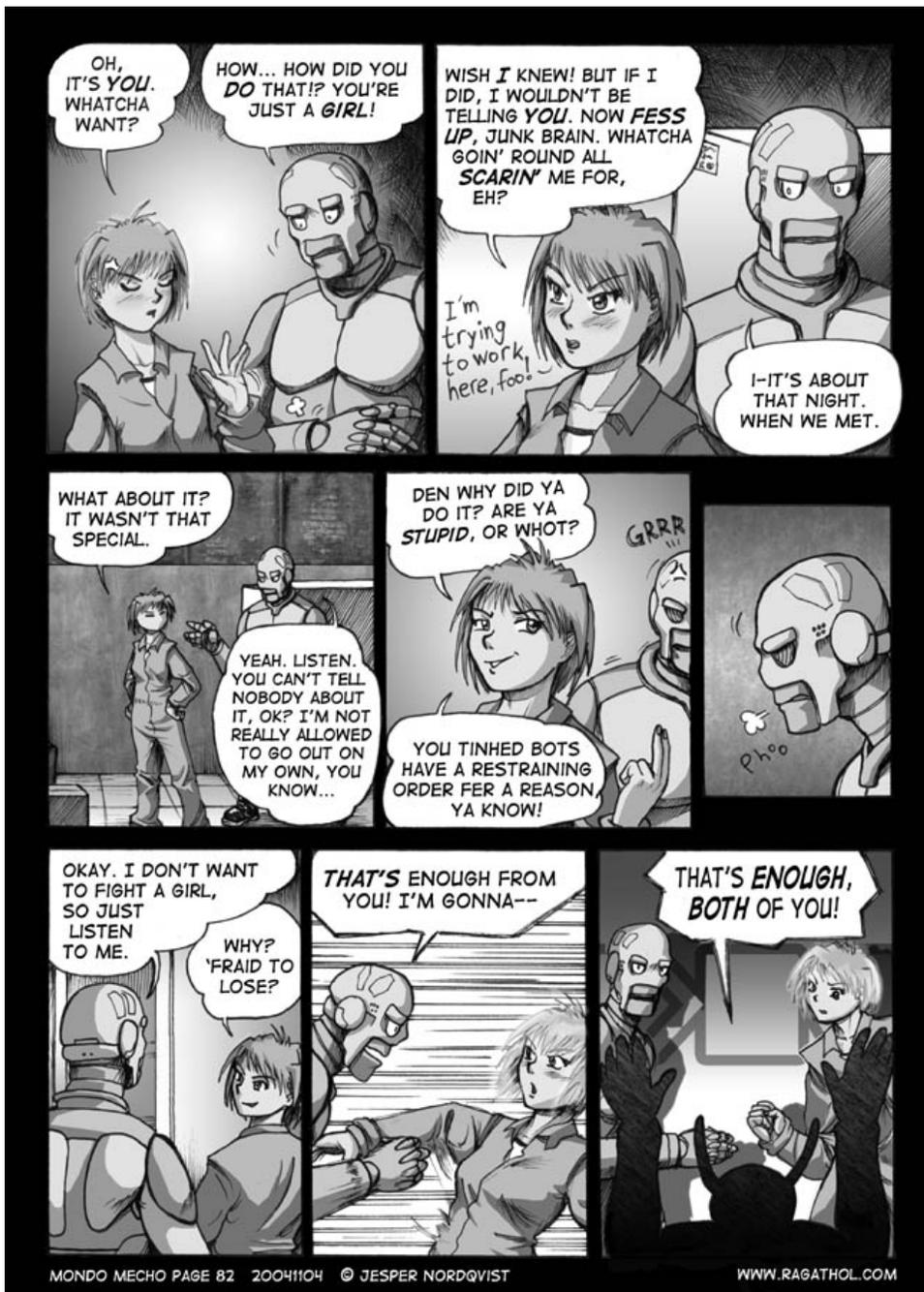
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

Snap! Crackle! Pop! Some Action! How about it?

Jemma's hair sure makes a lot of sounds..





NOTES

Not a lot of backgrounds in here.. but you get the idea.





NOTES

I wouldn't wrestle a tank, either...

I very much like the lighting in the last few pages... It's a lot of work, but it's worth it

^_^



Contributor's Bios

ANNE CARLY ABAD received the Poet of the Year Award in the 2017 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards. She has also received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award. Her work has appeared in *Apex*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Strange Horizons*, to name a few. Her first poetry collection, *We've Been Here Before*, is forthcoming this February 2022 with Aqueduct Press. You can preorder the book by emailing the publisher at info@aqueductpress.com.

* * *



JAY CASELBERG is an author and poet whose work has appeared around the world and been translated into several languages. From time to time, it gets shortlisted for awards. He can be found at www.caselberg.net.

* * *



ANDREW DUNN is a science fiction and fantasy writer living near Baltimore, and frequenting Annapolis. When he's not writing he runs, reads, cooks, watches old movies, and plays music. His work has previously appeared in *365 Tomorrows*, *AntipodeanSF*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Metastellar* (as reprints). He won honorable mention in Writer's Digest 2021 story competition, and his work ranked 5 most read of more than 120 reprints in *Metastellar*. Andrew hopes you enjoy this story!

* * *

JESSA FOREST writes poetry and weird fiction. She is the author of *The Slaughter Chronicles*, a grimdark, Lovecraftian-esque contemporary fantasy about werewolves, and *Speculative E-Shorts*, an ongoing collection of standalone, bite sized short stories for when you



need to escape reality for an hour. Her short fiction and poetry has also appeared in traditional print and online magazines. In 2011, she was nominated for the Pushcart Poetry Prize. Her writing questions the definable borders of reality and indulges the gritty, visceral aspects of dark fantasy and science fiction. She was born in Arkansas, USA.

* * *



JOHN GREY is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest book, *Leaves On Pages*, is available through Amazon.

* * *



credit: Maxim Kantor

PETER J. KING was born and brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. He was active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s, returning to poetry in 2013. His work (including translations from modern Greek and German poetry) has since been widely published in magazines and anthologies. His currently available collections are *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press) and *All What Larkin* (Albion Beatnik Press).

<https://wisdomsbottompress.wordpress.com/>

* * *



KAREN MANDELL has taught writing at the high school and college levels and literature at community senior centers. She lives in Lynnfield MA, which is fortunately not too far from the ocean.

She's written *Clicking*, interconnected short stories, and *Rose Has a New Walker*, a book of poetry.

* * *



AVRA MARGARITI is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

* * *



DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Fifth Di...* Sept 2021, interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares* #118 Sept. 2021, & poetry in *Shelter Of Daylight Autumn* 2021. In 2020 his website celebrated 20 years on the web. Also, in 2020 his artwork is for sale for the first time. The link is on his website. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gunroad.com/ragathol.

* * *



Originally from Silicon Valley, **DON RAYMOND** now lives in the sagebrush steppe of Alturas, CA, where he works as an accountant for the county, because his guidance counselors never warned him about that sort of thing. He spends his free time studying Egyptology and mediating the Machiavellian feline politics of his

household. You can read more of his work in *Cthulhusattva*, *Ghastly Gastronomy*, and *Bourbon Penn*. He once didn't make a left turn at Albuquerque.

For more information on Captain Jack and the Modoc War, he recommends a visit to the Tule Lake National Monument: <https://www.nps.gov/tule/index.htm>.

* * *



GARRETT ROWLAN is a retired teacher with 70 or so stories, a novella, and a novel to his publishing credits. He lives in Los Angeles. His website is garrettrowlan.com.

* * *



NNADI SAMUEL (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published/forthcoming in *Suburban Review*, *Seventh Wave Magazine*, *NativeSkin lit Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *FIYAH*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *The Capilano Review*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Gutter Magazine*, *Carte Blanche*, *Gordon Square Review*, *Trampset*, *Beestung Magazine*, *The Elephant Magazine* & elsewhere. Winner of the Miracle Monocle Award for Ambitious Student Writers 2021(University of Louisville), Penrose Poetry Prize 2021, Lakefly Poetry Contest 2021 (Wisconsin), the International Human Right Arts Festival Award 2021, and Canadian Open Drawer contest 2020. He got an honorable mention for the 2021 Betty L. Yu and Jin C.Yu Creative Writing Prize (College Category). He is the author of "Reopening of Wounds" & "Subject Lessons" (forthcoming). He reads for *U-Right Magazine*. He tweets @Samuelsamba10.

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art

photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

* * *



NICK SCORZA is a fiction writer and unrepentant daydreamer. He grew up in Washington, DC and currently lives in New York City. His short fiction has appeared in places like *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Podcastle*, and his first novel, *People of the Lake*, a young adult horror, is available from Sky Horse Press. Find him online at www.nickscorza.com.

* * *



CAT SCULLY loves writing horror and dark fantasy for all ages. Most recently, her work appears in the vampire anthology *An Unholy Thirst*, and she is the author-illustrator of young adult horror series *Jennifer Strange*. She's best known for her illustrations and world maps, including her picture book *The Mayor of Halloween Is Missing*, written by Emily S. Sullivan. When she's not writing and illustrating books, Cat works in video game development for the Deep End Games on their next title *Romancelvania*.

* * *



FARIEL SHAFEE has degrees in science (from MIT and Princeton) but loves painting and making digital art as well as writing in her free time. These activities help her cope with stress and keep in touch with her creative side. She has exhibited her art internationally, and her portfolio can be seen on

<http://fshafee.wixsite.com/farielsart>

* * *



MAX SHERIDAN is the author of *Dillo* and a few other stories. *God's Speedboat*, his second novel, is due out in spring 2023 from Outcast Press. He lives and writes in Nicosia, Cyprus.

* * *



MARGE SIMON is an award-winning poet/writer, living in Ocala, Florida. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *New Myths*, *Silver Blade*, *Polu Texni*, *Crannog*, *JoCCA* and numerous pro anthologies. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She recently received the HWA Lifetime Service Award, HWA. Amazon Author page: <https://www.amazon.com/-/eB006G29PL6/marge-simon>

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the two-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Dreamscapes* and *A Collection of Nightmares*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and have garnered many accolades, including the Jane Reichhold International Prize, nominations for the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Pushcart Prize, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's essay "Final Girl: A Life in Horror" was a finalist in the 2020 Bram Stoker Awards for Superior Achievement in Short Non-Fiction, and her first novelette "Fury" was anthologized in the multiple award-winning *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women*. Christina lives in Singapore with her children and a menagerie of curious pets. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media @christinasng.

* * *



Lover of wine, women and song, **TOEKEN's** had work published in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Tha Antihumanist Magazine*, *Blood Knife Magazine*, *Novel Noctule*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Unfading Daydream*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*, *Penumbic Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mysterion*, *Lovecraftiana Magazine*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *SQ Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *The Future Fire*, *The Drabblecast*, *Helios Quarterly*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *RobotDinosaurs*, *Ares Magazine*, *Double Feature Magazine*, *NewMyths*, *Non Binary Review*, *Persistent Visions*, *ParAbnormal Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Devolution Z Magazine*, *Cracked Eye*, *Nothing's Sacred*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Gallows Hill*, *Econoclash*, and *The Weird and Whatnot* and painted book covers for authors and editors such as Bryan Smith ('Kayla'), Tim Meyer ('The Thin Veil', 'The Switch House', '69'), Chad Lutzke (Night as a Catalyst), D.W. Cook (Intermediates: A Cuckoo for Mankind'), Millhaven Press ('Fierce Tales, Lost Worlds'), Cemetery Gates Media ('Halldark Holidays', 'Murderers' Bazaar'), Gavin Chappell ('Kek vs

Cthulhu'), Douglas Draa ('Funny As A Heart Attack'), and Trevor Denyer ('Railroad Tales'), among others. You can find his stuff here: <https://atoekeneffort.weebly.com>.

* * *



REKHA VALLIAPPAN's speculative fiction stories are found in many popular journals and anthologies. They cover the range of sub-genres, from science fiction to horror, fabulist to surreal, weird fiction to fantasy, gothic to magical realism. They can be read in contemporary magazines such as *Lackington's*, *Teleport*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Schlock! Best Short Stories*, *Aphelion*, *Third Flatiron*, *Theme of Absence*, *Coffin Bell*, *Across The Margin*, *Thrice Fiction*, *NonBinary Review's HG Wells Anthology*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, *Cerasus Magazine*, *The Hallowzine*, and other places. She can be found on Twitter @silicasun.



Tanda by toeken *(full image)*