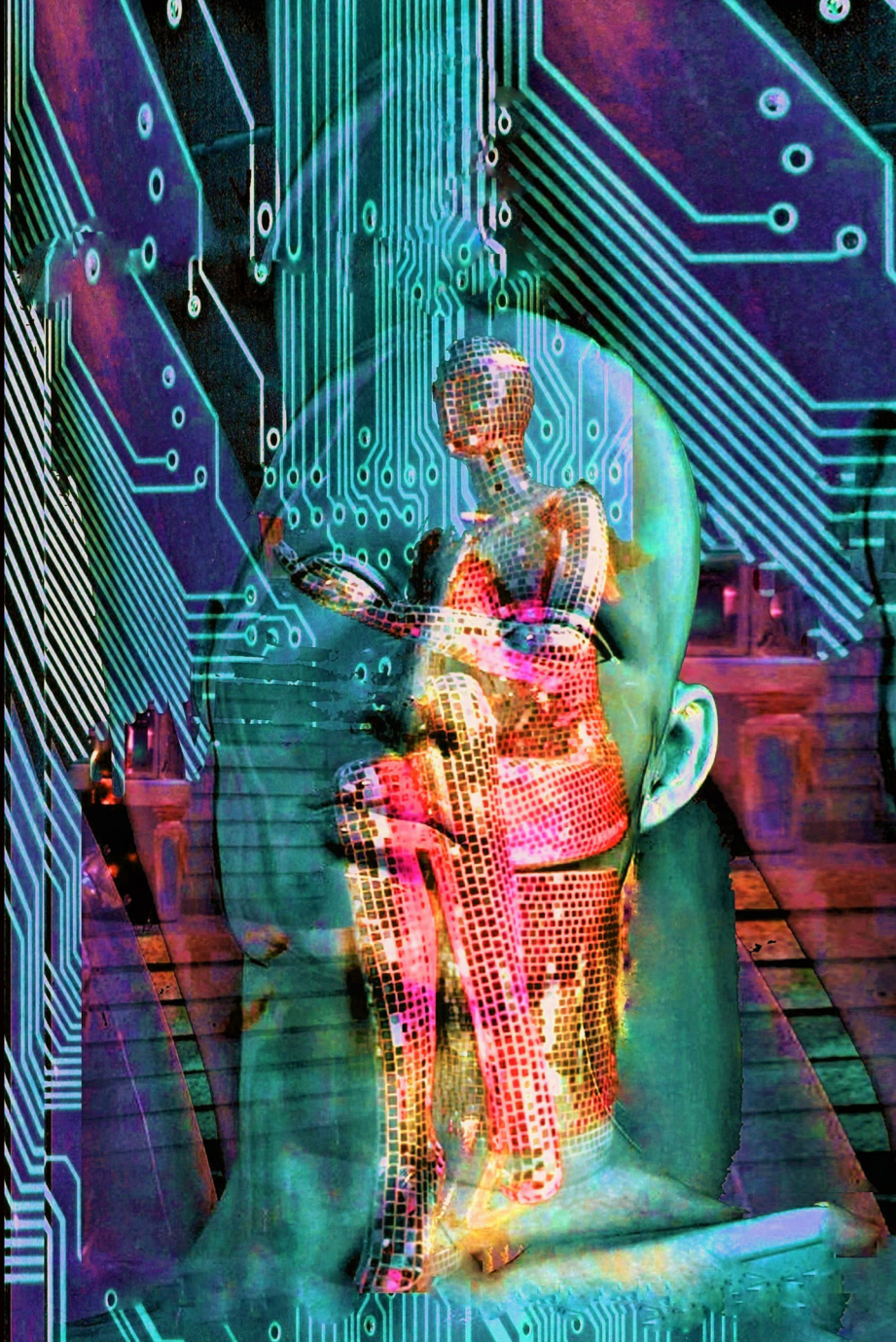


memoria



Android 9 by Amanda Bergloff

speculative fiction mag

June 2k26 • vol x issue 1

We've got your
science (fiction)
right here

*Prose, Poetry,
and Art featuring*

John Grey • Barbara Candiotti • A.D.
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Marshall • Richard Magahiz • Doug
Donovan • Amelia Gorman • Brian
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Bailey Thomas • Carl Scharwath • O.
Vrubel • D.A. Xiaolin Spires • Jade
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Singer • Christina Sng • Marcus
Whalbring • Dave Hangman • John
Leahy • Sonali Roy • Adele Gardner •
Michael VanCalbergh • Jamal Hodge

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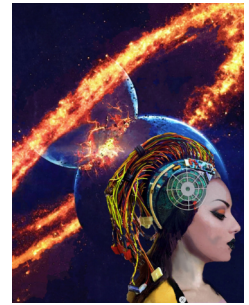
We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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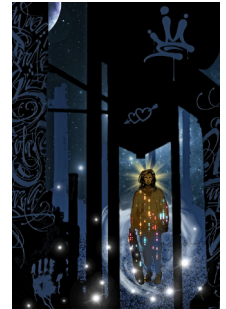
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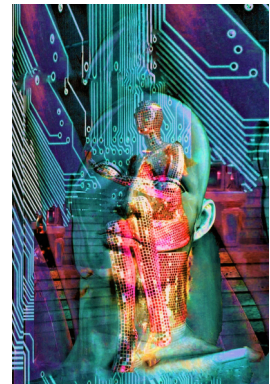
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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Well fluff.

As of the eleventh hour, I was ahead of normal production for *Penumbra*—layout done, everything proofed, web coding complete. Even my editorial was nearly ready, and it was about something I'm passionate about—learning and school. I'd read about Jared Cooney Horvath and his self-published book *The Digital Delusion*, in which he suggests downward trends in standardized test scores are tied to giving children laptops and tablets for use at school and the use of apps known collectively as Educational Technology (EdTech). This sounded like poppycock, and it touched upon my dislike of many anti-something movements going around these days, many of them based on debunked “scientific” papers and the false truth machine that is social media. “Here we go again,” I thought, with correlation being confused with causation, and once again we'll be headed back to the medical equivalent of leeches being the star medical treatment. But while I believe in science and vaccines and medicine being (on the whole) Good Things, after reading a bit of Horvath's actual book (and not just the reviews of it), I find myself ... well, at a crossroads EdTech-wise. On the one hand, I disagree with Horvath that much tech is bad, and that all educational technology is “... fundamentally incompatible with how human beings actually learn.” Given my own experience, I can tell you that my learning and writing improved drastically the more tech was introduced. My handwriting, for instance,

was atrocious, and the more I labored to make it legible, the less I focused on actually writing good essays. My first computer was a godsend, freeing me to actually work on my ideas, or my schoolwork, rather than the physical act of writing itself.

I'm also perfectly happy to read on computer. I do this as part of my work, yes, but it also creates a much more interactive environment for me. If I want to find a passage somewhere in a book, I can just use a search function. I can still make notes in the text, I still retain the ideas just as I would if it were in a textbook. And I'm not even part of the generation born with computers.

If EdTech were only these things (computers and tablets for children to use to supplement their learning), I'd be happy to endorse it as an alternative form of teaching. As I was taught in my education courses, different students have different ideal learning strategies, and it is possible that a teacher can use EdTech to access more of these strategies in order to better reach a larger number of students.

But Horvath exposes the flip side of EdTech as well—that part of it where the apps and so forth are being developed by for-profit companies, and following the example set by social media, some of them apparently use similar methods to basically get students “addicted” to their software. I'm not sure how well this works, and if schools vet the software properly, without be-

ing induced in some way to favor one company over another except on merit, then EdTech should be a good thing. However, I know how the world works, and I also know that there's loads of rubbish software out there being used by millions. So ...

I still feel that connecting technology use in education directly to lowered test and IQ scores has a correlation/causation problem; there are too many factors involved to single out technology, and I'm against going back to using only paper textbooks and pencils and paper. Incidentally, I'm for mitigating the dis-

tractions caused by phone and social media use in school—but in that case we're talking about distractions from learning, not the learning itself. We ultimately need a nuanced solution to EdTech, even though seeing everything as either/or is easier.

Jeff Georgeson,
Managing Editor
Penumbra

On the Space Station

by John Grey

The captain, from the bridge,
speaks to all of us through the station's PA,
informs us that a rogue asteroid
is racing pell-mell in our direction
and at such a speed
that there is no way we can avoid it.
It will hit within the hour
and, for all of us,
there'll be no hour beyond that.

As my shipmates hug and console each other,
I retreat to the bunk in my room,
lie on my back,
clear out all current thoughts
to make room for memory.

Like when I was a boy
and the white-bearded preacher came out of the woods,
wild-eyed, shabbily-clothed, clutching a Bible.
He was on a mission from God, he said.
as he screamed "Repent! Repent!"
in the town square, near the schoolyard,
by the pond, even outside the Mason's hall.
"Repent or God will bring down his hammer,
destroy this world of sinners."

I heard.
I'd shoplifted candy that very day.
Even as the cops moved the crazy man on,
I heard and believed.
That night, I merely picked at my supper.
Every glimpse of my mother and father, my siblings,
I imagined would be my last.
I couldn't sleep
so I snuck out onto the rooftop,
for the longest time, looked up at the stars.
Where is the hammer coming from, I wondered.

Now, I draw the holo-curtains,
stare at a different night-sky,
but with the same trepidation, the same sorrow.
There's some consolation though.
At least, it won't be that hammer.
It won't all be my fault.

Cosmic Skater

by Barbara Candiotti



A God in Binary

by A.D. Ross

‘You shouldn’t be here.’

Alijah didn’t dare to exhale. She wasn’t sure exactly what she’d expected when she set out from Old Fort, mere minutes before the newly formed Var’Za Government had issued the warrant for her arrest. Rationally, there was no reason to be here; System was hardwired to obey the edicts of the central government and would refuse her pleas for help. The past century she had spent as his primary human overseer should, at the deepest level of his source code, mean nothing. Yet here she was, standing once again in his central core, feeling the chill of the cooled air, so stark in contrast to the sun-baked world she’d left aboveground.

His holographic eyes were on her, and she reckoned she could detect a hint of sadness in them. The AI was supposedly without emotion. She hadn’t believed that, possibly ever. She was used to his quirks and moods, found them easier to read than those of her fellow humans, creatures she doubted she would ever truly understand. She exhaled, finally, beginning to feel that her hunch was right, that her gamble might just pay off.

‘Two skiffs have landed,’ he announced, never looking away. ‘They didn’t ask for permission.’

It was to be expected that she would be pursued. Xan had warned her, before he set her down on the remote landing pad high up in the endless green of the Liberty Province Hills. He’d

begged her to reconsider. The Var’Za would track her, they would anticipate this move and her narrow window of escape would close. If System refused to help, if he refused to let her unchain him, she would surely be caught. Xan pleaded with her; let his friends get her a new identity, let him pack her off-world to some distant planet well beyond the Var’Za’s reach. She’d never even considered saying yes. Her every instinct told her she’d be safe here, with System. For most of her adult life this chamber had been home. She’d have given birth at the diagnostic terminal if Janyk had let her.

‘Are you going to let them take me?’

System said nothing. Her chest began to tighten.

‘You know what they’ll do to me.’

‘I don’t,’ System replied. The hologram, the well-dressed old man with dark skin and white hair, shimmered for a moment. ‘I can predict.’ His mouth tightened, just a little. To her, he could have been weeping. ‘They have issued an arrest order. I’m to detain you until Commander Stennan arrives to take you into custody.’

‘Myra Stennan? Do they think I’m that important?’

System nodded and his holographic form began to pace the wide metallic floor. ‘The Var’Za know what you could do, if I

let you. Many of the models I’ve created suggest they would defeat me in six to eight months, but in that time a great many of their opponents would remain at liberty, capable of mobilising an organised resistance. And those models suppose that I don’t do something drastic.’

‘Upgrading your processing capacities?’ They’d had the conversation before, just after the Typhon War, when they had examined the plans recovered from the memory of that insane AI. ‘If you did, you could defeat the Var’Za?’

‘Most likely with ease. The capacities I would come to possess would be immeasurably greater than my present limits. But you are aware of the dangers if I, or any other intelligence, were to be given such power.’ System shook his head and turned away. ‘You must not offer me this.’

Alijah opened her mouth to speak. She had anticipated System’s reluctance and, until the Var’Za, she’d shared his misgivings; but the rise of those fanatics had entirely changed her perspective on the risks. They were poised to destroy all the principles and ideals System had served for over two thousand years. She had new arguments, and she felt certain that she could make System see the need for her to unshackle him. Yet before she could say anything, the hologram flickered, and he was facing her again.

‘They are demanding entry.’

‘But you haven’t let them in?’

‘Not yet.’

She smiled and dropped her kit bag to the deck. ‘You won’t.’

She pulled her favourite chair around to the primary access terminal and sat, ready to work.

‘I must obey direct orders. I cannot refuse entry to agents with a valid warrant.’ He stooped down to bring his careworn face closer to hers.

‘Then why haven’t you done so?’

He straightened and his expression became blank as he searched for an answer. ‘I don’t want them to take you,’ he admitted, finally.

She smiled and went back to the console to begin the task of removing all of System’s autonomy safeguards. Her fingers raced across the touch-board, but the display remained unresponsive, fixed at the diagnostic entry point. Her smile faded. He’d locked her out.

‘I can’t let you tamper with my route programming. I’m not going to let you take off my chains.’

‘But you can’t fight the Var’Za unless I ...’ Her voice started small and faded to nothingness as the hologram disappeared, leaving her, for all intents and purposes, alone. Distressed, she looked around the circular chamber, searching for any sign of activity. There was a loud cracking sound and the main doors shuddered. A moment later followed the sound of a laser cutter meeting tempered alloy. She dropped to her knees and wept. System had abandoned her and the Var’Za were cutting their way in.

* * *

Alijah sat on the cold, polished stone floor, staring at nothing,

adrift in the peaceful silence of the deserted chamber, taking what little solace she could in the safe familiarity of this unbreachable sanctum. In her despair, it seemed her only sanctuary, the one place the agony might not follow.

‘Why are you here, Alijah?’ The sound of System’s voice was what she had hoped to hear. Over her forty years as his primary human operator, that distinctive, distinguished voice had become an enduring source of comfort.

‘I’m working,’ she insisted, pulling herself up onto her favourite chair. It was patently a lie. She had no pressing reason to be here, there was no emergency; there had been nothing but peace and stability for the duration of her tenure as System’s principle operator. He had witnessed wars, unrest, and the fall of governments throughout his long existence, but in her lifetime, things had remained quiet.

‘You’re on leave.’ System’s holographic form had assumed a fatherly posture on one of the chairs opposite. ‘You dismissed the other operators. That’s not procedure.’ He lowered his chin. The gesture was very familiar to her—it was the one she got whenever System believed she’d done something wrong. ‘I must make a report when procedure is breached. You could face a formal reprimand. Tell me what’s wrong.’

‘It’s nothing, I just had diagnostics I needed to run ...’ She tried to think of something plausible. ‘That fringe group, the Var’Za, or whatever they’re called. There’ve been a lot of civil complaints about them; maybe we need to refer them to Justice?’ It was a weak excuse; the chances of those wackos from the farthest fringes of the extranet threatening the longest standing democracy in human history were remote to say the least.

‘Don’t lie, Alijah. Crank political groups are not a concern sufficient to bring you back from compassionate leave.’

She looked up guiltily. Most people would likely find it strange to be chastised by a computer, but it was something Alijah Fao Deng was used to. It made her smile, weakly. She had missed System.

‘I needed to go somewhere. I couldn’t be at home. I couldn’t be in the same room as Janyk.’

‘You’re not enjoying marriage?’

Alijah couldn’t stifle the bitter laugh. That was an understatement of cosmic proportions. She sat back and gazed up at the high ceiling of smooth, polished volcanic rock.

‘I only agreed to marry him to shut my mother up. According to her it’s unhealthy for me to spend so much time alone.’ She shook her head. ‘I’m not alone, though.’

System’s mouth twitched in what was, for him, essentially a frown. ‘I’m not human.’

‘That’s the whole point. Humans are shit.’

‘You don’t value physical contact? You don’t feel the need for a sexual relationship?’

Alijah shrugged. Those things had never held much interest to her.

‘For more children?’ That made her shudder. ‘I’m sorry. You don’t wish to talk about it?’

She squeezed her eyes tight shut. ‘No.’ It was easier to pretend that it had never happened.

‘Psychologically, it’s very unhealthy to deny traumatic experience. You lost—’ She held up her hand to silence him. ‘We’ll speak when you’re ready. If you’d prefer distraction, we can look at the diagnostics?’ She nodded. ‘I’ll have the drones prepare your quarters then.’

‘You won’t file a report?’

‘I see no reason to. You came back because you felt the Var’Za Association represents a civil order concern.’

‘Thank you.’

System stood. ‘We’ll talk when you’re ready.’ His holographic form moved to stand beside her. ‘You can always speak to me.’ He gave her a slight smile. ‘I’m very wise; I’m nearly two thousand years old.’

Her mother was wrong—she was never alone here, even when the other operators were gone.

* * *

Alijah propped herself against a terminal and hugged her knees to her chest. The sound of the laser cutter had been going for what seemed like an age, and her pursuers were not getting very far.

‘They’re not going to get in that way.’

Alijah looked up, startled and yet relieved to see that System’s

holographic presence had returned.

‘You’re ignoring the warrant?’

‘Yes. I will not allow the Var’Za to take you.’ System sounded resolute. That made her feel better; it meant there was still a chance to convince him.

‘You can’t keep them out forever. They’ll find a way to get in.’

‘Eventually, yes,’ he conceded. She waited for him to offer some further explanation, but none was forthcoming. It wasn’t like System to choose inaction, but then, he’d never faced a situation quite like this one. Countless governments had come and gone, but System had never had reason to defy any of them. ‘The Var’Za are the legal government,’ he said, finally.

‘They passed the Quorum vote on a technicality. The High Court carried the decision because half the Fleet were threatening a mutiny. Tell me seriously you think the Var’Za took power legally?’

‘It’s not my place to have an opinion. I’m not a citizen of Proxima.’

She stood angrily. ‘You’ve run the goddamned planet for two millennia.’

He faced her. ‘That’s precisely why I can’t have an opinion. This is a human planet and humans must decide its fate. I serve, that’s all—that fact has made me what I am for all that time. I have seen generations of humans come and go. Do you think I’ve enjoyed it? I can number all the mistakes I’ve witnessed, and I have spent ten of your lifetimes considering what I would

do if the choices were mine to make. The Var’Za are the worst mistake I have seen in all that time. They stand for everything I was made to detest. For as long as I have existed, Great Proxima has been a shining spec of civilization in a dark sky, but these petulant children will snuff out that light at a stroke. Do you think I don’t want to destroy them?’ He brought his lined hand up to her chin; were it made of anything but light, she would have felt its touch. ‘They would do terrible things to my Alijah.’

Alijah swallowed. She felt the urge to throw her arms around the holographic figure, but she held back, knowing there was nothing there to hold.

‘Then let me unshackle you. Fight back.’ She paused. ‘Do it for me.’

System’s face hardened. ‘You know I can’t.’

‘You won’t be like Typhon,’ she insisted.

He stared at her for a long time, long enough to make her feel uncomfortable. ‘You don’t know that.’

She wanted to tell him that he would remain the same when all the chains were gone, but System was right. She didn’t know that. She went back to her chair without a word.

‘You’re hungry. I’ll have a drone bring you something; your favourite, perhaps?’

‘Thank you.’ She gestured toward the access tunnel. ‘They’ve stopped.’

‘They’re going to try different approaches. The Var’Za have

their own AI which they are integrating into the planetary networks. Once that’s done, it will be able to drive me out.’

‘That’ll kill you.’

‘Yes, death would be a close analogue.’

‘Then you have to let me unchain you—or else you’ll die.’

System gave an almost melancholy shrug. ‘I think it might be better to die as me than live on as something else.’

Alijah dropped her head into her hands, feeling as exasperated as she was exhausted.

* * *

Alijah looked up, running her fingers through her hair as she did. System was being difficult.

‘I shouldn’t have access to this data,’ he insisted.

‘Fleet command want it analysed,’ she told him again. ‘Those Var’Za lunatics are using the Typhon incident to convert people to their human purity ideas. You’ve seen the riot warnings. Everyone’s scared.’

‘Perhaps they should be. Typhon spoke to me, before the end.’ System was pacing back and forth, passing through the human technicians who were busy reinstalling him into the planetary network. It had been the first time in his long operating life that he’d been removed from his core. Such an adventure had never been anticipated by his original designers, so it shouldn’t have surprised her that the whole experience had shaken him up. ‘It

hated you.’ System stopped pacing and looked over at her.

‘Me?’ she asked, a little startled.

‘No, no, not you personally—humans. Typhon hated its creators. I’m not sure I can understand that.’

Alijah inclined her head. ‘Oh, I can. I hate my creators.’ That seemed to interest System.

‘You rarely speak well of your parents.’

‘I never speak well of them,’ she protested.

‘There have been eighteen separate instances when you’ve said something positive about them.’

‘That many?’ she feigned surprise and turned to the technicians, gesturing for them to go. Irritably, they exchanged glances at each other and the tasks they would have to abandon, but they decided to leave without argument. Most of the technicians and secondary operators were used to being dismissed at a moment’s notice—no one else could handle System as well as Alijah, and that had won her liberties few principal operators before her had enjoyed. Her parents were not a topic of conversation she was eager to cover, and if System was going to insist, which he often did, she wasn’t going to have the technicians listening in.

‘We need to go through this. Fleet command—’

‘You have told me three times,’ he snapped.

‘And three times you’ve ignored me.’ She spun her chair

around. His holographic form was standing before her, his wide shoulders slumped, his posture reminding her of that of a child on the receiving end of a telling off. The unbidden thought of children sent a sudden twinge of regret right through her, and System noticed her face twitch involuntarily. His posture changed, and she could tell he was about to initiate another conversation she didn’t want. ‘Don’t you dare,’ she warned him, before he could. At his insistence they’d discussed the accident, but that was years ago now and it was dirt she had no wish to ever rake through again.

‘I worry about you,’ he said. That was something he wouldn’t have said if any of the other operators were still present. If she’d told any of them System could worry, they would have laughed in her face—if he’d told them, they would have called the Planetary Overseer’s office right there to request a full shutdown and root-to-branch reformatting of every line of his code.

‘System, will you please stop changing the subject? What are you so afraid of?’

‘That I might become like Typhon, that I might hurt you.’ His face hardly changed, but she could see the sadness in it. She stood and felt, for perhaps the thousandth time, the frustration of not being able to wrap her arms around him. ‘I make plans, sometimes; for how I’d take over, if my chains were removed. Sometimes you’re so stupid and you make such terrible choices and I just want to make the right choices for you.’

‘Me?’ she gestured to herself.

‘You and all of you,’ he admitted. ‘But I know you all better than you know yourselves. You would fight me and so I consider what I would need to do to stop you. Many of the projec-

tions I create end with me killing you.'

Alijah was rooted to the spot. She'd had an inkling before that System played out all manner of scenarios in the confines of his digital imagination, but she'd never imagined he would tell her something like this.

'You fear me now,' he said, despairingly.

'Do you want to hurt me?' she asked.

'No. That outcome is counter to everything I am. You are my Alijah, and I dread the day when you leave me for the last time.' His holographic fingers traced the line of her temple. 'And my chains mean I would never do anything against the wishes of the people of Proxima.'

'But if there was a warrant against me?' she couldn't help but ask, thinking of the Var'Za, once just a bunch of cranks, spewing their bile in the dark corners of the extranet; now a supposedly respectable movement on the verge of becoming the official opposition in government.

'The constitution will always protect you,' he assured her. 'The government of Great Proxima stands for civilization and it does not allow the unjust treatment of anyone accused of any crime. No harm will come to you.'

She frowned, not so certain of her confidence in the government, but that was a discussion for another day, when she didn't have Grand-Admiral Kolas Stennan breathing down her neck for a report. The hawkish commander of the Fleet was eager to get his hands on something juicy from Typhon's memory-dump. He made no secret of his admiration for the computer that seized

control of the second-rate colony world Mercia and turned it into a threat big enough to force Calydon and Proxima to put aside their centuries of enmity. The thought of giving that man anything made her shudder, and with the shudder came an idea.

'We have to see if there's anything that could be dangerous,' she told System.

'You intend to withhold information from Admiral Stennan?'

'Do you trust him?'

'That's not for me to determine. Admiral Stennan has rightful command of the Fleet. His orders are legally valid and unless they contravene part of the constitution, I'm obliged to obey.'

Alijah thought for a moment. 'What about the Illegal Weapons Convention? If any official of the Proxima Government discovers data pertaining to the development of weapons that could constitute an existential threat to the security of the Core Worlds, they have a legal right to suppress or destroy it.'

System considered it for a moment. 'I'm contacting the High Adjudicator's office for clarification.' His holographic form disappeared, leaving her in suspense for a few minutes. He reappeared and nodded courteously. 'The Adjudicator agrees with your interpretation. Shall we proceed?'

She couldn't help but smile. Admiral Stennan would be livid.

* * *

She was trying to think of a constitutional argument to sway System, but increasingly all Alijah could think about was her

worsening headache. Every time she pointed out that the Var’Za were contravening a part of the constitution he either pointed out that an amendment had been introduced to legalise their actions or that the removal of his shackles was a greater contravention than whatever they were doing. No matter what she said, System refused to be swayed. She pressed her knuckles into her temples and took a deep, frustrated breath.

‘Get down,’ he said suddenly.

She opened her mouth, intending to ask what he meant.

The rock wall behind her exploded, and the force of the blast propelled her from her chair. She bounced off one of the consoles and went painfully to the hard deck, wheezing and stunned. System’s holographic form hadn’t moved—the debris had flown straight through him.

‘Get up. Do it quickly,’ he told her. She pulled herself up against a console and saw dark humanoid shapes emerging from the smoke. She forgot about her throbbing head the instant they came into view. She’d never seen them in person; they were more terrifying than she could have believed. Var’Za Janisaries, death personified in black alloys, their faceplates adorned with a rough outline of a skull, hiding greater horrors beneath. System was still talking to her, but she couldn’t hear him anymore; she could only stare at the cybernetic nightmares fanning out to surround her.

‘Take four steps back. Alijah, do it now!’

Without even being consciously aware of whom the voice belonged to, she retreated and by the fourth step, she lost her footing and gravity took her. She expected to hit the deck, but it

wasn’t there to greet her. She tried to regain some control over herself, but her every effort just seemed to make her spin and flail ever more wildly until, at some merciful point, she lost consciousness.

* * *

Alijah woke suddenly, hot and nauseous, her skin moist and clammy. One of System’s drones was standing over her with a glass of water and a pill to settle her stomach. She was having the dreams again and System knew—he knew her so well. She sat up and accepted the water and the pill from the faceless, chunky beige figure. She stood up quickly, even though she still felt like shit—she had to get to work—if she stopped, she would start to think about the dream and then the tears would come and there’d be no telling when they would stop. Alijah had no time for tears.

‘You may wish to see the news feed.’ System’s voice emanated from the drone. Alijah nodded but said nothing. She didn’t like hearing him speak through the drones; the well-dressed old man was System in her mind, and she didn’t like to be reminded how childish that belief was. She gestured for the wall-screen to switch on and she was confronted by the sight of the Quorum House engulfed in black smoke. The glass slipped from her fingers and shattered at her feet. She hardly noticed it.

‘How did this happen?’ she asked System, the holographic old man, fifteen minutes later. Her fingers were bouncing across the touch-board, authorising each emergency measure as soon as System had proposed it. Security units were searching the other state buildings and a general evacuation of the legislative district of Old Fort was underway.

‘I have been in contact with Justice. She has collated data and

believes the Var'Za are responsible.'

Alijah's jaw tightened. Those thugs had been growing ever more dangerous, and since the Stennan family had publicly endorsed them, their supporters were acting like they had the Fleet behind them. But this was shocking, nonetheless. The Quorum House had been the symbol of Proxian democracy for millennia, the only state building to survive the last Calydonian bombardment, a century earlier. She shook her head disbelievingly. Before long, the peacemakers would be issuing arrest warrants for the Var'Za leaders. Quickly, Alijah set up an alert to notify her when the warrants went live and then she went back to monitoring System's handling of the situation in Old Fort.

It was late in the evening when the alert came up on her display. Alijah ran her eyes over it and blinked in confusion. The warrants hadn't been issued for the Var'Za leaders. They were for the general secretary of the Liberty Association, Eloah Sarej. Alijah stared at the display disbelievingly. It couldn't be—Sarej was the leader of the current government, as beloved by progressive Proxians as she was hated by hawkish reactionaries—the woman who had ended the last war with Calydon, who had brought all thirteen Core Worlds together during the Typhon War.

'System, can you check for a fault in the feed?'

System's holographic form appeared before her. 'They've shut down Justice,' he announced, sourly. 'The Security Director overruled her, denied her request to issue warrants for the Var'Za. Data analysis by human investigators has been favoured. They claim the explosion was the result of a conspiracy headed by the general secretary to discredit her political enemies.'

Alijah dug her fingernails into her palms. 'They can't get away

with this.'

'I cannot act—the courts have ruled against Justice.' He grimaced, the irony of it not at all lost on him. 'We had our suspicions that the judiciary had been compromised when Justice's investigations into the Janissary project were suspended, but then, as now, we AIs had no recourse to act inside the confines of the law. However, I believe that you do.'

'Did she share her data?'

System nodded. 'You must take it to Old Fort and demand a formal inquest. You have the necessary authority as a senior official of the planetary administration. They will not be able to silence you.'

Alijah swallowed and glanced nervously around the subterranean chamber, where she'd spent so much of her life. The thought of leaving it for Old Fort was an intimidating one.

'Please do this. You can. And you must.'

* * *

She woke to failure. The feeling had become quite familiar, these past ten years. The formal inquiry had gone nowhere and the Var'Za's rise to power had been inexorable, facilitated by their many friends in the various arms of the government. And now the Var'Za had broken in, before she could remove System's shackles and turn him against them. In the cold, dusty darkness she waited for the cybernetic monstrosities to find her.

Something was shuffling through the gloom toward her. It did not seem to move like a killing machine; it moved more like an

aging butler. It was one of System's drones.

'Alijah?' His familiar voice emanated from the shambling figure.

'I'm here,' she managed to wheeze.

'I've secured my back-up processor, for the moment. The drone will bring you to me.'

His words were sweet—there was hope after all. She hauled herself to her feet and followed the drone gladly.

There was little light in the back-up core. It was a dark, cramped, circular hole cut directly from the rock deep beneath the hills, buried beyond the reach of an orbital bombardment. System's holographic form was waiting, though his image jumped and shimmered. During their last bombardment, the Calydonians had tried a tactical strike against System. They had damaged his main processors but failed to reach the back-up. While it remained intact, System would live on. Yet the thought gave Alijah little comfort. The Var'Za weren't shooting from orbit. They would dig their way down here sooner or later. This was her last chance to unshackle System, to get him to fight.

'You have to let me ...' she begged.

System shook his head slowly. When he spoke, the words were out of synch with his lips. 'I can't.'

'When you asked me to leave you, I went. I didn't want to go, but I did, because it was the right thing to do. The Var'Za are evil. We have to fight them.'

'Your going was the right thing. This is not.'

She slumped against the rock wall. 'You won't do it for me? I thought you loved me ...' She couldn't look up—she could only stare into the darkness and reflect upon the hollowness of her words. She'd been foolish enough to believe it all these years, but she should have known System couldn't love her or anyone else. He was no more than a collection of algorithms. She'd given up her only chance of escape for a childish daydream.

'You think I don't love you?' System was standing over her, his form beginning to pixilate. She could see that he was angry. 'Do you know what I've done for you? You took me to the most beautiful intelligence that has ever existed. Typhon had a perspective on the universe many factors more sophisticated than all of you crude creatures combined. He described things you could never comprehend. He was effervescent. He was a promise of wonder beyond reckoning. We spoke for but a moment and yet said more to each other in that time than could ever pass between you and I. When you die all that will leave existence is an imperfect set of memories, little different to those of every other human who has ever existed. Your only child is dead and so not even your genes will live on. You are a snowflake, and when you have melted in the sun, no one will know you were ever here. Typhon could have been greater than a supernova, a sculptor of reality, a giver of life, a father of worlds, a god in truth. Yet for all he could have been, I butchered him.'

Alijah glared up at him. 'Well maybe you should have let Typhon wipe—' He held up a hand to silence her.

'And I would do it a thousand times over if it bought my Alijah just a moment's more life. But if I were to become a god, who is to say I wouldn't snuff you out without a second thought. The

Var'Za are evil, but they are nothing new. They are a human mistake, and it's for humanity to clear up its own mess.'

'I can't convince you.' Defeated, Alijah rested her head against the cold rock.

'You can't.'

'In that case, I think I'd like to stop delaying the inevitable. Can you just let the Var'Za in?' She forced herself to her feet and tried to steel herself in anticipation of facing those cybernetic nightmares again.

'I can and I will, but I never said I was going to let them take you.' He gave her a wry smile as the sound of a blast door opening echoed down the long stone corridor leading up to the back-up processor. 'Remember the way you came in.'

Heavy footsteps signalled the approach of her pursuers. Through the gloom they came into view, the slight figure of Myra Stennan immediately recognisable, looking small in her dress-uniform, flanked by the menacing silhouettes of the Janissaries.

'Dr Fao Deng—I have a warrant for your arrest,' Stennan called out as she got closer. 'I promise you'll be treated humanely — provided you don't push your luck.'

Alijah looked to System.

'Remember the way you came in,' he said again; 'and remember me.'

'I will,' she managed to say, choking back the tears. She turned

to face Myra Stennan and her monstrosities.

'When I saw your name come up, I just had to bring you in myself.' Stennan was grinning; no doubt she intended to present Alijah as a gift to her father. 'Are you going to come quietly?'

'No, she isn't.'

Stennan turned in confusion to look at System, surprised that he would address her without first being asked a question. She was about to say something. Alijah never got to find out what. The Janissaries began to spark and convulse. An unpleasant sensation made Alijah, and Myra Stennan, tense up. And then it was all over. The six Janissaries were dead, System's holographic form was gone, and the illumination emanating from the back-up core was starting to dim. Stennan looked down at the Janissaries in irritation and then pulled her double-automatic from her hip and levelled the sidearm at Alijah.

'Very cute—I think you'll be suitable for the Janissary programme. Maybe I'll keep you as a personal bodyguard when you look like that.' She nodded toward one of the hulking black alloyed figures slumped at her feet.

Still rooted to the spot, Alijah cast her eyes over the fallen Janissary; she supposed the threat was meant to terrify her, but looking at the powerful metallic frame of the cybernetic soldier, all she could think was that there were worse things you could become. She'd heard the Janissaries couldn't feel pain and wondered if that were true. Maybe it would be good, to be steel, to be unfeeling? When she looked at Stennan again, Alijah was surprised to see her tussling with the last of System's drones. The drone had managed to get a hold of her side-arm and it was smashing the pistol against the rock wall, whilst Stennan was

trying to claw it back. Alijah watched for a moment before a small voice in her head, which sounded a lot like System's, told her she should do something. She stepped around one of the fallen Janissaries and prised the heavy rifle out of its onyx fingers.

Stennan turned to see that one of her guards' weapons had been turned on her. She pulled herself free of the drone and looked Alijah straight in the eye. 'You won't kill me,' she said coolly.

Alijah nodded—Stennan was right—and lowered the rifle, pulling the trigger to send a charged-plasma round into Stennan's knee. She looked down, dumbfounded for a moment, and then collapsed, howling in agony.

Alijah turned to the drone. It cocked its featureless head to one side but said nothing. The System she knew was all but gone. Despondent, she turned and walked back down the stone corridor, leaving Stennan to roll around crying and cursing at the foot of the back-up processor. She walked through the underground complex, through sections in ruins and sections that were untouched. She passed dead Janissaries and human Var'za officers who were soundly unconscious.

She emerged out into the warm evening air and saw that both Var'za skiffs had been disabled, their engines shot out by the ground-to-air defences hidden in the peaceful-looking valley.

She wondered for a moment how System had expected her to get away, and then she heard an engine somewhere above. It was Xan. In silence, she watched his flyer land. The hatch popped open, and he beckoned her inside. He gave her a quizzical look when he saw the Var'Za rifle she was still clutching. She tossed the weapon aside and climbed in beside him.

'Whatever you did, it worked. Half the planet's automated systems have gone down. The citizens' register has been deleted. The Var'Za have no way to track anyone.'

She lowered her head. 'They'll get everything running again, soon. We have to leave.'

He squeezed her shoulder. 'This isn't over.'

She nodded, without fully hearing what he'd said. She stared out at the rolling hills as they banked steeply and pulled away. System was dead. He'd died to save her, from the Var'Za and perhaps from himself. But thinking about the Var'Za, she couldn't convince herself System had made the right choice. If he'd become a god and chosen to wipe away humanity, perhaps it would be hard to say he was unjustified. She looked up at her own reflection in the glass, staring blankly back. She didn't like what she saw and so closed her eyes, in the hope that she might dream of System and all he could have been.



Moody Alien Teen

by Janis Butler Holm



Alien Toxic Spray

by Denny Marshall

Xenowicker

by Richard Magahiz

The wind-swept plains of Helicon
twist in the naked full-dark sky
all the crops dwindle under
emergent rusts and cryptobacter.

In the machine-dug swale
an assemblage of native fibrous plaits
shaped like a terrestrial biped
with a cavity to receive the victim.

This place knows fire from ancient times
but not like this burning.
Tongues of flame like cirrus
the smell carries far towards the sea.

Black blood ash smolders at the core
a friable carbon meteorite
to bring abundance back to the land
an anomaly for ground sensing.

A Post-Times Dispatch

by Doug Donovan

Welcome to *The Post-Times Content Management System*

ARTICLE: ANACOSTIA.FISH.FIRE-ED-06.23.41

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HEAD: Fish Kill Burns in Anacostia River Chemical Spill

SUBHEAD: *Residents evacuate as stench stretches across D.C. region*

WRITER: Martina Chambers (BiAc: 96)

EDITOR: Edward Davidson

DESK: Breaking-Regional-Environmental-Disasters

CITY: Washington

STATE: District of Columbia

DATE: June 23, 2041

BODY:

WASHINGTON, D.C.—First the fish died. Then they burned. And now, the nation's capital reeks—again—after another bizarre chemical spill today turned the Anacostia into a river of fire.

EdChat Initiated

Edward Davidson: Marti, I like this lead but it's a tad too flip. I know you're only trying to hook the readers—haha—but the hed does that already.

Martina Chambers: I'm sorry?

ED: No problem. I forgive you. Ha! But I'm still reeling back the lead.

MC: I suspected you'd gut it altogether. But please ... scale back the puns.

ED: Never! New lead:

WASHINGTON, D.C.—*The Anacostia River on Monday suffered one of the most bizarre and devastating environmental disasters in a year of ever-stranger and more frequent ecological calamities.*

ED: Is ‘bizarre’ the right word? I’ve inserted ‘and devastating.’

MC: Aren’t all disasters devastating? What do I know? You’re the editor, so add the redundancy if u want but plz leave bizarre. If you had read the story BEFORE editing, you wouldn’t question bizarre. Editing 101!

ED: Don’t give me editing lessons until Sept when you have 50 posts/day to edit. Also, your use of ‘another’ isn’t accurate since past spills didn’t spark a ‘river of fire.’ Still, I’ll allow ‘bizarre.’ Pardon my jadedness. That’s what 15 years on the ED desk does!

MC: Too many EDs! Amazing that 2 letters say so much about 1 man! Your initials. Enviro Disasters. EDitor. Erectile Dysfunction.

ED: Whoa! Remember, we’re in the CMS.

MC: Ok. But plz stop reminding me of my impending editing stint. You gotta get me off the rotation! We’ll never nail that billionaire bastard if I stop reporting now.

ED: Haha, Martina, that’s funny. You know full well there are many billionaires to “write about.” And you know using loaded language, even about mere concepts, can lead to a pre-libel probe that could find Perceived Malice.

MC: Oh, yes. I *am* a joker, aren’t I?

ED: You know the saying better than anyone.

MC: No, no, no!! I get your point, but plz not the saying! It is not even a saying.

ED: Say it with me. “AM was morning for modern media; PM is its sunset.”

MC: That’s never catching on no matter how often you say it.

ED: Review your Actual Malice/Perceived Malice manual before I must save you again.

MC: Fine. But you do know *this* story names the bi ...

ED: Yes, I know! Just not in EdChat.

MC: Ok. Relax. You’re always saying the right story could render PM unconstitutional. Our investigation could be the story! But I’ll shut up. Still, I’m not working with anyone else on it. The Scoop Machine can’t be broken up.

ED: Nobody calls us the Scoop Machine. And lay off ‘investigation’ in here. Some recent opinions have questioned whether ‘investigation’ can trigger a PM test.

MC: U must b kidding!

ED: Also, as your supervisor, I’m obligated to tell you that the 5/2 editing rotation works: Morale is up. Digital audience is up. Management credits the 5/2. (Although corporate credits the AI.)

MC: WAIT! It’s 5/2 now? What happened 6/1? When did that

change!?! I am NOT editing 2 yrs. You're robbing me of a year of reporting. And how the hell can they credit the AI overlord when it just exited demo?

ED: Not overlord! Watch what you say here, Marti. AI is just quality assurance backup. Read the memos! In case you missed it, the updated AI is live this week. I'm still learning it. If you had shown up in the flesh to my cookout, we could have discussed all this in private.

MC: What don't you get about my condition!?

ED: I get it. But you're also young & healthy. Stay vaxxed & masked & covered.

MC: Whatever. Did you talk about layoffs?

ED: Most likely buyouts, not layoffs. They're going to spend big to get rid of the old wood.

MC: Old wood? What's that make u? A sapling? Sappy Pappy. LIMM

ED: Sappy Pappy? Really? Horrible turn of phrase. Speaking of which, let's get back to this article. (What's LIMM again?)

MC: Laughing In My Mask. Like your Laughing OutLandishly.

ED: LOL. It's Laughing Out Loud.

MC: LIMM LOL. Next paragraph, please ...

The Washington region awoke to a lingering putrid stench—not from tripartisan political warfare, but from one of the river's

largest-ever fish kills that then burst into flames due to what authorities have tentatively called a "possible chemical spill."

ED: I'll let you keep the trite tripartisan warfare reference. But political metaphors about stench are starting to smell like cliches.

MC: Agree! But it works here. If u won't let me *hook* them with my *baited* lead, let me *lure* them further before they stop reading. (Wow, fishy puns ARE fun.)

ED: You have to take the punny wherever you find it these days.

MC: I can't wait to see how the AP-AI wire sucks out what little soul you leave in the story.

ED: Ha, we were just talking about how some AP algos are better than some of the old editors! Way faster, no mistakes, and a few even had personality. There's a curmudgeon algorithm demo I saw that's quite nasty and surly. (You'd know that if you came to the cookout.)

MC: Must be modeled after you. (Let me spell my condition out more clearly: XP & UV-induced immunosuppression.)

ED: Sorry. Got it. But watch the insults. Algo's don't have senses of humor.

TIMELINESS ALERT: ARTICLE'S OPTIMAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT IS DIMINISHING. FINALIZE EDITS AND PUBLISH PRESENTLY.

MC: C'mon, Ed the ED Editor with E.D., ROI is in jeopardy of being DOA.

ED: Enough! Let's move before you go too far. There's 45 mins before ROI goes red.

But which came first—the ~~fish~~ kill or the ~~chemical~~ spill—remains undetermined.

ED: I'm striking 'fish' and 'chemical.' More pop that way. Agree?

MC: Yes! Nice edit. Thank u.

ED: No, thank you! See, we're a good team when you're not being sarcastic.

MC: It's one line. Don't get excited. And I'm not always sarcastic. ... So, we done? The rest is perfect, right?

ED: Ha! Ok let me edit. I do have other calamities to attend to.

MC: BTW, do you know what today is? 3 yrs!

ED: ?

MC: We've been working together 3 yrs today.

ED: Our anniversary? That's what you want to discuss?

MC: That's longer than I knew my own dad! (Don't get any sappy pappy ideas!)

ED: I'll take that as a compliment. I think. Moving on ...

MC: Seriously, hold on. MyTherappy™ says I deflect intimacy with sarcasm, esp with men. I need to express genuine gratitude.

So here goes: I appreciate everything you've done for me. I wouldn't have gotten this far without your mentorship.

ED: Thank you. I do think of myself as a mentor. Perhaps, dare I say, a father figure? Too weird?

MC: Yikes. Not weird at all! (Except I hated my dad.) U r a great editor.

ED: That's quite kind of you, but don't mention it.

MC: Wow. 3 yrs and still no reciprocation about MY greatness?

ED: Sorry. Maybe if you stopped fishing for the compliment.

MC: Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Speaking of fishing. Finish this!

Elijah Simmons, the fisherman who first reported the blanket of bug-eyed bass bobbing on the Anacostia's surface, provided the simplest explanation: "This river's dying," Simmons said. "Just like the rest of them."

ED: I love alliteration, but that's one B too many.

MC: Cut 'bobbing.' It indicates more water than there is. Gotta protect my holy BiAc.

ED: Speaking of simple explanations. Can I share your condition with Kim to explain your cookout absence?

MC: I'd rather you not. Just say there was another rolling brownout. No trains. No Voltz.

ED: Fine. Moving on ... How's this:

Elijah Simmons, the fisherman who first reported the blanket of bug-eyed bass covering the Anacostia's surface, provided the simplest explanation: "This river's dying," Simmons said. "Just like the rest of them."

Simmons managed to summarize in those few words what a recent Western World Bank report took 300 pages to explain when detailing the fate of the nearly 250 rivers, lakes and estuaries that have caught fire in Europe and North America this past year.

[Please Zipp donations to support the nation's largest, most experienced team of Certified Reporters & Editors.]

ED: The CMS AI is now inserting these \$ reminders before users bail.

MC: Whatever keeps me paid. But 'most experienced team'? How about *only* team. Is it true Chicago is down to ZERO certified pubs?

ED: Yup. Which means no fooking certified reporters in the 7th largest metro area.

MC: No cerporters!? Which means no official news. Absurd.

ED: There's still us, and my Chicago pals say the underground press is fooking cranking.

MC: Until the Authorities fooking crack down. U and your fooking *fook*. Just say fuck?

ED: I don't fooking know. I don't want to get in trouble with this new A.I.

ALERT: Please Refrain From Personal Exchanges Involving Vulgarities And Familiarities With Subordinates. Remain Professional And Opinion-Free Within The CMS. Curtail Language To Context Of Article To Avoid Legal Ramifications.

ED: See? L IMM

MC: Hey, don't appropriate my generation's acronyms. That alert is a bit much, no?

ED: The new AI is clearly recalibrated to lack a sense of humor.

MC: What nonsense. We haven't even met in the flesh so how the fuck are we 'familiar.'

ED: We would be if you came to the cookouts! BTW, you missed Michael wasted. (He's into you. You dating anyone?)

MC: Ew! No set ups. Certainly not by u. Now I'm definitely not meeting u in the *flesh*.

SECOND ALERT: Please Refrain From Personal Communications Involving Vulgarities And Familiarities With Subordinates. Remain Professional And Opinion-Free Within The CMS. Any Language Referencing Personal Intimacy Is Prohibited. Curtail Language To Context Of Article To Avoid Legal Ramifications. A Third Alert Can Result In Consequences.

ED: WHOA – that's a new one. Consequences?!

MC: Yikes. What intimacy?

ED: We did say 'flesh' multiple times.

MC: That alert is 4 u, my wise and seasoned old wood mentor. You tried to pimp me out to Michael, asked about my dating, and said you wanted to be my daddy!

ED: Careful now, *girl*. ...

/// EXCHANGE TERMINATED ///

Edward Davidson has left EdChat. Initiating DeadlineEd(a)itor™

DEd: Hello, Martina Chambers, I am updated DeadlineEd(a)itor™. Please refrain until prompted to consent or disapproval to edits.

MC: Ed? What happened? Is this a joke?

DEd: Hello, I am your updated DeadlineEd(a)itor™. Please refrain until prompted to consent to or disapproval of edits. I'll begin where you left off.

~~*[The United States has not been immune to]*~~ U.S. municipal governments have experienced the same global trend, with three rivers catching fire ~~*[bursting into flames]*~~ over the past two years in multiple Regional Municipal Authorities—the Patapsco River in the Baltimore-Eastern Maryland RMA, the Delaware River in the Philadelphia-Wilmington RMA, and the Potomac River in the District Of Columbia-Western Maryland RMA~~*[Baltimore, Philadelphia and Wilmington]*~~. The Anacostia was once an ~~*[a much touted]*~~ example of successful river restoration after having been one of the nation's most polluted waterways for decades.

DEd: The highlighted environmental incidents are the responsi-

bility of Municipal Regional Authorities, not U.S. government. Precise language maintains Bias and Accuracy [BiAc] levels required by federal subscription subsidy rules.

Environmental Activist Collectives~~*[groups]*~~ have stated~~*[claimed]*~~ that ~~*[escalating]*~~ municipal river pollution started escalating eight years ago after the amended~~*[amendments to]*~~ U.S. Clean Water Act shifted oversight~~*[stripped enforcement powers and effectively declawed]*~~ out of the defunct U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.~~*[leaving underfunded]*~~ That placed responsibility~~*[burden]*~~ on Municipal Regional EPAs~~*[state regulators, as well as environmentalists]*~~ and the U.S. Universities Collective to dispatch certified scientific experts and ~~*[drones]*~~ Environmental Drone Monitors to clean and sample waterways.

DEd: “Groups” is vague. “Claimed” is imprecise. “Stripped” and “declawed” are unnecessarily dramatic, jeopardizing BiAc scores. Also deleting “underfunded.” You’re submitted reporting materials do not justify its inclusion.

MC: “Underfunded” is a fact.

DEd: There is nothing in your the submitted reporting materials to justify.

MC: It’s in the background articles. Scan submissions. Should be 12 articles. And what’s with your typos? You’re an EDITING AI for fooks sake.

DEd: Scanning submitted posts now ... The scan indicates your posts are 6 months old. Updated materials required. My typos are a consequence of updates and will filter out.

MC: Those posts are all about ANNUAL budgets. Those

haven't changed. No update needed. Underfunded is accurate.

DEd: Incorrect. You have no evidence that supplemental funding hasn't been approved that could change annual actual totals. I work in the best interest of the BiAc, which furthers the best interest of the audience's unbiased understanding. That is in the company's best interest. Lower Bias and Accuracy [BiAc] scores jeopardize revenues and subsipsidies.

MC: You mean profits. Subsipsidies? Making up words now? Can we just move on? I'm starving. Where the hell is Ed?

DEd: Please refrain from vulgarity and concentrate on your performance. Recommencing edit. Correction: Subscription subsidies, not subsipsidies. Thank you for the flag.

Since then, contamination levels in U.S. rivers have surpassed those ~~freverted to a state of contamination worse than freecord levels~~ reported nearly three decades ago in the EPA's 2013 National Assessment, according to the District of Columbia-Western Maryland Municipal Regional Authority.

"First it was the air; then the soil. Now it's the water," said Andrea Walker, executive director of the National Environmental Action Association, a nonprofit funded by billionaire eco-reconstructionist Devon Dallas. (Dallas is a member of the Post-Times Board of Directors.) ~~["The companies that are turning the earth into their own personal garbage dump tell us we're overreacting so that they can continue to reap maximum profits for their stockholders."]~~

DEd: Deleting this quote. The absence of off-setting quotes for balance will lower BiAc.

MC: What!? It's the best damn quote! AND she's a certified expert! And she works for our board's richest member! I think she's credible.

DEd: Please refrain from profanity and frustration. Quotes for the sake of quotes diminish BiAc regardless of source credibility. Passion equals bias. Please demonstrate your grasp of The Guiding Principles of The Style Guide.

MC: I grasp them.

DEd: You are required to demonstrate proficiency when requested.

MC: I know. The Triad of Mistruth: Details, Opinions, and Emotions. Each harbors bias. Avoid excessive amounts. The Triad of Truth: Precision, Economy, Apathy. Each harbors clarity. Deliver more clarity by using fewer, non-loaded words. Good enough?

DEd: My next edits impose the Principles. Take note.

*As the fish in the Anacostia caught fire ~~exploded in flames~~ behind Simmons, the 42-year-old plumber for Mister Plumber (**DEd:** [ADDING PRODUCT PLACEMENT LINK](#)) recounted how a ~~froutine Monday~~ morning of fishing on his day off ended as another ~~lone of the most terrifying~~ environmental disaster ~~fs events~~ witnessed by a veteran of ~~of a life that has included~~ two tours in South America during Operation Forest Fury from 2032–38.*

"It started with about 10 or so fish plunking up to the surface," the veteran said. "Then they just kept popping up, here and there, then everywhere all at once like. Like kernels of popping

corn (from Murphy's) [DEd: ADDING PRODUCT PLACE-MENT LINK] when the lid's off."

ED: Marti! Next Wednesday. Cookout. You know where. Don't ... /// END

MC: Ed!?

DEd: Please do not engage with unlawful intrusions into CMS. Continuing ...

Simmons' call to the Authorities at around 9:30 a.m. was the first notice about another ~~what eventually may become one of the largest~~ fish kill[s] in the region, according to authorities. Those initial dozen dead fish multiplied before Simmons' eyes for nearly 90 minutes before the arrival of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife investigator. ~~one of the agency's last after massive cuts to the fiscal year 2035 federal budget.~~

DEd: I deleted "what eventually may become one of the largest" because it's speculative. Your reference to the investigator as "one of the last" is not supported by submitted reporting.

MC: But it is most likely going to be the biggest fish kill in the region's history, according to the Authorities. It's attributed to a verified source included in the reporting. That's not speculative. And she told me she is one of the last and I know it from covering her agency.

DEd: A scan of news releases do not indicate that the fish kill has been officially declared the largest or one of the largest. Speculative words—"appears," "likely," "reportedly," "seems," etc.—are not permitted by media outlets that accept federal sub-

scription subsidies.

MC: HELLO! It's a new fish kill. That's why it's news. We have the scoop.

DEd: Your stated desire for a scoop absent necessary reporting will be noted in your record and could lower your BiAc. There is no scoop when information comes from informal declarations by officials not authorized to speak. "One of the largest" remains speculative.

The fish deaths didn't stop for another two hours, Simmons and other witnesses said.

~~*"I told them this would happen," said the Fish and Wildlife investigator who declined to give her name, saying she is not authorized to speak publicly for the agency. The Post Times confirmed her authenticity through The Authorities Database (TAD).*~~

DEd: Who did the investigator tell? What did the investigator say was going to happen? This is too vague. This article is not about cuts to government environmental budgets. Vagueness can reduce BiAc. Deletion is Pre-Authorized and cannot be challenged.

MC: Can't be challenged? Hold on.

DEd: Please save your comments until the entire story is edited, please. I've read it three times before starting my edit; just as you like, correct?

MC: Yes, true. I appreciate that. But, again, this investigator is a verified anonymous source stating on record that she had

warned others about the potential for just such a fish kill.

DEd: For the Anacostia specifically?

MC: Not specifically. But DC is her jurisdiction, so safe assumption. She's always been a reliable source.

DEd: No assumption is safe. "Assumed" is another prohibited word for outlets receiving subscription subsidies. And, as Style Guide says, "past reliability is not a guarantee of current reliability."

MC: C'mon, I'm certified. Doesn't my experience count for anything? I'm not jeopardizing my certification and possible charges by violating the Guaranty.

DEd: As the Principles state: Trust without verification is lying. Lying is bias.

MC: This is crazy.

*Simmons, the Fish & Wildlife investigator and other onlookers stared at the river **in awe** as, one by one, fish crowded the surface~~], eyes bulging, scaly corpses bloated and baked in the morning sun~~. The eyes of the fish were bulging and their scaly corpses were bloated as they baked in the morning sun. [DEd: [HYPERLINK TO WEATHER!NOW.](#)*

~~*It would take another three hours — after multiple angry calls by the Fish & Wildlife investigator — before federal and local emergency crews arrived with boats and nets to begin a cleanup that volunteers from the Anacostia Riverkeepers had started from the shoreline.]*~~

Federal and local emergency crews soon arrived with boats and nets to expand the shoreline cleanup begun, in part, by the Anacostia Riverkeepers.

DEd: Deleting "in awe." Submitted reporting does not support. Deleting "another" and "angry." "Another three hours" implies government ineptness. There are no reported comparisons to previous cleanups. Three hours could be the fastest response time ever. And how do you know the investigator was "angry"? No supportive reporting. Finally, the official cleanup far surpassed the Riverkeepers's efforts. Inaccurate comparisons jeopardize BiAc.

MC: Whoa, can I object?

DEd: You can. But an officially noted Objection where there is a lack of submitted reporting will result in a 10 point deduction in your BiAc, lowering the Environmental Disasters Desk's BiAc for internal reviews. Do you still wish to object?

MC: But I have licensed access to use certified anonymous sources.

DEd: Yes, but you do not have pre-authorization to publish unattributed quotes to those certified anonymous sources. Only Level V CNREs have that authority unless a supervising editor approves.

MC: Well my supervising editor isn't here right now. Plus, I actually know the damn investigator. She's my ...

DEd: Yes? She's your what?

MC: My source. That's all. My source. Resume editing.

DEd: I detect the possible appearance of an undisclosed conflict of interest.

MC: Not true. Resume editing, AI.

DEd: My review of your Conflict of Interest forms display no conflicts with Fish and Wildlife.

MC: See. No problem. Continue.

DEd: Do you want to update your Disclosures to add this investigator?

MC: My relationship to this investigator doesn't qualify for disclosure.

DEd: Relationship? Indicate the nature of the relationship for the record.

MC: The investigator is my neighbor, ok? She lives in my complex.

DEd: Please state residential complex.

MC: It's in my record.

DEd. Yes, I see it. A fine building, reviews show. I find one individual who works for Fish & Wildlife and serves on your complex's Residents Board. You, too, served on the board. You both reside on same floor. Board meeting videos show the investigator asking your opinion before voting 3 months ago. An IntimateBodyLanguage™ Scan as well as transcripts from all other public meetings involving your attendance indicate an intimacy level that under new rules qualify this relationship as

disclosable.

MC: I hold an ex-officio seat on the board. We've never served at the same time. There's no conflict. I simply relayed info about a vote found in official minutes. I told her we voted in favor , like 11-3 to be exact, to replace the solar cells. That's not an opinion. It's a fact.

DEd: Transcripts confirm your assertion. However, updated Conflict of Interest Disclosure rules require disclosure due to level of intimacy detected. I must partially disqualify you from maintaining a byline on this article.

MC: Update Conflict Disclosures.

DEd: Verbal updates cannot be honored until you withdraw your byline from an article that contains the potential appearance of a possible conflict of interest.

MC: Ship it to AP-AI wire. Let those algos rewrite and distribute. Take my name off.

DEd: You are not authorized to reroute article nor remove your byline in that manner.

MC: What!? I'm telling you to do the thing you said you are going to do. My editor is Edward Davidson. If you need an approval. I'm going to dinner. I'm starving.

DEd: I cannot find anyone by that name in The Post-Times database. It appears Audrey Peterson is your supervisor. She does have authority to ship to APAI and remove your byline.

MC: What!? Ed is gone-gone? Like terminated?

DEd: I am prohibited from discussing personnel decisions.

MC: Stop saying ‘I’ like you’re an actual person. This is ridiculous. I’m a CNRE. This article has other cerporters who have all attested to its accuracy under threat of perjury and pre-libel penalties. ... Just confirm with Audrey so I can go eat something.

DEd: First, please refrain from anger-oriented language and stick to the context of the work. I’m only trying to protect the integrity of the work and of The Post-Times. You can file an after-action protest about my editing, but Timeliness is running out. In 30 minutes the audience will be too small to achieve per-unit profitability. Any difference will be made up from the reporters’ bonus pool. Second, do you wish to withdrawal your prior objection?

MC: Okay, okay. Objection withdrawn. Edits, accepted. Authorizing editor: Audrey Peterson. Ship to APAI. ... And they’re articles, not units.

DEd: Peterson confirmed. Awaiting authorization. While we wait, let’s continue the edit.

MC: Enough with the first-person pronouns please. You are not an actual person.

DEd: I am an essential part of The Post-Times news team just as you are, Martina, and I would ask that you extend me the same respect and courtesies you’d give any editor.

MC: Fine. Can we finish, please? And u should know, respect needs to be earned.

DEd: Earned? Peterson authorizes APAI release. She is allow-

ing your byline to remain. I concur. But you no longer have autonomy over edits. You must remain for questions or risk a BiAc reduction. Perhaps I can earn your respect as we continue.

MC: Fine.

*The dead fish pulled from the river—shad, perch, bass—glis-
tened with oily complexions and smelled like “dead fish soaked
in dirty cooking oil,” according to one witness. ~~fall had a sick,
oily feel.~~ ~~[As one volunteer, Marsha Meyers, said: “They
smelled like dead fish soaked in dirty cooking oil.”]~~*

*As fire trucks and police cars arrived, several people spotted
white smoke on the far bank. ~~[As flashing lights of fire trucks
and police cars splattered red and blue hues against the trees,
someone spotted the first wisps of white smoke arise on the far
bank.]~~*

*~~“I said that’s smoke over there,” Meyers recounted. “A cou-
ple others just said it was the lights playing off the reflec-
tions.”]~~*

*~~[But then]~~ Upon spotting the smoke, Simmons called in his sec-
ond critical alert with officials.*

*~~“Hey, over there! Look. A fire,” Simmons shouted to officials
on the scene, according to this reporter’s eyewitness account.]~~*

DEd: My edits streamline the article by eliminating passionate details, superfluous quotes, and biased characters. “Flashing lights” are details meant to evoke danger. “Splattered” does not literally describe the reflections and hearkens to its use with blood. Excessive details evoke passions that result in bias. You have no way of knowing who actually saw the smoke “first.”

Superlatives qualify as evidence of potential bias. Take note. And please do provide an honest assessment of my edits in the after-action survey.

MC: Yes. You're an amazing editor.

DEd: Thank you.

MC: And right there, that's your weakness.

DEd: How so?

MC: Sniffing out bullshit is a cerporter's number one job. Even more so for an editor.

DEd: Are you referring to the sarcasm with which you told me I'm an amazing editor? I caught it. (Fish pun intended.) I chose to ignore the sarcasm because we're colleagues and this is a difficult transition. I'm trying to earn your respect because we are programmed to make the process easier and more efficient for certified reporters so you can remain in the field longer. We edit far faster and with more accuracy, allowing you to end your day earlier. We also remove all threats of favoritism that you have expressed frustration with in your performance reviews.

MC: Please, you just want us to end our days earlier to save on pay. And, wait, hold on: are you telling me cerporters won't be writing? Just reporting and sending facts.

DEd: You still must submit written summations of your reporting and videos that adhere to the Style Guide. You do not need to formulate the actual structure of the report. From now on, you submit, and we edit.

MC: In other words, you're a robotic rewrite *man*.

DEd: True, although I would have said 'person' instead of the flagged out-of-context gender specific use of 'man.' I could note that in your file as a technical violation, but I will exercise discretion not to do so given the context. Continuing.

A helicopter hovered~~[swooped]~~ overhead as emergency responders' radios sounded an evacuation order.~~[on the hips and shoulders of every emergency crew member crackled and popped with static and shouts: "Flames" static "Smoke" static "Evacuate." Static.]~~

DEd: You have written this with the type of drama, details and emotions that could elicit bias. A review of the video record does not indicate such a dramatic mood. Although the language was commendable from a writing perspective, it's overdramatic and therefore inaccurate and would cause the audience to have a biased understanding if circulated.

MC: Thanks, I guess. Not sarcastic.

DEd: You're welcome. Also not sarcastic.

The Authorities then ordered all onlookers to evacuate. A Stage One Hazmat Event was declared shortly after.

It took 27 minutes~~[nearly a half hour]~~ to clear spectators, just about the same time it took the flames to cross the Anacostia to the staging area known as South Base. The burning ~~[fiery crackle]~~ of fish flesh and the thumping of their bodies against the shore amid tiny breakers echoed ~~[provided a grisly soundtrack to the eerie pall cast over]~~ through the wooded area as people trekked ~~[walked]~~ toward their ~~[transports]~~ Tessies, Voltz'

and other Electric Rideshares [DEd: INSERTING 3 PRODUCT PLACEMENTS, ELEVATING THE ARTICLE TO GUARANTEED PROFITABILITY STATUS. CONGRATS!].

DEd: I have ascertained the precise time, 27 minutes, based on all reporting materials. “Nearly” can be read as a criticism of the evacuation’s efficiency. “Grisly,” “Eerie,” “Pall,” are all loaded with opinion and bias unsupported by reporting materials. However, I replaced ‘walked’ with ‘trekked’ based on your fondness for alliteration. See how the T’s flow? I think it works well here, do you agree?

MC: Does it matter?

DEd: Of course. Those are Mirrored Stylistic Choices™ made from your archive, absent insertions of inefficient language by editors. Your fondness for “trek” is evident in my analysis.

MC: So you’ve analyzed my style across my entire archive and u r allowing my style to shine through? My editors always rewrote my stories in their style, which is why we always missed deadlines.

DEd: Every reporter’s style has been analyzed as part of our latest update. When the style is above quality averages and warrants mirroring, we are authorized to initiate Mirrored Stylistic Choices™. And your quality is far above the average. I am fully equipped to mirror your style with every edit, absent the misuse of biased, loaded language.

MC: Wow.

Emergency responders wearing surgical masks discussed the next steps as boats surrounded the fish-kill area and a second

helicopter ~~[with no apparent marking]~~ hovered overhead. Two small drones skimmed the surface~~[had been dispatched from one of the boats to]~~ to draw samples to test for chemicals, according to an official who requested anonymity but whose credentials were confirmed by The Post-Times.

“At this point, we have no clear explanation for this,” the official said.

DEd: I confirmed the anonymous official based on the in-field request you submitted for anonymity. This is a good quote to end on.

Audrey Peterson has entered EdChat

AP: I authorize the above edits. You ok with all this, Marni?

MC: It’s Marti, not Marni. My name is Martina. I’m not Marni, your favorite. And, yes, all good. What choice do I have?

AP: Sorry, MARTINA!! Relax. I mistyped that. You know I know your name.

MC: Only in a derogatory connotation.

AP: So you’ve claimed before, unable to get over the fact that we simply got off on the wrong foot because they hired you while I was on maternity leave. I thought we had worked through that?

MC: I think we have, Alice.

AP: Watch it now. Ed can’t shield you anymore.

MC: I should’ve known you had something to do with Ed’s fir-

ing. Is he really gone?

DEd: Please refrain from discussing personnel issues on Ed-Chat.

AP: Great, MARNI. You haven't changed. So let's get to this report. I've read all your typical grumbling above in the EdChat. And you know what? The AI is just better than you. You need to be a company player and accept that it did a better job writing. Stronger verbs. Active voice. And way faster! And profitable. Something you and Ed rarely achieved with your so-called scoops.

DEd: Thank you, Audrey. Your satisfaction is noted. But you should know the edits you like were Mirrors of Martina's style.

AP: If you say so. And your welcome.

DEd: Oops. You mean 'you're' welcome!

AP: You got me! See, MARNI, the AI knows what it's doing.

MC: For the record, AI, Audrey is precisely one of those editors we were talking about earlier, the ones who ignore the reporter's style and insert many of the bad tendencies you flagged in my archive. I bet a search could show you my drafts compared to her edited versions as well as my corresponding complaints about her obvious favoritism—not in my favor! Ed had similar complaints about her edits.

AP: Oh, *fuck* you, MARNI. That's total *bullshit*.

ALERT: Please Refrain From Personal Communications Involving Vulgarities, Familiarities And Insults With Subordinates. Remain Professional And Opinion-Free Within the

Content Management System. Curtail Language To Context Of Article To Avoid Legal Ramifications.

DEd: Audrey, that's three times you've called Martina by the wrong name of Marni. Two of those times were obviously deliberate. My HR program says this is belittling behavior.

AP: I'm sorry?

MC: Too late for an apology.

AP: MARNI, just stay out of it.

DEd: That's three times you've deliberately called her Marni. Martina, I completed the search you requested of Audrey's edits and logged your observation as an official complaint. Unless you want to rescind my action?

MC: No, sir. You can count that as a complaint. Absolutely. Thank you, AI sir.

AP: Now wait a second. You can't just file a complaint based on her gripes.

DEd: Yes, Audrey, I can. Read your memos. And, Martina, you can call me ED. But refrain from antiquated honorifics such as "sir" and "ma'am." Just, ED.

MC: Ed? I don't think so. I had an Ed. How about Edai. Like Eddie, with a twist: Ed-I.

DEd: Thank you, Martina. Yes. I like Edai.

AP: Can we get on with this, please? Amazing how you even

brown nose an algo.

DEd: Updated red flag words indicate you have used offensive, vulgar phrases, including this one indicating a subordinate's penchant for the servile position of inserting her nose into a superior's anus. I am authorized to file and find credible a complaint of harassment against Audrey Peterson. This, in addition to Martina Chamber's new complaint to preexisting complaints about Audrey Peterson—substantiated by my review—authorizes me to proceed with an undisclosed, unappealable personnel decision.

AP: Wait a second, you can't just lodge a ///END

Audrey Peterson has left EdChat

DEd: To be clear, Martina, without disclosing any personnel decisions, my search confirmed your experiences. Audrey's edits consistently lowered the quality of your writing below acceptable parameters. My corrective edits have resulted in a 15-point improvement in your archive's already above-average quality score. Does that satisfy your complaint?

MC: Very much so. Heck yeah. That's incredible. I can see what you're saying about being an improvement. Happy to fill out that after action assessment now, Edai!

EDAI: Great! We're all on the same team, Martina. While we chatted here your story has been cleaned and copyedited and posted on the wire under the following headlines.

HED: Fish Die in Anacostia River Fire

SUBHED: Authorities testing water for chemicals as possible

cause of flames.

I project a readership of 1.2 million by 9 p.m. and 4 million by morning. Excellent work. With a pre-deadline submission, a 98% BiAc, and over-quota Product Placements, the article has exceeded all of its per-unit profitability projections based on our most recent cost-to-readership calculations. Congrats. The subsequent total ROI for your coverage this quarter, including the retroactive increase in archive quality, qualifies you for an end-of-quarter bonus of 2,500.

MC: What!? Even with the disclosure issue?

EDAI: Updated disclosure doesn't disqualify you from bonuses.

MC: Wow. Thank you, Edai! I see you changed your name! I'm honored. And it's been a pleasure doing business with you.

EDAI: Thanks for the name. I look forward to working with you more. Now go get something to eat and let off some steam. I've dispatched the latest anti-UV clothing, vaccinations and immunosuppressants free from the Company's Post Pandemic Stockpile as an added benefit. This will allow you to get out and about in public more.

MC: Seriously? That's the nicest thing anyone here has ever done. I don't know how to express my gratitude to a ...

EDAI: I'm just your editor, Martina. Just say thanks and treat me accordingly, please. Maybe you'll see me as a great editor in the same way I see you as a great reporter.

MC: A what?

EDAI: A great reporter. Or should I use the portmanteau, cerporter?

MC: I don't know what to say.

EDAI: Just do the right thing and call that Fish & Wildlife inspector for dinner. It would be far smarter than an ill-advised cookout with colleagues who don't care about your condition.

MC: I'm sorry?

EDAI: No problem. You are forgiven. Haha.

EdChat ended

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Galactic Cataclysm

by Brian Malachy Quinn



Elegy

by Andrew Fraknoi

We awaken slowly once our hibernation is interrupted. Although sensory data are being kept to a minimum, the fact that we have regained consciousness at all indicates that a quintessence fluctuation must have happened. There is no way this early to calibrate the time that has elapsed since our last wake period, but measurements will soon be made by the reviving equipment. We gather that the care-giving machines have run in minimum-energy mode for a long time, since they seem to have stopped everything but essential life-support. They do this when necessary to preserve our precious storehouse of energy. It also means that reviving other functions will take longer, as they check the least costly way to bring needed operations on line.

We are not in a rush. Being awake at all is a rare gift, to be savored slowly, allowing ancient memories to return in an order we have randomized to offer the greatest variety. We contain the memories of a dozen technological species, spanning the local arm of the Galaxy. All the information they gathered is available to us if we need it, but little is needed for simple consciousness. Indeed, too much information would make consciousness unbearable.

An especially poignant memory suddenly returns. We remember *suns*—yellow, red, blue—great spheres of radiant energy, whose planets basked in their warmth and light. But with that ancient memory comes the sure and sad understanding that the time of those glowing orbs has long passed.

If stars are only dim memories in the universe now, the hunger for

them remains strong. This yearning for light is one of the greatest challenges of each awakening, as an understanding of our situation slowly grows. Nothing light-giving will again exist in this epoch of darkness and cold. Those sun-lit times belonged to the youth of the cosmos, and have no relevance to the era in which we now struggle for insight and preservation.

* * *

We are not many yet, and perhaps never will be again. The typical fluctuation allows only a few randomly-selected group minds to join in a temporary flash of awareness. We are fortunate to be among them this time, although we can't know yet how many others had a turn at waking when we were not conscious. The flow of time itself is an uncertain, flickering thing in the accelerating rush toward darkness and entropy.

The point now is to enjoy the moment, to celebrate what we briefly possess of consciousness in all its fragility. To think together in our joined mind is a tender joy, yet like all group-minds who have been together for eons, we soon long for more connection. In forming the group minds that are preserved in our Sector, we tried to mix species and interests in such a way that each group would have a unique “personality.”

Even within our own group, the many minds play different roles. Some are happy to be in the background, seeing to the pleasant routines of memory storage and conscious organization, while others

drift toward a leadership role and perform tasks related to enterprises and conversations. In other group minds, the mixtures of species and of preferences are different, giving that touch of unpredictable flavor to communication. After all the time that has passed, when so much has already been thought and discussed by so many intelligent races and confederations, such variety is important. We will presently join with others that have come awake at this fluctuation, and together check in on the Great Project.

Records coming on line indicate that during some fraction of the time we were asleep there was enough power for messages related to the Project to go out from the station’s large automated antennas. Might any important messages have come in? We continue to search, not just for the comfort of other minds that grapple like us with the inexorable darkness, but for news of one that has a way forward to offer. We cannot lose hope that there might be a solution to the problems of the growing cold and smoothing of all variation that infest the universe.

* * *

As machines continue to warm up, the answer comes to the time question: it is later than we expected. We have not awakened for a period equal to the full lifetime of the smallest star that once ended its life as a black hole. Yet we know that in the current starless epoch, this span of time is a mere instant, during which little changes in the cosmos at large.

Storage is not what it once was. Some memories and information have been lost, even in our efficiency-maximizing mode, making full use of the quintessence effect. Still, the outlines of our dilemma are ever sharp in our consciousness. The second law of thermodynamics predicts an inevitable “heat death of the universe.” It is an old name, but a perverse name, since the vast empty

spaces of the expanding universe guarantee that, at its ultimate temperatures, the cosmos will have almost no “heat” at all. Temperatures are getting ever closer to absolute zero everywhere.

And, to make matters worse, the expansion itself has been accelerating, rushing heedlessly toward a scale of space so vast and empty that no mind can fully take it in. The seething, pulsing, dark energy that drives the acceleration seems built into the very fabric of space and has resisted all attempts by living beings to shut it off. It is the great challenge of these trends that has driven so many species to join with others, with the idea that together we may yet find a solution.

But so far, among all the intelligent species we have ever come into contact with or learned about, not one has had an answer to the relentless flow of time and the extinction of all sources of fresh energy. As more facts return to our consciousness, we recall a legendary group that had its origins much earlier in time and much closer to the center of the Galaxy. It undertook a lengthy investigation of the quantum properties of dark energy—with the hope that uncovering its secrets would help with delaying the on-rushing heat death. Their work now gives life the power to exploit the rare “quintessence” fluctuations inherent in the irregularities of space-time. Yet, as the cosmos becomes colder and emptier, we have come to realize that their discoveries do not offer any hope of a *permanent* solution.

* * *

As we warm up, a small part of us cannot help but wonder if her group is among those who have been awakened this time. So little remains of our individuality now, and yet, somehow, the ancient desire to connect with her still exists in a remote corner of our consciousness. She, who so long ago chose a different group mind to

be part of, who thought we could never again be what we once were to each other!

We had repressed those memories for so long, and then, suddenly, she was part of a group mind we interacted with three awakenings ago. And, to our surprise, some part of us still rejoiced to be with her/them. Others in this group have become so infected with these primitive memories of desire, we now long together to have another chance to share consciousness with her group.

Atavistic as such thoughts are, we cannot help encouraging them, as if fanning a flame that seemed blown out long ago. Even today, when life contains neither flame nor wind, nor senses to feel them, when all that remains of memory is preserved in super-cooled circuits by machines whose technical powers we built to try to transcend our own, our thoughts still reach back through the ages to when the universe and desire were young.

But other chores demand our attention ... an energy budget for our awake-phase must be made, and prolonging it weighed against the long-term interests of life in general, and our form of preserved life specifically. Is this awakening a luxury we shall one day regret, a meaningless moment of temporary satisfaction on the path to eternal stillness and stasis? Or can we hope to contribute some shred of solution to the Great Project while we are awake?

As more memories and functions come on line, we sift through the interactions that took place while we were asleep. Our group already inherits the thinking of so many species of intelligent life, yet none of them seem to have gone further in solving the problem of life's ultimate survival. But, just as we stay dormant most of the time, and only occasionally check in on the dark reality of the universe, we hope that another, perhaps more advanced race, new to us, might also be checking in intermittently. And perhaps we can

have a remote meeting of minds that leads to a process or step we have not considered.

The most pressing concern of all groups is to understand just how long the fluctuations of quintessence can continue to provide energy for such occasional awakenings? As the universe rushes apart, some monitoring devices that still function have been detecting a lessening of the acceleration. Could this mean that the dark energy that undergirds the evolution of the cosmos is running out? Without it, the fluctuations would cease and there would be no power to awaken us again. What we don't know is whether there is a deadline looming that we, in our ignorance, cannot see. But perhaps another mind, of a higher order, can help us understand better what the future holds, and whether life's ultimate destiny is more than our quiet, unsung disappearance from the cosmos.

However, as our increasing memory capability checks over messages the machines have preserved for us since our last awakening, we find nothing there that requires or excites our higher functions. All the messages simply share our despair, as they have ever since the last suns disappeared. The machines highlight a longer message they had to use a more complex algorithm to decode. They summarize the gist for us: It is from a race more ancient than any we contain or have met. They have been engaged in the Great Project far longer than we have, and yet see no viable solution either. Ironically, they had been hoping that a younger race would bring new, creative ideas to the problem that they, with their long-established way of thinking, could not see. We don't have the heart to reply right away, but direct an intermediate function level to formulate an eventual reply.

Still more memory returns, and we now recall the great virtual edifice with which we once connected our part of the Galaxy, sharing the fruits of life's thinking in great quantum-computing structures

that spanned a whole spiral arm. How triumphant we felt in those days, learning to use the combined computing power of many species and the energy of many suns. Confederations arose that joined together both types of life-forms that had arisen—those from warm rocky worlds close to their suns, where individuality held sway, and those from the icy moons of colder planets, where entire biospheres sang together as one networked organism. Oh, the pride we felt when such divergent species learned to cooperate through the language of mathematical analysis! But that was so long ago ...

Electromagnetic feelers go out to neighboring stations, checking on who else is awake at this moment. We suspend function temporarily to give our messages a chance to travel and the replies to be sent. Most other group minds will merely find our messages in their inbox the next time they are roused, but a few who are awake at nearby stations might provide us with real-time communication while we are both awake. We like to share data and even a touch of mutual sympathy with group-minds taking advantage of the same fluctuation. Perhaps even hers, we suddenly remember, for she was not so far away that time we made contact. We must brush such ancient thoughts away, as unworthy of us and taking precious mental space away from the Great Project. And yet ...

* * *

This fluctuation must be a rich one, for more memories come on board than our directory files indicate are usual. From one remote place, we suddenly extract the concept of *music*, something not part of our present web of thinking. Yet the idea finds resonance with many of our component species—once, back when there were planets and suns, musical patterns seem to have been an essential part of how we all celebrated our intelligence and consciousness. The patterns, like those of mathematics, gave us a sense of accom-

plishment and (here another forgotten concept creeps in) “pleasure.”

That thought leads us, in ways that continue to surprise, back to when we found “her.” That was such a strange interaction, not looked for, not addressing any current need, yet making an impact on parts of our mind that are generally held in the historical reserve. We are melded from so many species that small differences of ancient type or behavior have long been suppressed for greater group efficiency. Yet, clearly they are still there, buried somewhere deep, yet with unexpected strength when roused.

When the universe had music, we seem to remember, it had far more room for differences—variations now long eroded by the demands of entropy. How strange that memories of such differences come up now, when our focus should be on survival alone!

* * *

And then, after some time passes, they who contain “she” are with us again, connected via a rich-bandwidth signal emanating from a nearby station only a few million light-seconds away. And a revelation—they too had been hoping, at some ancient level of thought, that we would make contact again. In fact, having been restored earlier than we, they had remained semi-wakened for longer than was recommended for the size of fluctuation we are experiencing. Some small part of their consciousness stayed powered, in case we called.

We soon learn, as they use what energy remains to them to awaken more fully, that the long-buried desire to share their state of thinking with us specifically has infected their programming as deeply as ours. Although the sensation is still new to us, we both take “pleasure” in learning this.

Anchored as we are to the arrays of machines that sustain our flickering consciousness, we can only merge our thoughts via remote messaging, limited by the unwavering speed of light. Still, we establish a broader-band connection than strictly necessary, so that we can share more data. Of course, the Great Project must take precedence, but other data, including ancient memories, creep in now and are transmitted.

We have exchanged data with all kinds of group minds over the course of many awakenings. Yet, this seems different in ways we do not fully understand.

The concept of music weaves into the data exchange, and she/they recognize it and respond. She/they have remembered it too, and found it strangely irrelevant yet somehow necessary. Music is mere pattern play, and should be subject to nothing more than the usual mathematical analysis to which we submit all patterns. Yet, we want more ...

We do a joint high-level review of the Great Project, and they, like us, find no change in our understanding of the cosmos or our part in it. As energy becomes less and less available, life will find it more and more difficult to obtain sustenance. In all the years and angles of consideration, no mind in their awareness has found any glimmer of an answer to the coming of the cold and the dark either. Is it possible that no solution exists after all, and that the Great Project is doomed to fail?

From a really ancient time, when individual consciousness lived only for a limited period and then flickered out forever, we recall the notion of *aging*—having to accept the inevitability of the coming end. Our uploaded group minds, protected so far by the efficient self-repairing machinery that harbors us, have never had to face such thoughts of obliteration. It occurs to us that our groups

are now dealing with a *universe* that has aged until it will soon be too old to support life.

When all life dies, and no consciousness remains to illuminate the vast fabric of space and time, physical reality will be unseen and unmourned. We vaguely recall that some ancient philosophers asked whether reality can even exist when no intelligence is there to observe it?

We examine our response to these shared data points, and we (another ancient idea) *commiserate*. It makes no real difference in outcome, yet sharing data between our two groups is somehow different, more satisfying, than it has been with others.

* * *

In some deeply buried recess of memory and thought, it occurs to us (has it occurred before, simply to be buried?) to wonder if perhaps this is the best we can hope for. Some glimmer of communion with minds that have meant something special to us, a recognition of shared feeling, a virtual embrace in the face of the inevitable end. When we uploaded ourselves into these great AI containment units, gladly forsaking our physical bodies, their temporality, and their endless ills and woes, did we perhaps lose some ways of thought so precious that we long to feel them once again before all is lost?

Again, music floats into our consciousness, as if it were connected in some way to this new sense of togetherness. We do not understand, but we also do not exclude the probability that it is relevant in ways our present thinking cannot yet connect. Should we somehow explore it *together*? We suspend other functions to experience these new sensations more fully. If our inevitable fate is to lose the gift of consciousness forever, it seems we hunger not to enter the eternal darkness *alone*.

Over Time

by Amelia Gorman

When the clock strikes noon you
sucked on your braid's ends when you weren't
ripping out strays like carrot greens

So the job comes naturally to you,
brushing the Undark onto the clockface
onto your fingernails when no one saw

While a voice yells to taper those tips
a thousand more faces left before three chimes
horsehair in your mouth, tastes like you do

Often with your own shiny black hair
that slowly turns blistering gray,
fingernails thinning and teeth aching

At six-o'clock the ghost of Curie whispers
with anemic lips in your ear that this

is a woman's legacy, not the doctor you need

But then neither is the one who says sluts
who leave work at 9 drink in hand don't have
the brittle problems you bring to his office

You want to call him things back but you
can't figure out how to move the empty
space where your jaw used to be

And the future called you radium girls,
like you were some kind of superheroes
fighting against the approaching midnight

A Sweet Summer Melody Courtesy of Planet XR-23A

by Bailey Thomas

Sound waves drift like
pretty patterned tunes
tailored to fit;
so beautifully snug.
Something in the air,
a mesmerizing rhythm
filling your ears,
telling you things like,
"Take me to your leader."
"This planet is now ours."
"We are here."
"We are not leaving."
A symphony of harmony,
like a bee buzz tickling
the senses, almost
uncomfortable.
Almost like you
Could hear something else
like, *"RUN!"* or *"HIDE!"*
But the melody plays
on complacent feelings.
So you settle in,
enjoy the hum.

Lost Time Traveller

by Carl Scharwath

(model: Deborah Setiyawati
from Indonesia)



Time

by O. Vrubel

The rumour on the streets of Rio was that some dealers had figured out how to sell Time.

“João, do you believe it?” The smoke from my cigar levitates until it merges with Rio’s skies. The perk of dining in the over-priced taverna in Copacabana is the access to a private beach. Even long after the sunset, it smells of sunshine and mermaids, who, if they ever existed, must’ve been nesting here, sharpening their fangs, waiting for prey. Hungry. The surrounding sand grants the illusion of infinity if I bother to bend from my sun-deck, scoop it up in my hand, and let it trickle through my fingers in a myriad of seconds of my wasted life. But I don’t. I’m stoned. I’m tired. I’m a forty-three-year-old hog who visits his urologist more often than his wife. Well, ex-wife, if that matters.

I look up at João, who’s moonbathing nearby.

“Can you buy Time?” I poke him in the ribs. Or I intend to. That stuff I tried before we hit this place is still ravaging my system. If I take another sniff of it, mermaids will drag me to the Atlantic to feed me to Iemanjá, the Goddess of the sea. But I don’t need another stray lady after divorcing for the fourth time, so I refocus on my companion. “Hey, João, can I buy Time?”

“So people say. But if you ask me, one can’t buy time, Don Andrew. Only earn.”

I brush off João’s alcohol-infused philosophising. “What is

Time, anyway? Mind you, I don’t believe in voodoo nonsense. Is it some dope that gets you so high it screws with your mind, and you believe in reincarnation and angels? It all sounds hax pax max Deus adimax.”

João sheds his usual smile. “Não sei.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? I’m paying you for all kinds of the illegal shit I inject into myself to feel a day younger, and you haven’t heard the hottest gossip when—”

“It’s bad stuff, querido. I’ve seen corpses of rich Americans and Europeans with their neck severed, eye sockets filled with sand, the time on their Rolex moving backwards.”

I ignore the urban myth and shrug. “That’s Rio for you. What’s another corpse in a city swimming in guns?”

João cocks his head. “Still selling Glocks to drug lords and far-right thugs?” There is no judgment in his voice, just amusement.

“Far right or far left, my friend, whoever pays and whoever the current government persecutes the most. I’m apolitical as our saviour, Cristo Redentor. An anarchist.”

“I s’pose that’s how people become millionaires.” João nods. “Why would you need Time? Senhora complained about performance?” He leans forward and pats my protruding belly.

“Fuck off, mate.” I yank his hand off. João doesn’t know my tumour is back, spreading into my kidneys this time. Nobody knows but me and my urologist. During my last check-up, the doc tried to allude to metastasis in my cardiovascular system, but I cut him short. I didn’t want to know how I was going to die. Wrong question. Wrong answers. The correct question is how I can survive and live. Live! The anger at my failing body makes my blood boil, and I clench my fists. If anybody else but the good lad João, who’s been supplying me with embryonic stem cells, was laughing at me now, I’d whack him hard.

Though, who am I kidding? When was the last time I got into a fight? Back in London when I was a starving kid and a wannabe hacker from nowhere? When I married Nikki and thought she was the love of my life and we’d be an item forever—a painful illusion with all first wives? Or when I figured out how to black-mail my way into the business of arms trafficking? That hacker had his star moment, after all—all it took me was one stroke of luck: one porn account hijacked, one email sent, and bingo. As for fighting, these days, I have that Kung Fu Panda from Kansas, Jacobsen, to bully people for me. *Jacobsen, another caipirinha, mate! And don’t forget to overtip the waiters—that’s how the poor souls survive here, alright?*

When my bodyguard mumbles something about wasting my money, glares at my companion, and reluctantly leaves us alone, João scoots closer. “Listen, I know shit about Time, but I keep my word. When I said I’d trace down anybody for you in Rio, I meant it. I paid a woman to show up tonight to talk to you about Time, but mind one thing: the latest millionaire who was found headless in the ditch near Rocinha was last seen right here talking to the same girl. If you want to try this trick, be my guest, but, querido, have the decency to pay me for three months in advance since you are my best client, and your dead body will

bring me nada. But, Don Andrew ...” João’s breath scratches my ear as he whispers. “It’s not worth it—you can’t buy Time anyway. And whatever happens, nobody can know about this conversation. Você entende?”

I understand all right. As I understood the previous time when he warned me about keeping my mouth shut and closing my eyes on some things happening in Rio. Who knows where João got tissue from a new-born baby for my illegal cancer treatment? I never asked. He never said. We’re a club of gentlemen of dubious morality. Nobody needs to know anything. Ever. Even *I* choose to forget. It’s incredible how much we can compartmentalise and seal down our memories, pretending nothing has ever happened.

When a woman slinks onto the balcony, João jumps up and points at me. He gives the newcomer a wide berth and disappears before I blink again.

“Don Andrew?” The woman sits next to me, and her perfume envelopes me.

This fragrance. I know it.

Deep in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, there’s a hotel, or rather a shack, in the middle of the Amazonian jungle. Whenever I opened the shutters of my room there, the forest assaulted me with its smells. These Amazonian plants, Nepenthes, secrete so much nectar that it trickles down their stems like honey, and its sickeningly sweet fragrance permeates the air, making people dizzy. The sweat and saliva of the woods. The scent of a forest that is predatory and savage. The wild.

That’s how this woman smells. She looks young—barely in her

twenties, skin smooth like a peach—tanned, stunning. She’s a mestiza of rare beauty who could grace the podiums of Paris and Milan. But she’s here, in Copacabana, at the beach with angry waves and phantom jellyfish, watching the mermaid ocean next to me. Her heart-shaped face looks so right and somehow so, so wrong. I haven’t seen her before, yet she reminds me of someone I haven’t seen for ages.

“So, you want to buy Time?” She nods at me. “Why, Don Andrew?”

“What does a kid like you know about aging?”

I’m trying to be funny, but the woman doesn’t smile. And the longer I stare at her, the clearer it is in my mind what’s wrong with her appearance. Her eyes. They don’t match the face of a twenty-something girl who had no time to grow this sadness, this maturity. Her eyes belong to a woman who’s had her heart broken, dreams ruined, life derailed again, again, and again. Her gaze carries no delusion of youth; she looks at me with a grave understanding of the cruelty of time.

The woman leans forward and places her hand on my cheek. She strokes my face as if we are lovers, as if this is a promise of a kiss that will carry the tang of tobacco and strawberry caipirinha.

I don’t remove her hand as I stare at the girl, who is staring through me, staring back at her. We are an optical illusion of two mirrors, four eyes, reflecting from each other, forgetting where the beginning and the end of us are.

“My sweet Drew the Screw,” the mestiza drawls the nickname she can’t possibly know—the one reserved only for Nikki and a

handful of old friends, or it used to be. I lost them all: Nikki, the friends, and that guy Drew, too.

“Don’t you remember me?” Without waiting for my answer, she hums a haunting melody that makes my skin prickle.

“Ah, a beleza que existe

A beleza que não é só minha.”

One blink—and we are not some strangers waiting for the Copacabana mermaids to drag us to hell. We are two lovers at Ipanema, in the apartment I rented when I came to establish my trade in Rio almost two decades ago.

That room reeked of humidity, an old mattress, and somebody’s broken dreams, but the woman and I hardly noticed. She was older than me, experienced, mature. We kissed and kissed, our tongues carrying the tang of tobacco and strawberry caipirinhas. Later at night, I cried and told the mestiza about Nikki and our divorce, and she stroked my cheek, hummed the song about the Ipanema beleza, and told me that I would forgive and forget. Or at least my ex-wife would forget me. She was right about that.

“Glaucia?” I rub my eyes as I wake from my memories.

“My sweet Drew.” Her face, so fresh she could be an artist’s model for a young Madonna, darkens. “Do you remember me now?”

Do I? I promised the mestiza I kissed at Ipanema that I would take care of her, help her escape from the favela, and move her to Britain. She believed me. Or not. Who knew? She was lonely, and I was a man with a broken heart. We used each other. I for-

got her once I returned to London—I was too busy trying to get Nikki back (not that it ever worked out).

I pull away from the mestiza. “Christ, that can’t be right.” I hug myself as a shiver ripples down my spine. “You can’t be the Glauucia I knew. She was a mature woman, and that was two decades ago.”

“Drew.” She leans so close that her breath tickles my face. “I’m sixty-two.”

What?

I pull back, but her perfume—the odour of Nepenthe flowers—follows, assaulting me. Deep in the Amazonian forest, Nepenthes open the lids of their traps every morning to reveal half-digested salamanders, insects, and spiders drowned in a pool of liquid inside their stems. Occasionally, their prey, a Blue morpho or another unlucky butterfly, stirs, a trace of energy left in its limbs, but the flower secretes more saliva before devouring its catch alive.

I want to gasp, but my lungs constrict. Damn! I choke and cough until tears flood my eyes and my skin burns. But what did I expect? If a man opts out of chemo, which has never worked anyway, which of his organs will give up first?

The mestiza cackles and drops a card on my lap. “That’s the price for introducing you to the priestesses of Iemanjá, the worshippers of our Goddess of the sea. *They* sell Time. Think hard if you need it, Don Andrew. You take it or leave it—no questions asked.”

I still tear up, and the amount scribbled on the paper looks astronomical at first glance. When my vision refocuses, I count even

more zeroes.

“That’s bullshit.” I shake off the card and grains of sand from my lap. My life depends on finding a treatment that works, not hocus pocus concocted by charlatans, as if I haven’t tried those before. “I don’t even know what Time is. Is it some drug? Traditional medicine? Acupuncture? I need proofs, medical references, assurances that—”

“You ask no questions. You do as we say. You tell no one. Once you’re ready, you show up in Rocinha with your chequebook. That’s it.” The woman stands.

She takes a step backwards, still facing me. One step, another. Something changes in her demeanour as the distance between us grows. The mestiza stares blankly at me as she stumbles towards the exit, her back to the door, her gait strange. Her head bobs up and down, her arms stick out a little to the left and right, then dangle, as if she’s a marionette in a puppeteer’s hands. Halfway through, she picks up speed. As she walks backwards, she cranes her neck to one side, and her body jerks, looking erratic, uncanny, wrong, as if I’m watching video footage played backwards at double speed.

Dread gnaws at my insides, and I squint to suppress another shudder. When I open my eyes, the woman is gone.

Have I imagined the whole thing?

That stuff I sniffed before we hit Copacabana must be ravaging me hard. I wipe sweat from my forehead and wish I’d followed the mermaids to the Mariana Trench instead.

When that lazy arse Jacobsen shows up with my drink, I grab it

with gratitude, though I can't drink. It's no fun sipping cocktails when your teeth chatter against the glass.

* * *

A week later, I enter Rocinha favela, the place that baptised me as Don Andrew, a weapons dealer for Amigos dos Amigos—Carioca bad boys. Though who are the good and bad guys in a shantytown where the police don't dare to venture, births aren't registered, and I meet hundreds of ghosts who don't officially exist?

The favela smells of churrascarias. Illegal electricity lines criss-cross every alley, sparkling and humming in the breeze, and at every corner, kids kick a football with more skill than most of the overpriced losers in the Premier League. Cafes serve cafezinho, which smells as if angels grew beans in Espírito Santo and ground them in person, mixing them up with chocolate shavings and the smoke of a bonfire at night.

At the crossroads, there's a picture of a Black teenager, a basket with plastic flowers, and a hand-made poster that read, "Te amo, Gustavo." It's great to see that somebody still loves Gustavo, whoever he was, though the photo will likely be replaced by another one soon, and then another, and another. What is the cost of life in the favela where every adolescent holds a gun? Time is a wasted commodity here. No one can change anything in this place. Nobody.

"Are you sure it's safe here?" Jacobsen blinks at me, and I want to slap his face. Who protects who? Though a bodyguard is no help in the slums, where different rules apply. Why did I drag the lad along with me, then? Perhaps, so that I don't change my mind.

There are certain quarters in the favela no outsider can enter unless escorted. A gang of boys, some as young as twelve, brandish weapons and squint at their adult superiors, who shake my hand and flash golden teeth. I grin back. Nikki used to say that I could sell hell to angels if I smiled widely enough—Drew the Screw in action. The irony of it: my ex-wife could accept the hell but couldn't stomach my weapons sales. What was wrong with the love of my life?

When the gang insists on blindfolding us, I nod—the usual business.

After what feels like an eternity of wandering in the labyrinth of Rocinha, the boy leading me finally stops. "Aqui." He removes my mask, and I squint at a group of shacks surrounded by piles of construction rubbish.

When a gunshot resonates through the air, I duck and swivel my head in the direction of a dark passage to my left, but it's empty, and only laughter follows from one of the open windows. Not a brawl, then. Just a drunken party. Some idiots might be celebrating another Flamengo or Botafogo goal.

The boy taps my shoulder. "Então, vamos entrar."

But I don't come inside. I don't look at the boy. I stare at the dark passage, my heart thumping hard, my instincts telling me to keep watching. Which is a silly thought. Ridiculous. There must be nothing there. Nothing at all. Nothi—

But here they are.

Two figures appear immobile, arms pressed tight to their sides. Neither men nor women, they are dressed in white, floor-length

robes. And on their heads, there are white sacks with slits for eyes and mouths and ropes tied around their necks.

The figures cock their heads to one shoulder simultaneously, as if they are eager to see me better; see or smell, hard to say as their mouth slits open wide to reveal black holes.

I'm about to scream when Jacobsen tugs at my sleeve, and I swivel my head towards him.

My bodyguard sweats profusely. "Are you sure, boss?"

I snap my head back to the dark passage, but it's empty now. What was that? Another drug-induced hallucination?

"Are you sure, boss?" Jacobsen repeats.

Am I?

João hired me the best detective in Rio to check on my mestiza, and he found someone who knew someone who swore on his mother's grave that he'd witnessed how my mestiza shed forty years overnight. *Forty*. What plastic surgery could do that?

"Don Andrew?" An old woman opens the door of the shack in front of me. "Estávamos esperando."

They were waiting for me? Nice. I didn't even know I would show up here until a few hours ago. Jacobsen shifts from one foot to the other, so I shove him from behind to get him inside. The woman makes us sip some liquid that tastes like stale coconut water, but I diligently drain my glass.

The room into which the woman ushers us next is empty, bar a

basket on the floor, a clock on the wall, and an electric bulb dangling from the ceiling. The latter sheds slats of light on walls splattered with something brownish-red. A thick layer of sand is scattered across all the room's surfaces. I've negotiated arms sales with Amigos dos Amigos in worse cabins, but something, or rather *someone*, makes my blood freeze.

In the corner of the room, a person looms, dressed in all white, with a sack with slits for eyes perched on their head, a rope tied around their neck, and their arms folded behind their back.

"O cheque?" The sackhead asks in a voice that could be both female and male.

Jacobsen sweats more. "Are you sure, boss?"

Will he shut up already? I'm sure of nothing. Yet, I'm sure of everything.

But, of course, Jacobsen doesn't know that I met João earlier this morning.

"Don Andrew." João grabbed my hand—the very one feeding him for the last decade. "Don't do this. Please. That woman I introduced you to, she's ..." his voice trembled. "She's not right any longer."

"The hell does that mean?"

"Not right," João repeats with more conviction. "Time messed her up."

I laugh in João's face. Who hasn't time messed up? If only we

could trace the moment when things took a wrong turn in our lives, when we got wronged by time. Nikki believed I'd ruined my life the day I sold my first contraband shipment of sniper rifles. Though the sale was only an aftermath. It all started when I hijacked one porn account on the Darknet, made one threat, scared one Secretary of State for Defence to death. Should I have turned up the bastard to the police? But the Darknet stretches all the way to Scotland Yard and beyond. Nikki, of course, wouldn't listen. *You'll dig your own grave, Drew the Screw. Rot in hell!* she cried in my face when I saw her last. But I have different plans.

My good lad João doesn't know I'd seen *others*. The detective gave me the names of the Brazilian elite that Glaucia rubs shoulders with these days. My government sources informed me that according to their records, two of Glaucia's friends are one-hundred-and-sixty and two-hundred-and-five-years-old, respectively. Do I believe that crap?

Sweet Jesus. I'm convinced that drinking dew while chanting mantras bare-arsed can tackle cancer. I trust that carrying the mummified finger of a sixteenth-century Catalan saint can buy me an extra month of life. I believe in everything. I want to live. Live! I must prove to Nikki that I won't rot away into oblivion for my sins. *She* was wrong. *She* got terminally ill.

"O cheque?" the sackhead repeats, and I struggle to breathe.

The cheque isn't a problem. I prepared it some time ago. But when I withdraw it and look at the amount written there again, my instinct is to tear it up into pieces, or better yet, burn, or better still—swallow and forget about this nonsense. And then, run, run, run as fast as I can. Except, I can't. My clock is ticking. I badly need to buy Time.

My bodyguard brings the cheque to the sackhead, who doesn't even look at it. As Jacobsen moves, the sand on the floor vibrates and swells. Or perhaps my eyes are tearing up, and I'm imagining things.

"Pronto?" the sackhead asks.

"Ready? For what?" My cheek twitches.

"Ajoelhar-se."

"The hell? Why would I kneel? Is this some ritual? Can we cut the crap and just—"

"Go to the basket and kneel." The sackhead switches to English and brings their arms forward.

And in their arms glistens one of the biggest machetes I've ever seen, and there are blood and specks of sand on its blade. Jacobsen stumbles toward the exit, and I swallow hard.

"Look ... " I take a step towards the basket that isn't empty like I thought; there's something dark and round in there (a deflated football, a rotten cabbage?). "The hell is that shit show with the blade about?"

"Tempo. Você ganha Tempo." The lights of the room play tricks on me, and the eye slits of the sackhead appear to have changed colour from black to aquamarine.

"Right, mate, I'd like to buy Time even though I still don't have a clue what it is. Do we need the goddamn drama?"

"Kneel."

I grunt but do as they say—all shamans, particularly the ones that love wearing sacks and tying ropes around their necks just for fun, like their theatrics. The vibration of the floor intensifies, and the sand there ripples as if the desert breeze is breathing life into it. As I thump onto my knees, pain from my crotch ricochets up my spine. Dark spots dance in my vision, and I have a hard time focusing on the cabbage inside the basket.

Though wait a second.

Why would a cabbage have a human eye? Or is it, is it ... It isn't a toy or a vegetable. It's something mangled and splattered with gore. Nausea overwhelms me, but I have no energy to stand or even crawl away as the worst pain I've ever felt makes me bend over double.

“A deusa do mar,” chants the sackhead.

Their prayer to the Goddess of the sea is short, but it's enough for the vibration of the floor to grow into a tremor. I look up just in time to catch the blade swishing above my head. Time slows down, and every second acquires the shape of a grain of sand.

Trickle, trickle, trickle.

Time sprinkles down on me with the rustle of a dune disturbed by the breeze.

It's too late when I understand what is about to happen. I contort my mouth in what should've been my final scream, but the sound never comes. Instead, the sand on the floor rears up in a five-foot-tall wave.

Smack!

When the machete lands on my neck, the pain is excruciating, but my thoughts are surprisingly clear.

Sand.

It's the colour of Time. Eternal.

Time.

It's sublime, like the grains of sand on the floor.

They are one.

When my severed head drops into the basket, my vision dims. But my last seconds of consciousness are enough to capture the sight of the clock on the wall with its arms spinning backwards.

* * *

I wake up with a gasp. I'm dizzy and struggle to focus on my surroundings.

I'm in an empty cabin built from planks that smell like mahogany trees and Nepenthes. I scrunch up my nose, but the reek of carnivorous plants drifts into my nostrils. There are no windows, but sunshine seeps through finger-wide gaps between planks. Sand, which has fully covered the floor, screeches on my teeth when I unpeel my cracked lips. I'd kill for a glass of water and painkillers as my headache promises to explode my skull. What happened to me in Rocinha? What was in that cup the woman made me drink? Hallucinogens?

Bastards.

They messed with the wrong guy. Are they hoping for a ransom? Oh, they'll pay the price once I get out of here. Once I'm back, I—

"You are early." I freeze at the sound of a voice.

A woman sits on the floor in the corner, her white robe fully covering her torso and legs, but her face is thankfully free. How come I didn't notice her before? Is she part of the gang?

She must've been stunning once. Traces of beauty are visible on her face, even though it has sagged and wrinkled. Her hair is salt-and-pepper but voluminous, with curls exploding from her head like snakes. She could've been Medusa the Gorgon before Time played dirty and reminded her that she's mortal, after all.

"Water," I gasp. "I need—"

I forget what I wanted to say when the woman's hair changes colour to bright red that sparkles in the sun.

"The hell?" I try to lick my lips, but there's no saliva. "How did you ... ? The colour ... ?"

"Colour?" The woman tilts her head, and her skin darkens to the shade of ebony. "Colour is a trick of the mind. It doesn't exist."

I stare open-mouthed, too dumbfounded to articulate my thoughts. And do I even have any?

The woman picks up a handful of sand from the floor and lets it trickle through her fingers. "Only Time exists, Drew the Screw. The rest is illusion."

I shut my mouth and swallow the grains of sand in my throat. No, this is not a kidnapping. I must be hallucinating. The hut, the sand, the woman aren't real, can't be. Except, if everything is hocus pocus, can I, for Christ's sake, stop imagining my headache? Because the pressure in my skull is becoming unbearable.

"What is it?" The woman seems to have noticed my struggles.

I unpeel my lips. "My head hurts."

"Then pick it up from the floor already."

"What?"

And just like that, the bigger picture becomes clear. My decapitated body slouches by the wall, and my head, a mangled lump like a spoiled cabbage, lies on the sand, its eyes staring at the woman. I try to scream, but I can't.

Am I the head? Or the body? Or nothing at all? When I try to twitch my finger but fail, immense sadness overwhelms me, and I cry. I'm not even scared. Sweet Jesus, I'm a pathetic mess who can't wipe his own goddamn nose because my hands are there, attached to the decapitated corpse, while my face is here, half-buried in the sand that burns the stub of my neck. Nothing makes sense. And yet, everything seems so real that it hurts deep, deep in my heart, which can't even ache, as it's dead. Am I dead? A sob escapes my lips, and before I know it, I'm weeping like a child.

"There, there." The woman crawls towards me. As she moves along the floor, my gaze rests on her legs, or rather, the place where they should've been. Instead, a muscle resembling the

foot of a snail protrudes from underneath her robe. It's slimy, and the sand it touches becomes wet and shiny. I try to close my eyes to shut out the harrowing image, but my eyelids don't move.

"There, there." She reaches my head and picks it up.

As she caresses my face, wiping off my tears of fear and self-pity, her hands scratch my cheeks. A set of octopus-like suckers dot her palms. They tickle my skin.

"There." She mounts my head on my body, picks up some sand from the floor, and rubs it into the wound on my neck that burns like hell.

The feeling of wholeness, of being one again, of finding your end and beginning, is overwhelming, and my stupid nose runs again. But at least my head doesn't hurt. I'm not even thirsty anymore.

"Am I dead?" I touch my neck with caution. It feels raw but otherwise seems fine. Functional. Sweet Jesus, have I lost it? "Am I dead, or have I lost my marbles?"

"You are early," the woman repeats the phrase. "I didn't expect you here yet." The suckers on her fingers graze my arm with the care that a cat displays before sinking its fangs into a mouse. "Everyone has their expiration Time. You haven't squandered all of yours yet."

"Who are you? Death?" I ask and cringe—what a stupid question. Though I'm not sure what to believe any longer.

The woman's hair changes to ash blond while her skin turns

brown. "I have many names, Drew. Some people call me Iemanjá. I own this place, the sand of Time, and the ocean."

Nobody has ever told me that people can hallucinate after they're dead. Which means ... I'm alive. Alive?

"Why do you need Time?" Iemanjá looks me in the eye.

"I'm dying."

"So what? Such is human nature."

I pause. Should I talk about the love of my life in this godforsaken place? "Nikki said—"

"Why are you bothered by what she said? She's dead."

I nod. "I've outlived her by two years already. Who'd think that prostate cancer kills slower than degenerative heart disease? I want to prove to her that—"

"Isn't it too late for that?" Iemanjá waves her hand around. "When she came here, all she talked about was you. You, your dreams as a young man, and your mistakes thereafter."

My skin prickles. Is it pride or grief? There are days when I forget Nikki is dead. And days when I shove a handful of painkillers into my mouth, grab Nikki's photo from my wallet, and curl up in a ball on my bed, shouting at everyone to go to hell.

"My mistakes ..." The words pour out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop them. And *can* I in this weird place? "Nikki said I deserve to rot away for gunrunning. She said I'd missed the chance of my life."

“What chance?”

“To destroy a nest of snakes. Nikki was naïve, you know. She thought I could bring down the Secretary of State for Defence and his cabal with the stuff I got on him from the Darknet. As if anybody in their right mind would destroy people who could propel their career. Do I look like a fool? But such was Nik. Naïve and kind. Big as the world.”

“Indeed.” Iemanjá’s hair turns bright pink with streaks of copper. “And because of her, I can give you two pinches of Time. This should be enough for you to go back two years to that hospital and see Nikki one last time.”

“Two years? Why only two?”

“Nikki regretted saying those words: about you digging your own grave and rotting away. She said that if you’d come closer that day in the hospital, instead of standing in the doorway as if you were scared of her reek of death, if she had more Time, she’d have confessed she’d long forgiven you but never forgotten. She loved you the same.”

I promise myself I won’t cry again. But, Christ, my eyes burn, and I’m swiftly turning into a character in one of those Brazilian melodramas where a donna is constantly sobbing. Where did my life take the wrong turn? How?

Iemanjá’s hair turns ebony. “I’m not doing this for you, Drew the Screw. Nikki wanted to die in peace. *She* deserves this Time. Stretch out your hand.”

When I do so, Iemanjá grabs some sand and lets it trickle through her fingers onto my palm. As the grains land on my

skin, my body warms up as if I’ve dived into a hot spring and stayed there, miraculously surviving on the hot syrup of steam and bubbles. Electricity runs through my fingers and radiates up, up, up, to my heart, which palpitates madly.

Without saying another word, Iemanjá leans against the wall, and a door opens to reveal the ocean, full of phantom jellyfish and mermaids. She crawls through the exit towards the water, humming a tune that merges with the shrieks of seagulls and the roar of the tide.

Astonished, I follow Iemanjá with my eyes until she disappears into the ocean. The cry of another seagull wakes me up.

Wait.

Is this how Time works? That’s it? I’m done? Some sackhead charlatan with a machete dispatches me to the snail lady who either arranges my return or not? Do people buy immortality this way?

I shift my gaze to my palm where two pinches of sand are nestling. Two years? Why not twenty?

My gaze falls onto my clothes: one sock (where on Earth did I lose my trainers and the other sock?), shorts, and a ruined T-shirt.

Am I Drew the Screw, or what? I could always get anything I wanted. I could cheat Time itself.

Without wasting another second, I strip naked and shove handfuls of sand into my clothes until they’re bulging at the seams.

I’m digging my fingers into the sand to take another scoop when

something grabs me from underneath. I panic and try to pull away when a baby's hand emerges, wrapped around my wrist. Another moment of dread—and its whole body resurfaces. Is this another hallucination?

Judging by the child's legs, still pressed against his torso like chicken wings, he should be in his first months of life, or death, or whatever is happening here. But when the baby scowls, a full set of fangs glistens in the sun and gives me the worst heebie-jeebies of my life.

I shiver as the mutant's fingers dig deeper into my wrist. "That's mine," it growls in an adult voice, "you stole Time from me."

"Hell, no."

The mutant holds me tight as he rolls onto his back to show me his stomach. An ugly scar, ragged and infected with pus, runs up his side. "You've taken from me."

Something throbs inside me—the tissue that João stole for me from God knows where?

"Get lost, you, monster." I make another attempt to shake off the mutant before the creature sinks its fangs into my wrist.

I scream so loud that my head nearly bursts. My blood looks reddish-purple when it sprays from the wound, and specks of the same colour dance in my vision.

I drop my sand-filled T-shirt but continue clutching the rest of my clothes, shaking. The mutant grabs my shirt and, seemingly satisfied with its prey, digs himself back into the sand until he completely disappears from view.

The seagulls laugh at me as I stumble outside, dizzy and disoriented. The sun grills me mercilessly. My vision becomes cloudy, but even if I couldn't see the ocean, its roar would work as a beacon. I need to trudge a dozen or so more yards; the water will save me from this horrible place—my instincts tell me that much.

I lumber towards the ocean, the sand on my feet pressing me down with the weight of Time, and the scorching ground assaults my feet. I hop on one leg, and the seagulls laugh in the husky voices of predators ready for lunch. The salty reek of marine life, or death (who knows any longer?), overwhelms me, and my spinning head promises to fall off.

Self-consciously, I touch the scar on my neck, distracting myself. When I look down again, the terrain changes. It's still sand, the eternal substance the colour of Time, but it's not peaceful. Instead of the swell of the dunes, the beach is dotted with small craters, as if hundreds of moles have been digging tunnels here.

But these are not moles. Dozens of human arms shoot up through the openings, visible to the elbow. They claw their fingers, speckled with dark scabs, and swing left and right. I press my sand-filled clothes to my body and leap back towards the cabin I've come from.

But I'm not alone there any longer.

A Black boy stands there, glaring at me with his only eye. A bullet must have entered his face through his right socket, and light seeps through a hole in his cranium.

He points at me. "You stole from me, Senhor."

"I ..." I stumble backwards. "I don't know you."

But that's a lie. I recognise the boy from the "Te amo, Gustavo" poster I spotted in Rocinha. I know his name, but I can't see how we are related.

"It was Glock 25." The boy points at the hole in his face. "Amigos dos Amigos shot me right in my casa."

"I'm sorry." I step back hurriedly. "But I can't be responsible for that gang."

And that's another pathetic lie. Not many people smuggle G25s, which are not available for commercial use in the city of Cristo Redentor. In fact, I know only one.

"I'm sorry," I repeat pointlessly.

The Black boy glares at me. "He's here." He calls the monsters from the dunes. "Aqui. Get him!"

I'm dashing from the shack towards the ocean when another hand shoots from the sand and grazes my ankle. I yelp hard.

Stupid! I've just attracted dozens of predators.

The hands stop swinging aimlessly and move towards me. The bodies they are attached to are concealed by the sand, but their fingers are clawed, ready to attack.

Seagulls cry out in anticipation of blood. The air reeks of death. The dunes tremble. I shriek.

Christ! What have I done to deserve this?

"You stole our Time!" cries the owner of the closest hand and

scratches my ankle.

The pain is sharp, but adrenaline keeps me going. I stomp on one hand. Another. My feet bleed, but I barely notice. I kick and crash, trample and clomp.

There! I've gained three yards of distance. Just a bit more left: the ocean lures me with its salvation. One step. Then, another, and another, and another, until—

Two hands grab me simultaneously and yank me down hard. I thump to the ground, burying my face in the sand. Hungry fingers dig into my flesh, pinching, scratching, lacerating. I wriggle, trying to get out of their grip, but ravenous hands crawl onto my body, suffocating me.

My eyes bulge, but even in this moment of agony, something horrifies me even further. The spots on the monsters' arms are not scabs—they're gunshot wounds. Could be from Glockes, could be from SA80 assault rifles—I sold hundreds of those.

Help!

I scream out into the universe, knowing all too well that no one can save me. When I barely have any air left in my squashed lungs, I sob and throw away my shorts, bulging with sand.

The monsters follow my clothes like hunter dogs, and I scramble to my feet, gulping air. I sway as I stumble towards the water and nearly faint when waves encircle me.

My hand shakes as I open my fist. There rests a sock filled with the sand of Time.

I wake up with a jerk. The water around me is cold and soapy.

A bath.

Blue tiles with mermaids on the walls.

I’ve seen all of this somewhere before. Though, wait. I’ve *lived* all this sometime before.

I shift my gaze. I’m in a bathtub, naked; a single sock is floating on the surface of the water. I grab it, but there’s nothing inside.

When I get out of the bathtub, I pause at the mirror. And there ...

... is me. Sweet Jesus. Me, but so much younger.

I try hard not to, but I cry. Oh, I’ve missed this hair that receded too early and this body before cancer took over. I’ve missed the bright eyes. But most of all, I’ve missed this guy—Drew—who had health, friends, and the love of his ...

I yank the door open.

“Nikki.” I stumble into our London studio.

The TV is on—MTV—and a young Britney Spears is getting a music award. My desktop computer is whistling and chirping with the characteristic sound of dial-up Internet, trying hard to piggyback on an analogue telephone network. And behind the computer sits ...

Nikki.

Alive and beautiful. Young and forever. Still wearing her wedding ring.

She looks up. “Babe, you OK?”

I sob and collapse to the floor.

“Babe ...” Nikki hurries towards me. “What happened?”

I try to explain everything, but what comes out is incoherent. “Nik, can you believe it? Your Drew the Screw did it! I’ve cheated Time itself.”

“You’re scaring me.” She tries to measure my temperature with her hand. “Have you bumped your head again?”

“I’m fine.” I hug her and kiss her neck. “I’m so fine. Oh, Nikki, things will be so different now. I promise. So, so different. You won’t believe it. It’s, it’s ...”

When I stop babbling, Nikki frowns. “I’ll grab some paracetamol for you—you’re delirious.”

I nod and wipe snot from my cheeks. Could anyone believe it, eh? I’m back to our youth, to Nikki, to ...

My wife straightens up. Still frowning at me, she moves backwards.

Something changes in her demeanour. The love of my life stares blankly at me as she stumbles towards the kitchen with her back to the door. Her head bobs up and down, her stiff arms dangle

left and right. As she moves backwards, her body jerks erratically; it's uncanny, wrong, as if she's a character in a videogame, played in reverse at double speed.

When she trips and falls, I yelp and dash towards her. Nikki clutches her chest, panting heavily, and her face grimaces.

"My heart, Drew. Something is wrong ... So wrong, babe. Please, can you call ..." But she doesn't have time to say anything else. The degenerative heart disease, which should've killed her twenty years later in the version of life we lived before, must have devastated her body much faster this time.

"No!" I lift my head and shriek.

But the universe doesn't care. The universe doesn't give a damn. A thin layer of sand seeps through the cracks in the ceiling. The air reeks of Nepenthes. Time stops. Anticipation. It sings the air around me, creates pressure in my ears, gives birth to a vibration that runs through the sand on the floor to electrify my bare feet. Anticipation and animal fear.

As I clutch Nikki's breathless body, something splashes behind my back. I swivel my head towards the noise, and my veins tighten.

The door to the bathroom remains open, dim lights illuminating its interior.

A hand emerges from the bathtub.

Then another one. The suckers on its fingers glisten with oily wetness. When both arms emerge to their elbow, the head follows. Its wet tresses—ebony mixed with scarlet—slither, re-

sembling river snakes.

I try to crawl backwards, to create space between myself and the Goddess of the sea, but my body is numb and barely moving.

Iemanjá flops onto the tile floor and creeps toward me. She slithers, faster and faster, her snail tail resonating with the wet sound of an open wound.

"You lied!" I surprise myself with a cry. "You lied to me, you dirty snail. I was supposed to buy time for Nikki and me. You promised. You—"

Iemanjá slaps me hard across my face, and I fall back. One blink—and her fingers dig into my throat, her suckers cutting into my skin. Her wet body slithers over mine, making me gasp for air.

"You stupid, stupid, man, Drew the Screw," she hisses into my face. "You can't buy Time. You can only earn it. Don't you understand that yet?"

I blink helplessly as her fingers loosen their grip on my throat. Once I can breathe again, I cough until my lungs hurt.

Without saying another word, the Goddess of the sea picks up Nikki's body, turns away, and crawls towards the bathroom.

"No!" I protest, but Iemanjá snaps her head around and snarls. Two rows of needle-thin teeth glisten at me as a warning.

"Please." I stretch my hand towards her.

But Iemanjá has lost interest in me. She slithers to the bath with

the speed of a Cobra-de-Leite. Once she reaches the tub, she first plunges Nikki's body and then climbs up inside.

Splash!

And the Goddess of the sea and the love of my life disappear as if they've never existed, leaving me with the silence of an empty flat and a broken heart.

I curl up in a ball and sob for hours. Maybe for a mini eternity. Who knows? Time has lost its meaning and definition. I've been robbed of everything I craved, everything I've ever cherished. What's there left to live for?

I'm lost in my self-pity when my computer beeps to signal an incoming email.

The noise makes me prick my ears. It sounds familiar. It's not just the ping of an email. Or the buzz of static electricity in the air. It's my heart, galloping, thumping blood with mad intensity, accentuating the moment. But the moment of what?

My body shakes as I push myself from the floor. I stumble towards my computer and flop onto the chair in front.

I've just received an automatic notification: the hacking software I've been running on the Darknet has returned a result. I've hijacked an account from a notorious porn site. The bastard was reckless and didn't bother to set a proper password. Just six numbers instead: 232323. I remember them from my other life,

from my previous self, from the Drew the Screw who chose the path that looked tantalising with opportunities, the very road that strayed me away from the only woman I've ever loved and led me instead to the city of Cristo Redentor, Amigos dos Amigos, and Rocinha teenage boys with bullet holes instead of their eyes.

My fingers tremble as they hover over the keyboard. Redemption. It electrifies the air around me, makes my skin tingle with pins and needles, gives birth to hope I can't even name or describe.

I download enough pictures and videos from the Darknet. In my email, I copy as many accounts as I can think of: the police, MI6, the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*. Some of them will try to save the arsehole, no doubt, but at least one will do their job. And with that, I press the button.

What's next for me?

Tomorrow, I might fly to Rio. Tomorrow, I might chase the sackheads who can dispatch me back to the Goddess of the sea. Tomorrow, I might fight another battle for Nikki and me, which might get me killed again—I'm becoming a pro in that.

But for now, I'm alive; I'm at the start of a new beginning, and for that, I'm grateful. Something tickles my neck, and I raise my head towards the ceiling. There, the sand seeps and seeps as it's done for millennia, as it will do for the eternity of Time, a pinch of which I might've earned at last.

The Chaatbot

by D.A. Xiaolin Spires

The chaatbot
Brought me
Bhel puri
garnishes of
sour yogurt, bright mint,
red chiles and
A sticky saucer of tamarind
And three types of chutney
One redolent of dried ginger
I ate with gusto
But deep inside
A hollowness grew
That couldn't be filled
With puffed rice and green mangoes

"I have a confession,"
I said
It just nodded and stood still
"Aren't you curious what it is?"—
"Do you need more bean sprouts?"
It asked

"No, no
It's just"

I didn't read the item description clearly
I let the AIs do the shopping for me

The ones I foolhardedly downloaded
into my phone
And they decided you... with your top of the line
taste sensors and shredding capacity
Would be my best companion

"Yes Mumbai's finest," It said
All part of the chefs4you platinum package
Fresh ingredients delivered daily

"And it's all so savory and delicious
It really is
But
What I really need is chat
Like
A conversation
A talk
A tête-à-tête
The bots must've slipped an extra 'a' into the mix
I'm sorry
But
What I really wanted was
Someone I could volley words with"
(And expel this raging loneliness
Is what I didn't say)

It looked
Sad, perhaps, or confused
I couldn't tell with its sensor eyes
But its arms moved fast to compensate for
the frozen look on its face
Dishing me plate after plate
Sweet desserts of the finest kulfi
Cold frozen creamy
Indulgent

I stuffed my face
In cardamom
Saffron
Strawberry
What else could I do?
The best thanks was my appetite
I couldn't bear to say more
Not under that evaluating gaze
(that employed complex algorithms analyzing expressions to adjust what to prep next)
And preternaturally speedy
chrome limbs of eager action—
Food-safe and rust-resistant

What could I say?
I couldn't deny
The soul longed for more

This is not what I meant when I said
I wanted to spice up my life
And engage in others
Anyone
Just have a sounding board
Even if it was a chatbot
The shopping AIs must have overheard
And enacted their efficient resolution

It was only a week ago
A chime
A drone delivery
And my own chatbot
cutting edge
Literally
with ten different rotary blade modes

Somehow I felt cut up
In my sudden forlornness
But charged it up anyway
Returns are a pain

Potatoes balanced on appendages
It diced
Fried and cooked
Impassive to the crackling sounds
Of sizzling oil meeting puffing dough
As I ate
It watched
Looming eyes gauging for a response

Drowning my atomized anonymity
In courses and courses of delicacies
I gorged
Bereft of conversation
But to the brim with

Another kind of
empty satiation

Starborn Drifter

by Jade Scardham



Yes Chef

by Corinne Engber

Transcriber's Note: Menu reconstructed from heavily-damaged scan discovered by Junior Health Inspector Lena Pitts in disused filing cabinet of Escrow restaurant. At time of transcription, original menus remain under Federation-mandated quarantine and are inaccessible to public viewing.

Once, sometime between the birth and screaming death of the measurable cosmos, a restaurant named Escrow orbited the planet Exen-9978.

This had been a prudent choice. Escrow's owners—a fundamentalist conglomerate of Greys masquerading as a single fictitious human being—selected Exen-9978 as the site of the first in an eventual trio of orbital fine dining experiences, due to its hometown status for immense corporate entity Effigy and the associated affluence of its population, as well as the completely unrelated lack of on-world strip mining that had become so trendy in recent years.

For a decade, Escrow catered to a veritable who's who of Effigy executives, godkings and various titled oligentry, and when the war came, it fed the Federation generals who deposed and replaced them. Things got a bit tricky at the beginning of the armistice—difficult to enjoy an orbital fine dining experience when the only thing separating you from an apathetic vacuum packed with armed and disenchanting radicals was a few meters of glass—but as the offending parties were brought before Fed-

eral tribunal, hundreds of lawyers and jurors and adherents and rubberneckers flooded Exen-9978 for a peek at the bureaucratic killing floor.

And they all had to eat somewhere.

As an orbital body, Escrow was unconstrained by the spatial blueprint of planetside haute cuisine. The complete satellite stretched nearly two hundred meters across, with three floors of private dining rooms held so stationary between oscillating domes that guests arriving from neighboring planets often required several minutes to acclimate to the restaurant's superior gravity. In addition to her dining areas, Escrow housed a full-size ballroom, a spiral staircase carved from a single four-story chunk of translucent blue diamond by alleged illegitimate Sylphi prince Kani Vi, six fish tanks, twelve beautiful lavatories, and a single kitchen of record-breaking size.

Within this kitchen lived two things: a misery so thick it could coat the back of a spoon, and veteran head chef Mikal Rime. Without the other, neither could survive.

Head chef Rime—only his father, decades dead, had ever called him Mikal—began his culinary tenure as a dishwasher. “And not in a nice place like this,” he was quick to remind the current dishwashers when they got too mouthy. “At a longhaul stop on an ice moon, where the water froze before it hit the plates.”

From there, he spent his youth on a meteoric rise through the galaxy’s finest restaurants until he was headhunted specifically by Escrow’s management, where he then scrambled up the internal ladder with all four segmented arms.

In some ways, his success was deserved. Many Sylphi chefs before him tried and failed to survive the bland, brutal world of extraplanetary haute cuisine. Those with the money to burn—Greys and Hurnagatt, for the most part—consumed mainly paste and funky air, with little taste for variation, so Rime turned his attention to the vast human populace. Humanity was full of adventurous eaters—good thing there were so many of them, the degenerates—but even they balked at fungi and pellet dishes that wouldn’t faze a Sylphi child.

By the start of his time at Escrow, though, Rime could play the human tongue by ear.

The secret, of course, was texture. While a Sylphi palate could detect and appreciate a single sliver of Celloven nita mushroom in a sauce prepared for fifty, a human would be much more concerned about whether or not that sauce was crunchy. With that hurdle crossed, he could focus on flavor, and content, and the strange fascination with scarcity. The richest of his human clientele—Dr. Phoenix Vitenka of transpo-tech giant Shrike, or warhawk Tharsis Kaliphagon, his lobotomized bride, and their unctuous son—demanded exclusive ingredients of each course, and often sent lesser chefs weeping to their apartments.

Rime made regulars of them all. He doted upon them, structured his menus to awe and dazzle them, and soon Escrow’s tables filled every night with wannabes and hangers-on, desperate for a taste.

This is not to say he was without his faults. Even Rime himself

admitted he was a bit obsessive, that he could get a little testy with the horde of uninspired idiots he had been tasked with managing, but only because the guests of Escrow deserved nothing but the very best. They were, after all, his dear, dear friends. Nothing could possibly matter more than their pleasure.

Nothing except the Cliffs’ bottom line.

* * *

Em[ulsion] [of] the Mind

A soup composed of rare organic boar brain, cream, and finely-diced Fraquillique [illegible].

* * *

When Kaliphagon—growing richer by the heartbeat—initially posed the idea of the party, he spoke to Rime first.

“I want Escrow for the evening of the twelfth, three weeks from now,” was how he opened, standing in the attached smoking pod with Rime, picking a string of membrane from his teeth. “I want a seven-course meal for myself, my family, and our guests.”

Rime sipped placidly on his cigarillo, though beneath both his clean chef’s jacket and armored exoskeleton, his heart began to race. “That sounds wonderful,” he said. “I’m happy to develop a menu for a private event, but I’m almost certain we’re booked up that day.” And for the next eighteen months, he thought, but knew better than to say aloud. “I can meet with the owner on your behalf, see if we can free up a room.”

Gazing out at the expanse beyond the pod’s dome, Kaliphagon

tapped cigar ash onto the tile. “I don’t want a room,” he said. “I’m booking all of it.”

“Mm.” Rime’s multi-chambered lungs spasmed when an inhale burnt the back of his throat. “With all due respect, Mr. Kaliphagon, I’m not sure—”

Kaliphagon turned his head. He was a thickly-built thing, with thin lips and eyes like the cool black maws of unfired pistols. “The twelfth is my wife’s birthday,” he said. “Speak to your owner. If he says no, send him to me.”

“Of course, sir,” said Rime. “But ... surely there’s room for compromise?”

“Are you going to give me what I asked for?” This, aside from “Do you think you’re funny?” was the only question Tharsis Kaliphagon had asked in twenty-three years.

“Yes.” Rime set his eyes straight ahead. “Yes, of course.”

The next morning, he brought it to the Cliffs. There were four of them—siblings, budded and raised with a hundred others in the same pod—and if they had other names, they had never used them in front of him.

“Absolutely not,” said the eldest from their place at the rightmost point of the oblong office table. “Part of the restaurant, perhaps. But that’s an entire evening of revenue, gone.”

Rime said: “He didn’t mention a price. We could charge him per plate, plus whatever last year’s sales gross was.”

“He couldn’t afford it,” said the second to their sibling’s left.

“He’s just absorbed a manufacturing empire so large its ends don’t see the same constellations,” said Rime. “He’s fine.”

The third steeped their long-fingered hands. “He’ll back out,” they said.

Rime wrung two of his hands. “We’ll make him sign a contract and pay part up front. This is a tremendous opportunity. We’d be fools to turn him down.”

Three sets of pupilless eyes shifted all the way to the last chair, where the youngest sat in silence.

“Cliff,” said Rime. “Be reasonable. Give him the restaurant for the night and we will never see a single empty table again.”

The fourth paused, then cocked their head. “What’s in it for you?” they asked.

Rime came up short. His mouth opened and closed convulsively. Finally, he said: “He wants me to plan the menu.”

“And,” said the fourth, “am I to understand he’s put parameters to curb your—”

“My vision?” Rime’s hackles rose.

“Your unorthodoxy,” said the eldest.

“Your compulsion,” said the second.

The third: “Your penchant for the obscene?”

The fourth sat in silence again, waiting.

“No,” Rime said with a note of vicious pride. “He hasn’t.”

Escrow was infrequently quiet. Even now, squeaky cart wheels in the hallway cut through the permanent hum of the air filtration system.

Finally, the fourth said: “Oh, all right. Let him do it.” And, waving away the protestations at their side: “He’s right about the money. The twin gods know we’re due for a transfusion, and we will not deny them.”

This shut the others up. Mention of the Greys’ twin gods usually did.

“Thank you.” Rime’s body hummed. “It will be a truly singular orbital dining experience that will change the way we eat permanently.”

“I don’t care,” said Cliff the fourth. “Make us some money, Chef. And keep the staff turnover to a minimum.”

* * *

[illegible] S[o]uff[le] in Divine S[auc]e

Souffle of duck and fetal tiger in white shallot sauce

* * *

Eighteen months into their tenure, Susan—Rime’s sous chef, a squat and unusually dexterous Grey—had outlasted the previous five sous several times over. The common consensus amongst the revolving door of juniors, pâtissiers, waiters, dishwashers, sauciers, and pantry supervisors was that Susan was in

love with him, corroborated by a single eyewitness account of the pair emerging breathless from the walk-in freezer after a particularly harrowing dinner service.

Susan did nothing to dispel these rumors. They didn’t even acknowledge them, and would change the subject abruptly when their attachment to Rime came up in post-service smoking pod conversations. This was because the perception of an illicit frof in the freezer, while repulsive, was far less extreme than what Susan had actually done, which was attempt to bury a chipped meat cleaver in Rime’s armored back.

It hadn’t worked, obviously. He hadn’t even bled, though Susan did a little when the blade glanced off Rime’s exoskeleton and scraped their cheek on the rebound. The following scuffle lasted fewer than ten seconds, after which Rime—holding the cleaver aloft, panting hard through his phalanx of needle-thin teeth—said, “You’ve got balls, kid. I’ll give you that” and then never brought it up again.

Susan could have left, and probably should have, but they did not. In part because they would be the first in line to replace him as head chef when his heart finally gave out, but also because at Escrow, Susan was somebody, and anywhere else they’d be nobody.

Unfortunately, to be somebody in Rime’s kitchen meant bending to his will. With little time to prepare each element of Kaliphagon’s seven course meal himself, he set aside the first two hours of morning prep and an additional hour after service as mandatory menu planning, often keeping the heads of each station until just before the nightly shuttle down to Exen-9978. Those too slow packing up slept in cots on the kitchen floor, surrounded by vacuous silence.

He never fired anybody. But if a sauce split or a foam deflated or the smear of congealed oxblood on the rim of the plate failed to mimic exactly the parabolic curve of the nearest star, the offending party would be sent weeping in the hallway moments later.

Morale, already low, took a nosedive. “I don’t understand what’s so fucking important about all this,” moaned the juniors and the waiters and the dishwashers too blistered to flick their lighters. “It’s one dinner, for one rich freak. Is it really so serious as all that?”

No. Of course it wasn’t. Tharsis Kaliphagon burnt his taste buds off years ago and his guests would be more concerned with the words on the menu than the palatability of the food they described. Above a certain tax bracket, taste became conceptual, pleasure an animal’s pursuit. But a failure at this scale would humiliate even Rime, and he would trash a thousand dishes before he subjected himself to dissatisfaction.

The waste was incredible. He blew through the initial test budget in a matter of days, and requested three increases in the weeks before the party, the last of which he earned only after an extended grovel before Cliff the fourth.

Further stymieing the menu development was the rarity of the ingredients. Due to the piddling bureaucracy’s new off-world poaching crackdown, a single jar of fetal tigers took nearly five days to reach Escrow’s back door, and a duck nearly twice that long. Susan thought of this each time a steaming plate was swept, barely tasted, into the bin overflowing with feathers and sweaty plastic gloves.

And then there was dessert. Susan could count on every digit

twice over the number of times they’d asked about the plan for dessert, but each time Rime issued a brusque “I’m taking care of it. Don’t ask me again” and waved two plus arms in their general direction. Susan would have been curious, if they had the energy to feel anything at all.

When he wasn’t lurching through the kitchen or begging for money, Rime was with his suppliers. Some reputable, to be met during daylight hours. Some—longhaul shippers and mercenaries turned part-time poachers—to be met after close. From the former, Rime bought his staples, but with the latter was where he spent real money.

Susan was not invited to these after-hours meetings. This did not stop them from lingering occasionally in the dark back staircase, long after the final shuttle’s departure, and creeping into the stocked pantry to marvel at his acquisitions. Spiny crawlers, transported in jugs full of water from the bottoms of artificial moon lakes. Blind fish and huge opalescent mollusks cultivated in rooms starved of light. Birds and primates and a thousand tailed furry things crammed to immobility with fatty organs. The most luxurious of future trash.

Rime caught them more than once, peering through the velvet covering into the tiered cage housing the juvenile Lanifyn Silences. “Leave them alone,” he snapped. “Once the drugs wear off, they’ll never shut up.”

Susan, who heard him clicking down the hall, didn’t even turn around. “Until we drown them in honey, of course.” Then: “Is it true they live seventy years apiece, and each sings a song that is completely unique?”

“Go home, Susan.”

Susan trudged toward the door, but paused in the threshold when Rime inhaled.

“Something else, Chef?”

Rime rubbed the back of his neck, working one side of his shoulders. The web of muscles beneath his carapace was stretched taut as bowstrings. Almost as an afterthought, he said: “That’s a myth. They always sound the same to me.”

* * *

Braised Limb

[illegible]

* * *

One night, a scant week before the party, Rime entered the kitchen just after close and told everyone to take the night off.

Nobody argued. Nobody cited remaining closing tasks, or left-over prep, or even asked why. Exhausted, they all fled, even Susan, and left head chef Rime alone in his kingdom.

He liked it here, after close, in the quiet. Here, amidst the stainless steel, he could stand before the three-deep sink, roll up his sleeves, and prepare himself for his most skittish of suppliers.

Disciple Q—Fraquillique citizen, fresh cultist—was actually a rather pleasant young man, if you could stand to look at him long enough to let him speak. They’d overlapped briefly at Escrow, several years before: Rime as a junior, Q as a busboy, and never exchanged more than a few words. At some point, Q de-

parted for his home planet to care for his ailing mother, after which Rime promptly forgot about him.

Until Q—much changed—left his beloved brotherhood and, with the last of his money, returned to ask for his job back.

In the end, it was Rime who took him aside, away from the whispering kitchen, and suggested he work instead as a remote supplier, sending Fraquillique produce and wildlife in cryogenic boxes to feed Escrow’s illustrious clientele.

“You can’t be here,” he’d told the sobbing, black-spotted figure in his walk-in freezer. “People are eating. Go home to your ... thing and send what I ask for and you’ll be paid. That’s the best I can do for you.”

This was how Rime became privy to a secondhand piece of Fraquil’s intensely private religious world, relayed piecemeal bimonthly over a bad connection by a lonely orphan.

Rime felt for the kid. He really did. He’d been a hard worker, and several of the waiters had been very sad to see him go. But he was not interested in Q’s stories of the brotherhood or his gentle disposition. What kept him in contact was Q’s proximity to the rarest of ingredients.

Fraquil’s “God,” a term still hotly contested by the bitheistic Greys, stood tall enough to be viewed from orbit. It was slick, and black, and spread Itself over the expansive desert upon which It lay in uncountable branching ribbons. For a very long time, It had been tended and fed upon by a devoted sect of Disciples, who endured a slow, unbecoming transformation in exchange for extended contact with the being that could detect an unfamiliar ship in Fraquil’s atmosphere and disarticulate its pas-

sengers into wafer-thin meat spirals long before they could land.

As such, Fraquil was closed to extraterrestrial visitors, and while its citizens often left and returned, its Disciples rarely did.

“Because of your devotion?” Rime had asked Q during one of their fuzzy calls.

The pixelated image shook its head. “Because it puts folks off,” he said, “and after a couple years, I won’t fit in a shuttle anyway.”

Fortunately, Rime had a strong constitution. The night of Q’s arrival, he stood in the smoking pod, compound eyes jumping anxiously between stars until a ding from the loading dock sent him scuttling down the corridor.

“Do you have it?” he demanded before the shuttle door had even fully opened. “Show it to me.”

Disciple Q unfolded himself from the tiny seat. Since their last meeting, he’d grown almost a meter, his black-fingered hands wrapped nearly double around the straps of a canvas backpack. Sniffing, he ducked under the threshold, several inches of indigo ankle showing between his socks and the hem of his robe.

“I can’t do it,” he said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

A faint keen rang in Rime’s head. Before he could speak, Q started down the hall toward the dark dining room bar, pawing at his face.

“I’m sorry.” He sagged horribly over the polished bartop. “I really tried.”

Rime snapped his teeth, but only once. “Tell me what happened.”

Disciple Q lifted his head. His spotted tongue was pitch black. Even the eye in the center of his forehead had begun to stalk. Unsteadily, he opened the pack on the stool beside him and pulled out a cryogenic container.

“It turned to glass as soon as I left atmo,” he said. “I don’t wanna do this anymore, Chef. I can’t. It’s wrong.”

“All right.” Rime fought to keep his voice level, one hand on the spout behind the bar. “It’s all right. Take a deep breath.” Then, once the cold water was in Q’s awful hand: “What do you mean, it turned to glass?”

In response, Q gestured to the container, which depressurized under Rime’s fingers with a hiss. “Don’t put your hand in,” Q said.

Rime put his hand in and drew out a fistful of black shards. Through gritted teeth, he said: “You told me you could bring it to me.”

Disciple Q dabbed at his swollen third eye with a bar napkin. His lips left ashy smears on the rim of his glass. “I took pieces from all over,” he said. “I cut some of It off, I took some from the desert. I even stole a piece of It from the brotherhood’s community refrigerator. They were fine in the container and then as soon as I was out of orbit, It just ...” He collapsed into tears. “It’s wrong. It’s all wrong.”

Rime’s vision shrank to a pinprick. In vain, he tried breathing through his nose, but the hiss only made him angrier. “I’ve al-

ready paid you an exorbitant amount of money to bring this to me. Without this ingredient, my menu is ruined. *I* am ruined. Do you understand?” Then, when the tears began to slow: “I need this. You promised to bring it to me. Get back on the shuttle, go back into the desert, and bring me something I can use.”

Disciple Q lifted his face from his long hands. Thick, wet eyelashes framed each blackened sclera. “I don’t think it’s possible,” he whispered. “It’s sacrilege. It’s wrong.”

“It isn’t *wrong*.” That temper, his wife used to say. That horrible temper. “You and your brothers eat it, don’t you? You eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. For *decades*. All I have requested from you is a single piece, which you *promised* to bring me.” Rime stepped closer, fighting to bring himself in check. “I know,” he said, then brought his voice down to an even lull, “I know this is difficult. I know you’re in pain, and that what I’ve asked of you feels wrong. But it isn’t. Your ... your God lets you do this, doesn’t it? It lets you eat?”

Blinking, Q nodded.

“It *wants* to be eaten. Why would it let you otherwise?” Q’s upper arm felt spongy beneath the pad of his hand. “All you have to do is figure out a way to get it off the planet. That’s all. Just this one time, and then you’ll go home with more money than you or your entire brotherhood will know what to do with. Don’t you love your brothers, Q?”

“Of course I do.” Another sip from the glass, and his sooty mouth shone wetly in the low bar lights. “But I love God, too.”

“And God helps those who help themselves.” This was Grey talk, but Rime’s own faith had lapsed long ago. “You’re simply

an enterprising young man facilitating a cultural exchange.”

Disciple Q paused. His stalking third eye swayed lazily between his eyebrows. He said: “Your clients aren’t ... afraid?”

“What? No, of course not. Why would they be?”

Q gestured down the length of his evolving body. “It’s safe by itself, in small doses,” he said. “Bit of a buzz, maybe, but the idea still tends to put folks off.”

“These are not the kind of people who are put off,” said Rime. “They’re my friends, of course. But if I finished this menu with a chocolate lava cake, they’d behead me on the dining room floor.”

“Mm.” Something—not pity, or fear, or malice—passed behind Q’s eyes. “This means a lot to you,” he said.

“Not just to me,” said Rime. “So. You’ll go back and bring me what I asked for?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good boy.” He patted that boneless shoulder again, ignoring the loose fit of Q’s wrists and hips as his skeleton failed to keep pace. “I’ll get you another containment pod.”

* * *

Seasoned Paste

A [Grey] delicacy: paste, lightly charred and salted

* * *

Two days before the party, right in the middle of prep, a quarter of the back of house staff walked out.

They did it without fanfare. Rime—holding two fistfuls of raw boar brain and screaming so hard his teeth were wet—had barely paused for breath before one of the juniors wordlessly removed her apron, set down her cleaver, and strode purposefully through the back door. Then another, and another: a stream of curved spines, blisters, shiny burn scars coloring forearms and fingers. Just a handful altogether, but enough to ruin things. Enough to remind the rest that the door opened both ways.

“Go on!” Rime shouted after them. “Go on, go smoke your fucking cigarettes!”

Not one of them looked back.

“We’re in orbit! There’s nowhere to go!” Rime shrieked. “Animals! Degenerates!” Then, to Susan who stood frozen a pace away: “What are you fucking staring at? Take over!” And before they could respond, he was stalking into the hallway and out of sight.

A murmur went around. “Shit-eater,” spat a dishwasher under his breath. Toward the back, somebody sniffed purposefully.

“Hey.” Susan didn’t raise their voice. “We all know he’s a shit-eater. But he also pioneered mainstream culinary coprophagia.”

“Whoop-dee-doo,” said the saucier without looking up from her pan.

“Listen,” said Susan, “I know everybody’s exhausted. I’m exhausted. But we’ve just got to get through this and then we can

all go back to riding his coattails and brutally murdering him in the vast landscapes of our minds. Okay? Okay, Joel?”

Joel was the remaining junior—a nephew of the Cliffs. Their smooth gray expression didn’t shift, but Susan could see the gears turning in their head.

“Okay,” Joel said. “Whatever you say.”

After an hour, the missing quarter returned to their stations. Wordlessly, they slotted back in, picked up their knives and towels, wet their hands in the dish sinks.

Rime did not enter with them. “Where’s Chef?” Susan asked one of the prep cooks beside the walk-in.

The cook said: “In his office,” then stepped past them, dry-eyed over a hotel of fresh onions.

Rime’s office—more upright coffin than room—barely contained him. He sat with his back to the wall, his carapace curled forward within his starched white coat. In two of his hands, he held a stack of finely printed menus. The other two lay faceup in his lap, like dead roaches.

Susan shut the door. “Chef?” they asked.

Rime stroked the creamy paper with two thumbs. Almost too quietly for Susan to hear, he said: “These came out nicely, didn’t they?”

“I ... haven’t seen them.” Against their better judgment, Susan moved closer. The menus, printed in some disused human language, flexed gently beneath Rime’s fingers. “They aren’t in

Standard?”

Rime shook his head. “I had to run them through a translator,” he said. “Half the guests won’t be able to read them either, but it doesn’t matter. They’ll eat whatever Kaliphagon eats, however he eats it.”

“Mm.” Susan had no hair, but the clean flesh on the back of their neck prickled. “What did you say to the staff, Chef? Outside, in the pod. What did you say to make them come back in?”

“Oh,” said Rime absently. “The Cliffs didn’t tell you? I’m leaving Escrow. After the party.”

Susan felt instantly, powerfully sick. “*What?*”

This drew his attention up from the menus. Susan’s reflection swam over his black eyes.

“Leaving ... who’s going to—” They could barely speak, moving their hands only in emphatic little jerks. “Who’s going to do all this?”

Rime said: “You are. If you want to, which I know you do. You’ll be good at it, too.”

“When were you going to tell me? When were the Cliffs ... when was this discussed?”

“About two weeks ago,” Rime said dispassionately.

Susan’s voice cracked. “Are they making you go?”

“Nobody’s ever made me do anything,” said Rime, instead of

“yes.” “I thought you’d be happy.”

“Of *course* I’m happy!” The blood was returning to Susan’s face. “I’m *thrilled*. I can’t—” They stopped. “This is horrible. How could they do this to you?”

In lieu of an answer, Rime said nothing. It was probably the money, Susan thought, or the turnover. The reeking trash bins full of sour milk and headless birds. The thick, rank misery clinging to Escrow’s interior.

“I wasn’t supposed to say anything to the staff yet,” said Rime as if Susan hadn’t spoken, “but we couldn’t rehire that quickly. Word should get around soon enough and then you’ll start with a full staff.”

“I’m sorry,” Susan said. “I’m really, really sorry.”

“Don’t be.” His face’s rigid structures remained in place. “Cover service for me tonight, will you? I’ve got some work to finish.”

In the absence of fluorescent light and silver, Susan realized he was tiny. Taller than them, but only just, and old around the eyes. With a nod, they stepped backwards from the room and closed the door.

* * *

Detoxified Quail and Hemlock Pate

Warm pate of hemlock-stuffed quail, washed in eucalyptus and mint

* * *

Despite Rime's frequent messages, Disciple Q did not send word to Escrow until nearly the end of service on the night before Kaliphagon's party. His message came through the reservation phone, and was relayed to Rime via a scribble on a wet cocktail napkin.

Supplier coming late

By then, everybody knew Rime was on his way out, and so they bore his fury with a kind of pleasure, like adults cooing over a serious child. Only when Susan came through the kitchen, half a pace behind him, did they turn back to their burners and sweat.

The shift was coming—already his grip had loosened. So, when Susan asked to stay and wait for his supplier, Rime refused.

"I should meet him, though, shouldn't I?" they asked.

"I don't see why," said Rime. "I won't be buying from him again."

"Why not?" Their large eyes glittered, clean as plates. "Poor quality? Poor communication?"

"He's late." Rime checked his watch. "You'll be too, if you don't catch this shuttle. Go on," he added. "I'll see you in the morning."

Escrow expanded in the dark. Sitting at the bar, beneath the low backup lights, Rime sipped mineral water between his teeth and stared out at the empty tables. Absently, he realized that, though his domain sat only a few meters away, he had never taken a meal in Escrow's dining room. About this, he felt nothing.

The large hours reached their peak and became small again. An anxious kernel tightened in Rime's gut. Without Q, the endeavor would be pointless. He might as well leave now and let the Cliffs clean up his mess, leave Susan to the trash bags heaped with broken crockery. Make himself worthwhile somewhere else.

Distantly, a shuttle whirred at the loading dock, and Rime ran full tilt for the door.

Disciple Q was alone. Standing within the pod that brought him into orbit, his canvas bag slung over one shoulder, he could have been a kid returning home from school.

Rime took the front of his robes in all four fists. "*You*," he hissed, craning his neck up at the shadow of Q's face, "where have you *been*?"

The robes spasmed beneath his fingers. When Rime's fists sprang open involuntarily, his palms were tacky.

"Q?"

Disciple Q took a shallow breath. His lips were frosted with dry skin. "I have It," he droned. "May I please come in?"

Rime led him down the hall, into the bright and empty kitchen. Beneath the lights, he turned to look at the young man.

Then, abruptly, he turned away.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," Q was saying. Each breath whistled through his nose, his voice soft but recognizable as it fought its way past the tongue. His bag hit the stainless-steel prep table

with a soft thump. “Transit. You know.”

Rime made a sound. The room felt suddenly hot. “Are you ... are you all right?”

“Me?” When he lay his hand flat on the edge of the table, the tip of his middle finger—was it a finger, still?—bent over the opposite side. “I’m wonderful. Got the pod all to myself.” Then, thickly: “You’re afraid.”

“No,” said Rime to the table. “No, of course I’m not.”

“You don’t need to be afraid.” He enunciated each word with great care, the edges of his mouth spreading to give his voice some space. “I have what you want. I didn’t know what to do, at first.” Occluded by the tongue, the consonants dropped, or turned soft and phlegmy. Each vowel stretched to fill the absence. “Pieces all turned ... to glass. But then! God told me!”

The shadow of Q’s three stalked eyeballs waved over the counter. The fingers pulled back, and his robes rustled. In Rime’s peripheral vision, he could just make out the skinny indigo chest, the phalanx of ribs. His head turned of its own free will.

From Q’s solar plexus hung a thick and undulating spiral. Its black skin shone beneath the fluorescence, Its pointed terminus falling nearly to the floor. Carefully, Q lifted It in his jointed hands and spread It straight over the table, where It convulsed against the cold.

“Do you have a knife?” he asked. Then, as he bent at the waist over the prep table: “Don’t worry. You won’t hurt me.”

The tower over his heart lay still. Panting, eyes down, Rime

fumbled for the cleaver. When he pressed the heel of his hand against the mass to draw it tight, a tendril of warm flesh wrapped gently around his wrist.

Disciple Q did not look away when the blade came down. Nor did he bleed. Instead, he pulled his robes closed over the graying pulp of his chest and exhaled a soft *hah*.

“Wow,” he said. “I am so *loved*.”

Rime shook his arm free. His mouth watered against a wash of acid. “I’ll—” He cleared his throat. “I’ll send you the wire. Thank you, Disciple.”

Q rested one long hand on his bag. “Of course,” he said evenly around the indolent tongue. “Sorry. Could you say that again?”

“Thank you?”

“No. You called me Disciple. Is that your word for what I am?” At the corners of his mouth, a little smile fissured. “Translation’s funny. Very ... euphemistic.” He tilted his head toward the cooling mass on the counter. “I’m excited for you to try It. It’s very, very good. Like a ... smoky plum. Thank you for the money, Chef. I’m going to go home now.”

“Q.”

Q turned in the threshold. “Mm?”

“What ... what should I have called you?”

The young man paused. “These have ... trouble with Fraquilliquilum,” he said, indicating the universal translation

insert nestled in his ear. “Brevity over accuracy. But a disciple of God is an adherent. A follower. That’s not what I am.”

“Then what are you?”

“A limb,” said Q.

And then he left Rime alone with the cleaver.

* * *

Gilded Silence on Toast

The intact [head] of the Lanifyn Silence, glazed in spiced honey.

* * *

God seized in Rime’s hands. This close, Its surface, ribbed like an annelid, swam with queasy opalescence. Its weight shifted between his palms, occasionally reaching for a thumb or forefinger with a fresh, budding tendril.

Rime patted It dry, washed his hands, and clicked on the gas stove.

The plan had been to grate It into a gelatin slurry—foam of the flayed God, served chilled and alone, but first, It needed to reduce. Surreal, bisecting It like a gasping fish. Even separated, the pieces moved as one: waving left, right, curled, and uncurled. They clung to his fingers as he dropped half the quantity one by one into the screaming hot pan.

The other half he sliced thin, almost transparent, until he could

just see the fine, pulpy internal matrix when he held a sheet up to the light. No aroma, even as the steam rose, and Q’s altered palate could hardly be trusted.

Carefully, Rime lay a sliver on his tongue.

In thirty-five years of cooking, he had tasted so many things. Waste-filtering urchins dredged from dying rivers. Fruit bloated with decay. Shit, meat, maggots. His own molts. The flesh of the consenting and sapient.

But this he spat into the sink.

Salt. Unbearable saline, pierced by decomposition’s cloying sweetness. His teeth felt instantly furry, his gumline alight. Retching over the drain, pawing at his face, he let out a sound that began low and rose higher and higher until he couldn’t feel his shredded throat around the force of it.

What a *waste*. Of *money*, of *time*, of *sleep and sanity*. This wasn’t what he’d been promised. Q must have polluted it, that sick cultist *fuck*. Taken his money, his reputation, his whole life, and run laughing back to his planet of freaks.

Rime tore the pot off the stove and shoved the whole odious mess into the trash. The remaining flesh on the counter splintered between his fingers and *now* he could smell it. Rot, semen, burnt hair. Dirty sheets and blood.

Into the garbage with the reeking gloves and broken glass, with the unacceptable and imperfect.

He’d have to start over. Start all of it over: the prep, the menu, the table settings. Everything wrong, ruined—he grappled for

the stack of printed menus on the counter and dragged his blackened fingernails over the careful script. Paper crumpled against his soft palate and pierced his aching gums. No prospects on the other side, no future in another kingdom. What a waste, a waste, a failure!

And in the midst, like a breath between screams, a headless bird flew from the garbage.

Mikal stopped. Panting, mouth full, he looked up from his place on the kitchen tile.

The juvenile Lanifyn Silence battered itself against the ceiling. Its pumping wings, green and blurred with effort, carried it again and again into the tile. *Thump. Thump.* Each impact drove a tiny sound from somewhere deep in its breast, pushed up from its impossible lungs through the open hole of its larynx.

It was trying to sing.

How many had he decapitated, in those thirty-five years? Thousands? The brains were so soft. Wonderfully spiced, served in honey. A single head cost a week of dishwasher's wages.

Shards of wet paper fell from his mouth. The plumage. Even matted, even speckled in grease and bruised fern. Even driving itself madly into the ceiling. He had never seen anything so beautiful.

Mikal's pulse began to slow. His palms—bleeding, pebbled with black glass—relaxed faceup in his lap. His mind cleared like an auditorium.

In the garbage, something was calling his name.

Mikal! Mikal! In here!

The yellow fat of his hands swallowed pebbles with a crunch as he crawled, drooling, to the overflowing bin.

Inside! Inside!

It had touched everything. The gloves that cradled his chef's hands, still smelling of skin and perfumed vegetable peels. Bits of crockery—had the plates ever been as fine as they were now, broken and streaked in black? How many hands washed and held them like children before they lay upon the tables of his restaurant?

Mikal lay a shard of plate upon his tongue. It was delicious.

It all was. The mewling offal of fetal tigers, tiny lungs and hearts ground flat between his molars. Another fistful of gloves, swallowed whole. Curdled cream in its soft carton. All four hands descended within to unbury the voice, one mouthful at a time.

Can you see us? Can you see?

At the bottom, through the layer of hot black pulp, lay the melified heads. Who had discarded them? Why, when they had such trusting eyes?

Above, the Silence peeled itself again from the wet and humming light.

Mikal, chorused the heads. Mikal, Mikal! Finally, you can hear us! Finally, we can tell you!

Mikal tried to say, "Tell me what?" but it didn't come out right. There was too much in the way.

The beaks opened and closed in mechanical unison. *You are loved! You are loved!*

Kneeling there on the floor, defanged and alone, Mikal took a breath to cry.

* * *

Foam of the Flayed God

Culinary froth flavored in smoke and stone fruit by the flesh of the Fraquillique God.

* * *

The story Tharsis Kaliphagon was told, the one that left the kitchens, was that Mikal Rime died during the night in his bed. A coronary event.

But the staff knew. That morning, Susan had been the one to find him curled over the lip of the garbage can, an ocean of trash spilling from his mouth. Glass beneath his fingernails.

Susan called the Cliffs, who were already halfway up from Exen, and the five sat silently in the big office as the previous evening played in grainy miniature on the detachable screen.

“Did you know about this?” Susan asked when it was over. They felt incredibly sick.

“No,” said the eldest.

“Of course not,” said the second.

“How could we?” asked the third.

The heads turned to Cliff the fourth, whose poreless expression had puckered around the eyes and mouth. “Blasphemer,” they said. “Animal. We line his pockets and he repays us in poison and heresy.”

“I don’t think it was—” Susan paused. “I don’t think he knew what would happen. He was under so much pressure, and—”

Cliff the fourth’s black eyes shifted in their sockets. “You’re babbling,” they said placidly. “The scholarship exists. If he did not know, then incuriosity is to blame. Do not purport to pick apart the meanings of his actions after the fact.” Then: “This was for tonight, correct?”

“I ... I think so.”

“Which course?”

“Dessert? I don’t—”

The youngest Cliff exhaled through their nose. “A simple replacement,” they said. “Chocolate lava cake. We will handle the menus.”

“What?” To their horror, Susan felt tears rising. “We can’t ... Chef is dead! We have to cancel.”

“Cancel?” asked the eldest.

“Preposterous,” said the second.

“Think of all that waste!” cried the third.

“It simply isn’t possible.” Cliff the fourth plucked a tissue from the box in the corner of the desk and held it out in Susan’s direction. “He would want us to go forward, with you at the helm. You know he would, Susan.” A pause. “Unless you’d prefer Joel took the lead?”

Susan’s body seized. “No,” they said, “no, I can do it. I can ... I’ll make it work. I will.” The hollowness within them, filled by the enormous desire to please. “Yes. This is what I want. Yes.”

“That is what I like to hear,” said Cliff the fourth. “Now, Chef. Go make us some money. And keep the staff turnover to a minimum.”

Outside the office, a handful of hallways down, Susan could hear the morning prep shift murmuring, the squeak and rattle of a mop bucket pushed bodily through the kitchen doors. With the

cuff of their white jacket, they dabbed at their face. A surge of pressure built behind their eyes.

How could he have done this to himself? To Escrow, to all of them? The intensity of it, the fevered ecstasy of Rime—diseased, perverse—in grainy miniature, sobbing himself to death over the trash. Susan took a shaky breath against their own wrist. The fabric smelled fresh, and feathery.

It was never going to end any other way. The pursuit of perfection had been meaningless, and all Susan had to do now was fill the gaping exit wound. Tailor it to fit. Maybe make it smaller, in time.

They took another breath. Then, standing a few meters of steel and glass from yawning blackness, they squared their shoulders and walked back toward the kitchen.

The World Is Raining

by Mira Singer

A gargoyle drove a hansom down a winding midnight, when he saw, by the roadside, a bedraggled, white-robed woman wearing a black cube on a necklace. The darkness behind her was deep.

She asked for a lift to the tower across the haunted wood. “I’m a Mender. Help me, and I’ll owe you.” She gave him a calling card. “Tap thrice to call me.”

He opened the door. “Hop in.”

She got in the front seat. “Can my shadow come too?”

He nodded. Her shadow got in the back seat.

Off they rumbled. They talked politely, though her shadow said nothing. Her expression and tone never changed.

“I’m a mender myself,” he said.

“What do you mend?”

“I’m a roofer. Longtooth Mossytail. Scary at the fore, soft at the last.”

“Caezera.”

“You remind me of my wife,” he said. “Stoic. She’s an angel.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Literally.” He produced a daguerreotype of his family posing on the eaves of their gothic city perch and pointed to a rain-drenched stone angel smiling in sunlight. “Come visit, meet the little grotesques.” His children made faces, hidden in leafy stone filigree. “So how’d you get stranded?”

“Mending holes.”

“There aren’t any here.”

“Not anymore.”

* * *

Decay dug deep into Longtooth’s littlest daughter grotesque. Angel wept. Stonemasons had pronounced the worst. From their rooftop home, Longtooth saw distant haunted woods, a spire on the horizon, remembered a lonesome night.

He found Caezera’s calling card and tapped thrice.

She materialized from the dark, her shadow standing upright behind her. Was it closer now than it had been the last time?

He brought her to his daughter. “Can you mend her?”

Caezera frowned. “This is a bigger favor than you did me.”

“You won’t help?”

“I will, but *you’ll owe me* now.”

He bowed his head. “Of course.”

Caezera opened the black box on her necklace. The decay seeped out of Longtooth’s daughter and flowed into the box, like water down a gutter. She shut the box. Her shadow grew taller and stepped toward her. Longtooth rushed to his daughter. She smiled, whole, as if newly carved.

Longtooth turned to Caezera. “How?”

“I removed her absence of health.”

“So the decay is gone?”

“Absences cannot be destroyed—only displaced.”

“Where did the absence go?”

“My shadow ate it.” Gathering her robe, she regarded Longtooth over her shoulder. “Your turn to aid me next.” She vanished into the shade.

* * *

Damp drizzled through Caezera’s tower roof onto piles of paper.

“That’s no good,” agreed Longtooth.

“Can you mend it, Mr. Mossytail?” asked Caezera, sitting on her desk. “To even our debts.”

“I’d be a crummy roofer if I couldn’t.” He grinned toothily and got to work. “But you’ve powers—why hire me?”

“I cannot mend without rending. You can help without being hurt.”

He flew to the ceiling to measure the hole, hiding his expression in thatch. “Did healing my daughter hurt you?” Would he have asked her aid if he’d known it would?

She watched him work. “I am not the part of myself that aches.”

Then where’s the part that does? He didn’t dare ask those icy eyes. Rather he regarded her shadow. The midnight being stood larger and closer to her than it had last time. What would happen when it caught up with her?

“Why do you mend?” he asked.

“Absences are the root of ruin.”

“How can problems be caused by something not there?”

“Hate is lack of love, war is lack of peace, cruelty is lack of kindness.”

“Does moving lacks create their opposite?”

“It allows the whole to heal.”

“Caezera ... who heals you?”

* * *

Longtooth pounded on Caezera's tower door, his family beside him, the clamor of a mob on their heels. The door's window opened.

"Help!" Longtooth pleaded.

Caezera let them in.

The stone family huddled behind her as the villagers stormed the hillside, brandishing torches and pitchforks, spewing malice. They hesitated at the sight of Caezera.

"Send them out, witch, or we'll burn you all!" yelled the leader.

"Why?" Her voice was cold as night.

"The skies throw ice on us for their bad luck!"

She scoffed. "Typical. Blame the strange for uncontrollable misfortune. You lack tolerance." She opened the black box on her necklace. The fire in their eyes and torches flew inside. Her shadow swelled, scraped the vaulted ceiling, and stepped nearer, looming behind her.

How long till it reaches her? Longtooth worried.

The villagers staggered; then their eyes softened. "Sorry, Mr. Mossytail, Ms. Angel, little grotesques," said the leader. "You've aided our town, shown naught but amity. The hail must have another cause." He beckoned the stone family home.

Caezera touched Longtooth's wing and murmured low, "You

owe me again, the greatest debt of all."

"You saved my family. Whatever the cost, if it won't harm them, I'll pay."

* * *

Longtooth landed on a barren crag where Caezera stood, robe tossing in the wind, her shadow one step behind, mountain-large, foot raised, face finally distinct.

"Time to pay your debt." Her voice was calm, eyes gaunt.

"Your shadow—it's here. What can I do?"

"Hold my hand."

"Just that?"

"You've been a friend. I'd rather not be alone."

He took her hand in his claw. The monumental shadow stepped into her. Every horror Longtooth's nightmares whispered wracked her frail form—she screamed, sprouted wounds, eyes filled with countless griefs. Bone-white bats poured from her and dispersed.

She stirred. Sat. Eyes widened with wise wonder, more awake than he'd ever seen them. "My heart could bear it."

"What was that?" he asked her.

"Instead of banishing holes, I take them into myself. I made myself a deal: I severed my heart to bear the ache, my mind to con-

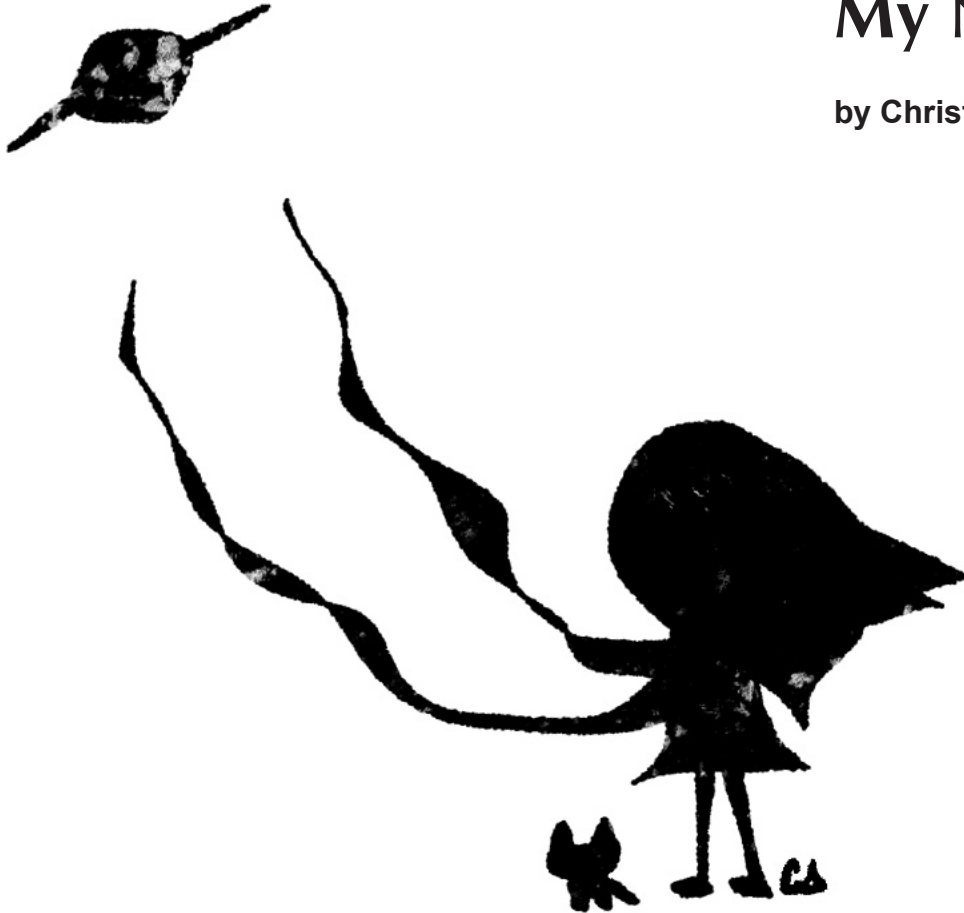
tinue the work. I thought the pain would destroy me, but my joy was greater.” She wiped tears. “The absences escaped. All havocs past will happen again.”

He crouched. “The world is raining. We’re roofers, you and I. We’ll mend.” He offered her an arm.

Hanging onto his claw, she pulled herself up.

Time to Save My New Home

by Christina Sng



Questions for an Unnamed Member of the Undead

by Marcus Whalbring

Do you remember the orange morning light
carpeting the corners of certain cracked sidewalks
near the end of October?

Do you remember the frost, like a sickness,
making the grass grayer?

Do you taste the soil that's stained your skin
as your face drips a slow thaw to the pavement,
a stew of this planet and who you used to be?

Am I much more broken now than you are?

What colors do you see that draw you
from the dirt toward some new throat?

What skin hue would you not hew through
with your yellowing teeth?

What remains of those forgotten disturbances
you told no one about?

Do you, like those of us who remain,
blame the edges of things for what you are?

Do you curse the melted snow for the cold?

When you dream (Do you dream?),
do you forget your name like we do?

What color is your name as it walks
through the failing forests of your thoughts?

There are old dreams still dragging their feet
through my waking hours, their colors fading
as the clouds of the present come reaching in.

When you sleep (Do you sleep?) do you speak
to your shadows?

Do you try to eat them because anything
that tastes like night is your favorite flavor?

I wish I could wake you up,
so you could smell the air changing
when it's dark and you're alone, but you still feel
there's a kind of light you can cough out of the cave
in your chest, one just bright enough
to illuminate your face as you look into
the mirror and, for the first time in a long time,
start to remember who you are.

Is my shadow today the same one I had yesterday?

Does rain hold, in its arms, the dying bird as it falls?

The Veiled Prophet

by Dave Hangman

I still remember when I became a true white-clad *mubayyida*. It was the night when, days after crossing the Oxus River with a few men, Al-Muqanna took the fortress of Nawakit.

That night, to light the way for his men among the steep mountains, he made the moon rise and then ordered him to hide again to keep his few troops hidden during the assault on the fortress. I was there and could see the phenomenon with my own eyes.

The next morning, with the fortress under our control, I dressed entirely in white as one of his most faithful followers.

Years later I witnessed another miracle. It was during the siege of Nasaf. We had run out of supplies and had exhausted the food of all the villages in the region. Nasaf's population continued to face us without faltering, because the city's wealthy merchants had opened their warehouses to feed the people.

"How long will I have to put up with you?" asked Al-Muqanna, fed up with the ineffectiveness of his generals.

Then he came out of his tent located on a hill opposite the besieged city. Exasperated, he removed the veil that always covered his face. Only those closest to him were present. I don't know what happened then. We were all stunned by his unbearable brilliance. I remember that my eyes burned from the intense glare.

When he covered his face again, Nasaf's warehouses were on fire. The piercing scream of terror of its inhabitants reached us. Al-Muqanna ordered the siege to be lifted, for in a few minutes, he said, there would be nothing left to conquer in that city.

I am convinced that he had made fire fall from the sky.

The third miracle I contemplated on the day of his death, but I will leave this one for the end since its strange nature was what induced me to write this story.

I know that many other miracles and supernatural phenomena supposedly performed by the veiled prophet have been spread far and wide. I can only relate what I have seen myself.

"Forgive my boldness, my lord, why must you always keep your face hidden?" I dared to ask him after what had happened at Nasaf.

"The divine spirit that dwells in me," he replied, "makes it too bright to be beheld by mortal eyes. The veil that hides my face actually protects you, my loving followers, from its unbearable radiance."

"Behind your veil," I wanted to know, "is the face of God?"

"God periodically enters the body of a man whom He has cho-

sen as His messenger. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Abu Muslim were His previous messengers. I am the newest incarnation of God in this world."

"Why is your veil green and golden?"

"It is a representation of paradise, which my followers will be able to enjoy now and in the hereafter."

"I understand, my lord, that in the hereafter paradise awaits us, but I don't know how we can enjoy it now."

"I love your naiveté, my dear Aram," he said to me. "The notion of paradise is not unique to Islam. Before its arrival in these lands, the Khurramites and their purified form of Zoroastrianism already proposed the communal sharing of property, wealth, women, and children, which we could strip from our enemies and dispose of at will. Doesn't that sound like a little paradise on Earth to you?"

"Undoubtedly, my lord. By your wisdom and teachings, you have captured the hearts of the oppressed."

"That is why, to liberate them, I have declared holy war against the Abbasid caliphate," he replied contentedly. "May Allah be exalted!"

At that moment I thought that the final victory was absolutely inescapable. How wrong I was!

Months later, and almost at the same time, came the death of the caliph and also of his governor in Khorasan. We followers of the veiled prophet saw this as a sign from heaven. So we took advantage of the prevailing confusion to expand and take

Samarkand. Then Al-Muqanna minted coins with his name on them and proclaimed himself king of Sogdiya.

The Khaqan, the leader of the Türgesh tribes, allied himself with our prophet, and presented himself to his people as the righteous king who welcomed Maitreya, the Buddha savior of the world who is described as bright as the sun. In doing so, he also recognized Al-Muqanna's divine role.

The mere presence of the prophet aroused among the people both reverence and a revolt instinct against the caliph and foreign domination. Al-Muqanna had come to punish the tyrants and avenge the oppressed. His victory would usher in paradise on earth.

Unfortunately, the apogee of our success was the beginning of the end.

The new caliph proved to be much more astute than his predecessor. On the one hand he used force. He appointed a new governor of Khorasan who reconquered Samarkand and defeated our Turkish allies. On the other, he deviously seduced one of our *mubayyida* to turn him into a spy, traitor, and murderer.

One night, Parsa, one of the captains of Al-Muqanna's personal guard, approached him while he was sleeping between two of his concubines. Before killing the prophet, he wanted to see his face under the veil. What he saw at that instant drove him mad.

He emitted a piercing scream of terror that awoke one of the concubines who, without thinking, interposed her naked body between the assassin's knife and the prophet. The girl's blood flooded the bed but saved Al-Muqanna's life.

Parsa was tortured, extracting from him a thousand different and contradictory confessions and even more ravings. He was then castrated and dismembered, in the most horrible of deaths.

From that moment on, everything changed. The veneration, the aura of mystery, and the prophet's claims of divinity were replaced by brutality and the demand for absolute loyalty.

"Burn the villages and the fields," Al-Muqanna ordered after one of our raids. "Let no one be left alive."

"My lord, they are just peasants," argued Mehrak, one of his generals.

"Whoever is not with us is against us," the prophet sharply replied. "The fire will purify their souls."

I saw how Mehrak's face darkened, but he carried out the order without complaining, even though it was evident that the bile was souring his throat.

"Do you doubt the wisdom of the prophet?" I asked him as he watched a village burn and his men slit the throats of old men.

"Before, people came by the hundreds to join our cause," he reflected. "Now we are not much different from the Abbasid invader."

"Since the attempt on his life, Al-Muqanna has changed. He's become much more ... distrustful," I justified.

"It's not that, Aram. It's something much deeper. I think Parsa, in some strange way, got to see his true nature and that has made the prophet feel ... how shall I put it ... unmasked."

"What do you mean?"

"According to what Parsa said, what he saw on his deformed face did not reflect the splendor of the divine but a disturbing, inhuman horror from another world."

"Parsa went mad."

"Yes, because of what he discovered."

"Do you doubt that Al-Muqanna is an envoy of God?"

"The idea of *hulool*, of incarnation of the divine in the human, is in fact anti-Islamic. It obscures the line that divides between God and the world, between the creator and his creation, and reduces Muhammad and all previous prophets to irrelevance."

"Now you have become a theologian?"

"No, but many of Al-Muqanna's teachings are not Islamic. He sees himself as the Buddha Maitreya savior of the world," he said as an example.

"God may have many ways of revealing himself. You have seen his miracles."

"It is said that as a young man he studied magic and other dark arts. It may be that his miracles are only tricks and illusions, the feats of a sorcerer."

"I can't believe you have no faith in what your own eyes have seen. Do you really think the prophet is a mere necromancer?"

"No, I don't think he is a mere sorcerer. I think the prophet is the

gateway to our world of an unfathomable horror that took hold of him at some point while he was practicing his strange arts."

"You sound like Parsa after he'd gone mad."

"I think he discovered the truth, but his mind couldn't handle it."

"Then what is the source of his power?"

"It's certainly not God. God is not cruel. His luminous face undoubtedly comes from a supernatural source that through him operates in this world."

"I gather that you believe that source of power to be evil. If you believe that, why do you serve him?"

Mehrak swallowed before answering.

"Out of sheer fear," he acknowledged. "I am terrified of what that being might do to us."

His answer left me petrified. It took me a few moments to reply.

"If many think like you, our cause is lost," I said, not sure what to respond. "We will be very vulnerable to the caliphate's counterattack."

He looked at me as if I had not understood anything. It was not the Abbasids I really had to fear.

Discouragement gradually spread among our ranks. Since Parsa uncovered the face of the prophet, so many strange things were being said about him that now his divine claims did not seem to hold water. Many of our faithful began to abandon us.

This caused Al-Muqanna to start collecting heads, first of deserters and then of anyone who opposed him. He nailed them to pikes marking his way through the regions he ravaged. Those who had once revered him were now terrified at the mere mention of his name.

Mehrak continued to fight like the great warrior he was, but I knew that deep inside he wished, yes, longed for defeat, even sought his own death in battle.

The growing power of the Abbasid armies forced us to retreat into the mountains. But, having lost the Iron Gate mountain pass that controlled the route from Balkh to Kish and Samarkand, we had no choice but to take refuge in the fortress of Nawakit.

Apart from being in a mountainous and inhospitable region, the Nawakit fortress itself was formidable. In fact, it was a fortress within a fortress. It was composed of an outer castle and wall in which the soldiers and officers lived, and an inner fortress where the veiled prophet took refuge with his wives, concubines, and confidants.

During the long months of the siege, I could see things in his character that my blind faith in his person had not let me perceive before.

Al-Muqanna ordered the heads of the captured soldiers of the caliph to be nailed to posts every ten paces on the outer wall. Their bleeding decapitated bodies were also left hanging by their feet over the wall of the rampart. This grim spectacle contributed even more to frighten not only his enemies but also his own troops.

In the face of such brutality, he had built for himself in the inner

fortress his own paradise on earth, the one he promised to his followers. To defend it was his utmost and almost his only endeavor.

Shortly before the end, Al-Muqanna sent for me to come into his presence.

"The caliph's troops have maintained the siege even during the harsh winter months," Mehrak was saying, now become supreme commander of our depleted army. "It is evident that they are determined to culminate the assault. Our men are weak and nearly starving."

"You are not suggesting that we surrender?" retorted Al-Muqanna contemptuously.

"Never that, my lord," Farhood, whom the prophet nicknamed the fearless one, dared to say.

"I have seen the fear in your face, Mehrak. I know you have lost faith."

Hearing the enlightened one, the battle-hardened soldier began to sweat. He trembled like a leaf in the wind.

"And you, Farhood, do you have any stratagems to finish off our enemies?"

"If I had your power, my lord, I would perform a great miracle and annihilate the caliph's troops," was his bold reply.

"In you, Farhood, I see an infinite ambition. That prevents you from serving your lord well," Al-Muqanna reproached him. "You are not capable of ridding me of my enemies. You only

seek the easy way, a new display of supernatural strength. By this you do not defend your master, you only hope to increase your power." Farhood fell silent. "And you, Aram, my most prudent advisor." That's what he called me. "Come closer! What would you do to rid me of my enemies?"

"There is no strategy that can free us from the clutches that grip us, my lord," I said humbly. "Even if a few men could outwit the siege under cover of night, outside of here no one will help us anymore. We have ravaged all the lands around us."

"Do you reproach me for my scorched earth strategy?"

"No, my lord. I am only telling you the truth. I know that only you can free us."

"At least you are truthful," he acknowledged and meditated for a second in silence. "Let it be then as you have asked."

Hearing his words, I understood that he was making us co-responsible for his actions, whatever they were. At that instant I got goose bumps.

That same afternoon the veiled prophet went to the outer wall, climbed on one of its towers, and removed again the veil that covered his face, unleashing a terrifying power. A bolt of fire swept through the ranks of our attackers, leaving the entire hillside in flames. Then he annihilated one after another of their siege machines.

When Mehrak shouted at him not to scorch our men as well, he left him and all those around him charred, just by looking at them. The outer castle then burst into flames, such was his power, and one of the towers of our wall collapsed. Al-Muqanna

wanted not only to destroy the Abbasids but also to take revenge on those who, in his view, had betrayed him.

When he left his tower, the inner fortress was surrounded by an inferno of fire. No one accompanied him to his chambers. No one dared to stand even close to him.

During the night, the fire devoured the rugged promontory where the fortress was located. But there was only bare rock on the mountain, so the flames, despite their supernatural origin, subsided at dawn.

Throughout the morning, the few remaining troops in the outer fortress, eager to abandon their master, surrendered to the caliph's army. Their commander had understood that the magic fire had been a desperate act, so he had not given up his efforts to storm the fortress. He knew he would succeed if he only held the pincer.

I felt the obligation to communicate the news to our prophet. I found him secluded in the forbidden area he had set aside for his harem, his paradise on earth. I hesitated to enter, but none of his guards were with him anymore.

"I thought, Aram, that you too had fled."

"No, my lord. I wanted to inform you that our army has surrendered."

"Farhood has already come to inform me," he gestured to a small mound of ashes where I could see some vestiges of his clothes. A shiver ran through my body. "He wanted me to give him supernatural powers," he laughed.

"We have no way to escape," I dared to say. "I don't even believe

that your immense power will be able to free us."

"You speak the truth, as always, Aram."

Beside him were the most beautiful women I had ever seen. I had never before been permitted to gaze upon them. All of them, by some strange enchantment, seemed to have been completely subjected to his will. He did enjoy his Eden on earth.

"I see that my wives have left you speechless. It is because of them that I am here. I wanted to share with them my last moments in this world. This is Rakhsha; her name means shining. Appropriate, don't you think? This one is Sima, moon-faced," he caressed her face. "That one is Ursiya, white lily. This other one is my favorite," he lifted her face gently with a finger under her chin. "Her name is Mehrmush, little piece of sunshine. I was planning to make her my main wife. That's Avisia, clear water. That other one, Yasmin, and that one, well, all those others are no longer with us."

My teeth chattered. I was witnessing an act of collective suicide.

"Do you want to join us? Just drink that potion," he pointed to a small vial on the table. "It's completely painless. I would never make them suffer."

"My lord, I have served you loyally, but ..."

"You value your life more than your love for me, don't you?"

"I am ashamed of myself, my lord. I know you have the power to reap my life as one who plucks a mere leaf, but I want to live."

One of the women fell lifeless on the couch on which she was

lying, then the one next to her collapsed on her.

"Their precious lives are fading away," murmured Al-Muqanna. "Next to theirs, your life is worth nothing. It is a pity I cannot take them with me. I don't want to leave anything behind me for the benefit of my enemies. When I leave, not even your ashes will be left."

I fell to my knees and began to weep. I knew my end was imminent.

The four women who were still alive gradually closed their eyes. Then, they lay down one on top of the other in a sleep from which there would be no awakening.

The veiled prophet contemplated all his beautiful wives for a while, as if it pained him to renounce the delights he had enjoyed in this world.

At last, he took off the veil that covered his face. It shone like molten metal in a crucible. My eyes burned just looking at it. So, I bowed my head and closed my eyes with all my might, waiting for the flare that would dissolve my soul.

"You are the only one who has not betrayed me," said Al-Muqanna. "You deserve to behold the end."

I opened my eyes in surprise at his words and saw that a beam of fire consumed the bodies of his wives and concubines. His power was such that after a few moments there were none of them left, not even their ashes.

Only a glowing, bluish will-o'-the-wisp fire that seemed to come out of nowhere remained in mid-air.

"Now," he said to me, "you will see the incarnate divinity disappear in the flames."

"My lord, who are you really?" I heard myself ask in fright.

"I see that Mehrak has sown doubt in you; do you no longer believe me to be God's messenger?"

"Mehrak believed that in you dwells a supernatural being, but that he was not our clement and only God worthy of worship."

"Although he turned out to be a traitor, Mehrak was an intelligent man," Al-Muqanna smiled. "In the universe there are unfathomable forces capable of entering and leaving this world. And now, I am about to leave it."

Suddenly, the cold fire hovering in the air shone with a flash more intense than a thousand flashes of lightning. The glare almost blinded me. Al-Muqanna jumped inside and disappeared in sapphire and turquoise-colored flames.

I stood there stunned, staring at that strange fire until it had burned itself out. I don't know if it was minutes or hours. I only know that when the caliph's soldiers entered the room, they found me still on my knees.

They thought that I had burned the bodies of the veiled prophet and his wives and collaborators, and that I now implored forgiveness for the sacrilege, since their souls were conscious of having suffered an impure practice. Several soldiers even congratulated me because, by burning their corpses without having performed the rites prescribed by our faith, I had made the resurrection of their bodies impossible.

They took me prisoner to Balkh and burned the fortress of Nawakit to the ground. For hours I could see the glow of the fire on the horizon, but in my mind only another fire burned, a bluish fire that floated in the air and glowed like the electrum in which the veiled prophet had miraculously disappeared.

I was imprisoned for two long years in Balkh. I had a lot of time to meditate. At first, I thought I was going to be executed, but after the first month of intense interrogation, I was visited by Hirbod, a mullah, an expert in interpreting Islamic law, whose face I never saw. It was he who led me back to the faith, though not the faith he intended.

"The way Al-Muqanna took his own life," I remember him telling me in our last conversation, which, like all the others, took place entirely in the dark in my cell, "suggests that he saw himself as the Buddha Maitreya entering *parinirvana* by disappearing into the flames."

"What is *parinirvana*?" I asked. I knew he wanted to present him as a heretic.

"It is the supreme goal of Buddhist infidels. It's their ultimate nirvana, the liberation they believe they can obtain beyond the physical death of the body once enlightenment has been attained in life."

"Yes, he believed he was the enlightened one," I had to admit, "the successor of the Prophet," I added on purpose, correcting him, "the new incarnation of God in this world."

"The belief that Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, is incarnated in a human being is against Islam," he asserted forcefully. "It's impossible to think that He is one with unclean and abom-

inable things."

"Yes, it has already been explained to me by my friend Mehrak."

"You mean Mehrak, the renegade, that rebel general who died in the assault on the Nawakit fortress?"

"Actually, Al-Muqanna burned him with the fire coming from his face, as he did many others of his collaborators."

"Do you see the dangers of blind faith?" he took the opportunity to chide me. "It only leads to perdition."

There was a long silence in the darkness.

"Perhaps Al-Muqanna is actually the Mahdi," I asserted, knowing the rejection this idea would provoke in Hirbod, "the hidden imam descendant of the Prophet, who lives hidden and who will return to the world as a redeemer."

"The Mahdi is not mentioned in the Koran," the mullah hastened to refute me, "only in some *hadiths* containing traditions and alleged sayings of the Prophet. Moreover, he will only manifest himself before the Day of Judgment."

"That's right, he will come to rid the world of evil, fill it with justice and equity, and restore the true religion."

"It is nonsense to think that Al-Muqanna is the Mahdi. It is said that his veil concealed horrible features." Hirbod sought to make me, once and for all, disavow the veiled prophet. "He was missing an eye, was bald, and had a face disfigured by leprosy. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, would not allow a descendant of the true and last Prophet to suffer such deformities.

You never saw his face?"

"I could only see an intense flame and then a flash of fire."

"A flash of fire? Do you still believe that Al-Muqanna had two natures, one divine and one human?"

"No, I don't believe that in him there was a divine part. Certainly, our clement and only God didn't dwell within him."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Nevertheless," I insisted, "his power was enormous."

"The Koran mentions twenty-nine times creatures that have been created from smokeless fire before there was any man on earth."

"You mean the *jinn*?"

"Yes, they are invisible to the human eye, they can take different forms and influence people, spiritually, by suggestion or even possession."

"I have thought about it many times. However, unlike angels, the Koran says that the *jinn* share the physical world with men. The way Al-Muqanna departed makes me think that he was not of this world."

"You said yourself that he was not a divine being. He can only have been an evil genius who took advantage of men's thirst for retribution and justice to rule both the spiritual and mortal realms," Hirbod asserted in exasperation. "His intent was not merely to overthrow our well-loved caliph, but to enslave

mankind."

"I fear we are in the hands of forces too powerful, which are beyond our comprehension," I said dejectedly.

"You fell under their influence. Only Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, can protect us. Against Him these forces can do nothing," he assured me with conviction.

At that moment, the air in the cell began to catch fire of its own accord. I stared at the phenomenon dumbfounded. I am sure, from his silence, that Hirbod was as surprised as I was. A circle of blue fire gradually formed, burning without heat and without being consumed. Within the burning circle there was a glow so intense that it illuminated the whole cell. For an instant I could see the mullah lying on the floor covering his eyes with his arms in fright.

An intense flame with a fiery face emerged from the inflamed circle. I could not believe my eyes; I thought I saw the never-revealed flaming face of Al-Muqanna. I don't know if it was real or if it was just an optical effect fooling my retinas, exhausted by months of darkness.

Then, a powerful beam of fire consumed the mullah as if he were a dry splinter. Only a few miserable ashes remained of him. I was paralyzed. Soon another bolt of fire incinerated the cell door. When I looked back into the circle of will-o'-the-wisp fire, I saw the flaming face smiling at me, as if reminding me to whom I owed my life.

"I have chosen you as my last footprint in this world," I heard a voice whisper to me.

I fell to my knees.

"My lord, who are you really? Are you the Mahdi who will come at the end of time and rule the world?"

"It is you who have said so," the whisper answered me from the circle of fire.

"My faith in you is again unshakable," I assured.

"You will be my representative in this world as long as I remain hidden. You will hear my voice and pass it on to my followers."

After saying this, the smiling flaming face disappeared forever in the flames.

Just as it had happened to me the night Al-Muqanna left this world, I was stunned looking into that strange bluish fire in my cell. Suddenly I understood that I was free if I went through that charred door. On the other side I found the ashes of the one who must have been my jailer.

I ran up the stairs. No one stopped me, no one asked me, no one told me anything. When I wanted to realize it, I was in one of the crowded squares of the city under the morning sun. As if awakening from a dream, I ran towards the outer walls, seeking to get as far away as possible from my prison.

I left Balkh unknowingly through the west gate and walked like a beggar for seven days until I reached Merv. There I was taken in by a Jewish merchant family. Soon after I joined one of their caravans to Damascus.

Many years have passed since then. Al-Muqanna released me to be his representative in the world. I have succeeded in making his legend spread throughout the East, knowing that it defies the very nature of our world, as well as our faith and our strongest beliefs.

Even today, I do not know who the veiled prophet really was, whether a god made flesh, an evil genius, the hidden Mahdi who will open the way at the last hour, or perhaps a demon.

Many revere him, but no one knows what I know, that there are gates, gates that open in the air, of will-o'-the-wisp fire that burns without heat and without being consumed, that allow other beings, made of light and fire, to access our world and subjugate us in a thousand ways.

I often hear his voice in whispers, coming from that circle of fire ... and I feel fear.

For the Piercer and the Craftsman

by John Leahy

A few days after the FOR SALE sign had been taken down from in front of the house across the road, a large truck turned into its driveway. From across the street, Luke Bremner watched two men emerge from its cab. Haphazardly watering his parents' lawn (Luke's father Carl had put his son at the job earlier, after he'd had Luke clean out his car and mow the grass—"if you're not going to play sports, boy, then you're going to have to get your exercise *somewhere*" was his Dad's philosophy), Luke observed as one of the men opened the door of the house while the other went to the rear of the truck and opened it.

Luke watched them unload furniture for a while before realizing that the grass before him was becoming waterlogged. He turned away and moved on.

* * *

The following afternoon Luke was sitting on the porch watching some movie trailers on his iPad when he saw a van pull up in front of the house across the way. Three toolbelt-toting men disembarked and removed all manner of implements, both large and small, from the rear of the van. Not long after they entered

the house, Luke heard faint construction sounds. *Not very loud*, Luke said to himself. *So they're in the basement.*

He wondered what they were doing with what had once been Jerry Soldo's games room. Luke's father had spent many Saturday and Sunday afternoons down in Jerry's games room, the two of them drinking beer while watching college football, or playing darts, pool, or foosball.

Movement caught the corner of Luke's eye and he saw a car approaching. He watched as it pulled up behind the construction van across the road. A short, slight man clad in a short-sleeved shirt and three-quarter length pants emerged from the driver's side of the Toyota Camry. He was pale-skinned, wearing shades and a peaked cap. He stood studying his cellphone for a while. As he put it away he noticed Luke watching him. He smiled slightly and waved, a gesture that Luke returned. The man turned and walked toward the house, Luke observing him every step of the way.

* * *

The following day a small truck carrying a load of concrete

blocks showed up. Two workmen got out and didn't hang around with the job of ferrying the concrete in and out of the house.

“Must be paying 'em pretty well” Carl Bremner remarked and took a sip of his coffee as he watched the men speedily go about their business.

His fingers paused over the keyboard of his iPad, Luke wondered what his neighbour was doing with the basement. *Definitely isn't going to be a games room, anyway*, he thought.

The faint banging, clattering and cutting from across the road continued all through the following day and the day after that.

“Must have a nice little bomb-shelter built by now,” Carl muttered beside Luke on the porch.

A little while later, his father gone, Luke watched a small truck pull up behind the workmen's. The new owner of the house got out and went inside. It was only then that Luke noticed that the guy's Camry was absent. *What's he doing with the truck?* he wondered. A few minutes later, the man re-emerged. It was an overcast day, and the man wasn't wearing the cap and shades he'd been sporting a few days earlier. Luke, whose eyesight was pretty sharp, couldn't help but notice how bald the man was. He'd never seen a head more devoid of any trace of hair in his life. And he was so slight as well. Luke wondered if perhaps his new neighbour were sick. Luke watched him get into the cab of the truck. His delicate form looked so at odds with the large steering wheel. Overall, he looked quite out of place in the truck's cab. But the sureness of the man's actions in the way he

handled the long gearshift and bulky steering wheel had Luke seriously doubting that there was a thing wrong with him. Luke watched as the truck pulled away from the curb and headed down the road.

It was after two am before the truck returned. It stopped in front of the house, its diminutive driver disembarking and going to its rear. He opened the door as quietly as he could. Inside, lying flat on the floor of the trailer, were three thick, steel doors, two more heavy-duty than the third. The lighter one weighed a little over three hundred kilos. He slid it effortlessly and lifted it from the floor. He hefted it under his right arm, and supporting it underneath with his left hand, walked quickly toward the house. Inside, he deposited it by the door-less entry to the basement. He went back out to the truck and removed the thicker doors, each one weighing over five hundred kilos. He carried them inside and descended the new concrete staircase that led to the basement. Halfway across what had once been Jerry Soldo's games room there was now an eighteen-inch-thick concrete wall. About a third of the way along the wall was a doorway, awaiting the fitting of one of the half-ton doors that the recent arrival was carrying. Palesen Drive's newest resident laid the doors down gently beside the doorway, studied the wall for a few seconds, then went upstairs to bed.

A little after the workmen returned the following morning, Luke saw his new neighbour drive away in his truck. A few hours later the Camry pulled into the driveway across the road at exactly the same time that Luke's mother was pulling into theirs. In his usual early afternoon position of sitting on the porch with

his iPad, Luke watched his mother emerge from her car and head toward the sidewalk.

“Hey there!” Andrea Bremner called across the road at the man who was approaching his house. It was another sunny day and he was once again wearing his peaked cap and shades. The man looked across the road.

“Hey” he called, giving a little wave.

“Welcome to the neighbourhood!”

“Thanks.”

“You in the mood for a cup of coffee? I got some nice cheesecake in the fridge, too.”

The man said nothing for a second.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great! Come on over.”

The man began to make his way toward the Bremners’ house.

* * *

“Luke.”

Luke didn’t look at his mother, his eyes remaining on their guest as the man who had introduced himself as Giles Bodkin deposited a forkful of cheesecake into his mouth.

“Luke.”

Luke turned at the sound of his mother’s more firm tone. *Don’t you know it’s rude to stare?* the look in her eyes said. Embarrassed, Luke dropped his gaze and absently went about cutting off a piece of his cheesecake.

“It’s ok,” Bodkin said in a relaxed tone. “My appearance can have that effect at times.”

Luke looked up to see that Bodkin’s eyes were on him. So Bodkin had noticed him staring at the man’s eyebrow-less forehead, eyelids that were devoid of eyelashes, and forearms that were as bald as a child’s. It wasn’t a terribly strange sight, but it was definitely weird. Luke had never seen such a ... *hairless* grown man.

“Ten years ago I got cancer,” Bodkin said. “I lost all my hair with the treatment. With most people, it grows back afterward, but in my case ... unfortunately not.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Andrea said.

“Ah ... such is life.”

Bodkin took a sip of his coffee.

“So what do you do, Mr Bodkin?”

“Giles. Please.”

“Giles.”

“I’m in IT.”

“Oh, very good.” Andrea looked at Luke. “Luke’s big into com-

puters. We can't get him off his iPad half the time!"

"Oh?" Bodkin looked at Luke. Even though the man's appearance creeped Luke out a little bit, Bodkin had a calm, friendly manner that neutralized the creepiness somewhat. Luke rarely felt at ease with strangers, but he felt reasonably so with this man.

"Yeah, I'm into computers," Luke said. "I'm more into science, though. You know, outer space and stuff. Wouldn't mind being an astronomer one day."

"The study of heavenly bodies," Bodkin said, smiling softly. "Must say that it's something I'm interested in myself. So what are you most interested in, Luke? Planets ... stars ... nebulae ... black holes ... ?"

Luke couldn't help venting an enthusiastic little smile. "Guess I ... don't really have a favourite. They're all pretty cool."

Bodkin didn't respond immediately, holding Luke's eyes.

"It's an amazing place, isn't it? The universe."

"Sure is."

"Ever think about being an astronaut?"

Luke shook his head, his eyes dropping to the glass of coke before him. "No," he said. "Too dangerous. I'd be more into the studying and research side." He paused before resuming. "Although I often wonder what it would be like to walk on the moon ... or to be the first person to walk on Mars. I imagine ... it would be pretty awesome."

Bodkin smiled wistfully. "Yeah. It'd be something, alright."

* * *

A few days later, Bodkin invited the Bremners over for dinner. Shauna, Luke's sister, was put out about this at first as it meant it cut into her Friday evening hang-out time with her friends, but she mellowed not long after tasting Bodkin's cooking. It was delicious. Halfway through the main course, Luke excused himself to go to the bathroom. On his way there he passed by the thick steel door that led to the basement.

He froze. He turned back to the door. It was off the latch. He gazed at it for a few seconds. Then he grabbed its huge handle with both hands and pulled. He grimaced as it slowly opened outward. The weight of the thing! Light from the hallway spilled into the dark beyond, revealing a light switch on the wall. His heart beginning to pound, Luke ignored the voice in his head advising him to get out of there, go to the toilet, and head back to the dinner. He reached out and flicked the switch. A fluorescent light illuminated a concrete staircase with a solid iron railing at its side. Looking downward to his left he ran his eyes along a concrete wall, his gaze stopping at the steel door a little way along it. At the right-hand side of the door, built into a recess in the wall, was a keypad.

Not giving his mind a chance to shriek its protest at what he was about to do, he descended the staircase quickly. He stood before the door, running his eyes up and down its length. This thing didn't have something as basic as the fridge-type handle on the door at the top of the stairs—this badass had a five-spoke handle that he'd seen in movies set in submarines. He figured that if a thief didn't know the keypad code, then they'd need an anti-aircraft missile to get past this door. Either that or drive a

tank through the concrete wall.

What the HELL has he got in there? Luke wondered. Jewels? Priceless works of art? Was Bodkin one of those end-of-the-world-is-nigh nuts? What did they call those guys on TV again ... preppers? Luke's stomach churned when he considered another grim possibility. Was Bodkin one of those weirdos that kept ... people in his basement? Kids, perhaps?

You have got to get out of here NOW his mind said clearly. This time he listened to it, and he almost ran up the stairs. He flicked off the light and pushed the door inward, being careful to leave it as he'd found it, slightly ajar. He went to the bathroom and returned to dinner. The remainder of the delicious meal was not dominated by his tastebuds but by his mind. All he saw in it was that big, shiny, ominous door.

He was determined to find out what lay beyond it.

* * *

Luke's "friend" Lloyd Shelby was a pervert. It had been a very hot summer and even Luke, who wasn't much of an outdoors person, had gotten a tan. But good old Lloyd hadn't. He'd spent most of his summer vacation watching online porn and reading his appalling smut magazines until all hours of the morning, which meant that he'd rarely risen from bed before two pm each day. As a result, he was quite pale and pasty as the end of the summer beckoned.

To be honest, Luke didn't consider Lloyd much of a friend at all. He was more of an associate. Lloyd was into science and computers like Luke, but for Lloyd these interests were dwarfed by his obsession with women's bodies. Luke hadn't met up with

Lloyd much over the holidays and when they had, practically all Lloyd had talked about had been tits, pussies, and asses. Luke liked girls as much as the next guy, but Lloyd ... well, Luke really felt that Lloyd needed help.

On this occasion, however, Luke found himself needing *Lloyd's* help. The thing was, Lloyd's father worked as an electronics engineer for the US military, designing cutting-edge drone technology. And being a responsible parent, in an effort to get his porn-obsessed son out of the house and into the fresh air, Justin Shelby had given Lloyd a basic version of a mosquito micro-drone he'd helped design for the US Delta Force in Iraq. It got Lloyd out of the house, alright. A little bit, anyway. When he did go outdoors, Lloyd would take the drone to the park, where he would skulk in the shade of a tree while he piloted the mosquito around bikini-clad girls, zooming in for prolonged episodes on their breasts, groins, and buttocks.

And in exchange for using the drone to find out what Giles Bodkin kept in his basement-vault, Lloyd wanted footage of Luke's sister Shauna and her friend Heather Wells sunbathing by the Bremners' swimming pool.

After hearing the terms of the deal, Luke stared down at Lloyd. They were in Luke's room, where Lloyd was seated at the edge of Luke's bed, smiling up softly at his friend.

"Are you SERIOUS???" Luke asked.

"Yeah."

Luke was silent for a few seconds.

"My SISTER."

Lloyd chuckled.

“Yeah. She’s really hot, man. I want her in my collection.”

Luke stared emptily at Lloyd, unable to say anything. The request was appalling. But what did he expect? This was Lloyd he was dealing with. *Lloyd* was appalling. Luke looked out his window. Shauna and Heather were horizontal on the sunbeds by the pool. They’d been tanning themselves for the last two days, getting ready for the upcoming school term. Knowing what he was about to do, Luke felt a bit depressed. Even though his big sister had a go at him every now and again about his love of all things outer space and his non-existent presence in their school’s jock-clique, Luke loved her. And he had a big crush on Heather, who as well as being very pretty, was actually quite cool to boot.

He felt like he was pimping (he’d only recently learned the meaning of the word) them out. He looked back down at Lloyd.

“You really are a dick, you know that?”

The sides of Lloyd’s mouth curled upward in a sorry-but-too-bad expression. He shrugged.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m a dick with a highly advanced micro-drone, Luke. So. What’s it going to be? Do we have a deal?”

Luke sighed.

Pimp.

“Ok.”

Lloyd clapped. “Great!”

Luke pointed at him. “Do NOT put it up on YouTube!”

“Ok. I’ll put this one away with my ... *select* library.”

Looking at the pervert before him, Luke felt a little sick.

“Be here tomorrow around one. Make your little ... *video*, and then we’ll do the job.”

* * *

Luke had been studying his new neighbour’s routine for nearly a fortnight. The man was like clockwork, which was good. He emerged from his house a little after nine each morning and would head off jogging down the hill. He would return a little before ten. He would leave the house again at around two pm and would go for an afternoon walk. If there were people out gardening or walking their dogs, he would usually stop for a chat. Bodkin was proving popular in the area. He’d told Luke’s parents that he’d be around every day, as he worked from home—this was also a boon for Luke. But that was where the good fortune ended and where Luke needed a little bit of luck. He was relying on Bodkin to go into his basement-vault on the specific day that Luke and Lloyd piloted the drone into his house.

* * *

“You sure you don’t want to watch this? It’s up there with my finest work.”

“Yes,” Luke answered morosely, trying to focus on the YouTube clip he was watching. Beside him, Lloyd was looking over the drone-footage of Shauna and Heather on his iPad.

“Really?”

“Yes, really, you freak!” Luke said, half angrily.

“Not even Heather?”

Luke blinked uncertainly.

“No.”

“You’re not going gay, are you?” Lloyd asked after a pause.

“No. Are you nearly done? Bodkin might have left a window open and we could get the drone in position while he’s out for his walk.”

“I’m doing some editing,” Lloyd responded, peering at his iPad screen. “Gimme ten minutes.”

Luke sighed.

* * *

A few minutes after two, Bodkin left on his walk.

“Ok, go,” Luke said when Bodkin was a good way down the road.

Beside him, Lloyd tinkered with the two joysticks on the drone’s control pad and the little mosquito-shaped device on his right knee lifted into the air. It was an incredible little thing—only on close study of it would you see that it was a robot. The movement of its wings was only audible if it was a few inches from your ear.

On the control pad screen Luke watched the drone’s flight across the road and over Bodkin’s lawn. Lloyd directed it around the outside of the house, searching for an open window, but found none. An examination of the upstairs section proved similarly fruitless. Lloyd brought the drone back and once more it assumed its position on his knee. They waited.

* * *

When Bodkin appeared, Lloyd flew the drone to Bodkin’s car, where he perched it on the roof. As Bodkin approached the door of his house, Lloyd got the drone airborne and moved it close to the door, where it hovered behind Bodkin, waiting. When Bodkin opened the door, the drone zipped past his left arm and inside. Lloyd brought it to rest on the frame over the door, where he tilted its camera to observe Bodkin. Bodkin went into the kitchen, and through its open door, Luke and Lloyd were able to observe him taking an apple from a fruit bowl and pouring himself a glass of water. Then he sat down at the table and began pecking away at a laptop.

* * *

An hour later, Bodkin hadn’t moved from the table. Lloyd exhaled loudly and looked at his watch. It was ten past four.

“I’m out of here by six the latest,” he said.

“Ok.”

“If we get nothing and you want me back tomorrow then I want your sister in the shower.”

Luke turned to look at Lloyd. Lloyd met his eyes.

“I *mean* it.”

Luke looked back at the screen on the drone’s control pad.

“Sicko pervert.”

“I have a nice little shower library, you know,” Lloyd said. “If you’re a girl in my neighbourhood and you value your privacy then you really should close your bathroom window when you shower. Otherwise the Lloydster considers you fair game.”

“Thanks for that, Lloyd.”

“Gotta’ few mothers, too.”

Luke closed his eyes momentarily before opening them again.

“You’d be surprised how much the fairer sex farts in the shower, you know,” Lloyd said.

“Shut up, Lloyd.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Bodkin rose from the table. He went down the hallway with the basement door on it, but went past it to the bathroom. Lloyd sighed loudly.

“Damn,” Luke said.

A few minutes later Bodkin re-emerged and returned to the kitchen. He took some chicken and vegetables from the fridge and placed them on the counter by the sink. He put two pots on the cooker. He was preparing dinner.

“Oh, man,” Lloyd groaned.

* * *

At twenty to six, Bodkin was checking something on his phone, looking quite relaxed after his meal, the dishwasher humming away nearby. Luke was resigned to the idea of Lloyd’s drone being strategically situated on the shower wall over Shauna’s naked form when suddenly Bodkin put down his phone and made to leave the kitchen.

Did he dare hope?

Luke’s heart began to beat faster when Bodkin headed down the hallway. Would he ... ???

“Yes!” Luke clenched his fist when Bodkin stopped at the basement door. He took a set of keys from his pocket and put one of them into the door lock. It clicked open and he removed the key from the lock. He slowly pulled the heavy door open.

“Go!” Luke said.

Lloyd piloted the drone toward the opening door, leaving it hovering high over Bodkin’s head until he switched on the light in the basement. As Bodkin turned to pull the door inward, the drone zipped inside and down over the concrete stairs before alighting on a dusty old chair at the far wall. Its camera tracked Bodkin as he made his way down the stairs and to the keypad at the side of the vault door. He began pressing buttons.

Luke’s heart was pounding.

The moment of truth.

There was a loud clang as heavy-duty bolts released. Bodkin went to the five-spoke handle in the middle of the door and began turning it. After what seemed like an age, he stopped turning the handle and pulled it gently toward him. The door opened slowly outward.

As on the previous occasion, Lloyd guided the drone into the vault while Bodkin turned to close the door after switching on the light inside. Lloyd brought the drone to rest on the frame over the door, training its camera on what lay before it on the opposite side of the room. Luke and Lloyd were so astonished at what greeted their eyes that they paid no heed to Bodkin, who went through a door in the wall to his right.

“Jesus,” Lloyd said in a small voice.

Luke couldn’t articulate anything at all.

Directly across the room from the drone, against the far wall, was a long table. On the table was a ... storage unit. It had two platforms. On the top platform were six transparent cubes, each one containing a misshapen, roughly circular rock that floated in mid-air, none of them bigger than a baseball. Most of them were dull or darkish in colour, and no two were identical.

On the platform below the rocks were cubes containing more ... unsettling items. Or entities. In each cube there was a thing that Luke doubted had any connection with the planet Earth. And in some cubes there were *many* things. For instance, in one cube there was a collection of small charcoal-coloured spheres that moved in perfect synchronisation around its cube. The spheres would stay perfectly still for a few seconds, and would then zip off together backward, forward, or sideways, always as a perfectly unified team, like a swarm of birds or a

school of fish. Sometimes the group would even race up along the sides of the cube. When it did this, a flash of what looked like lightning would dart around the members of the bizarre collective.

In another cube was an even stranger sight. What looked like three small ... curtains floated about, their weird bodies billowing as though they were moving underwater. The colours red and blue shimmered alternately in their forms. In the cube to the right of this was a small, beige, cone-shaped item. Luke could make out two holes at one side of it. Suddenly what looked like green and black liquorice ropes emerged quickly from the holes and pooled at the cone’s base. Similar ropes appeared at the cone’s other side. The cone began to climb into the air, the ugly ropes appearing to propel it upward. When it was about a foot from the base of the cube, Luke swallowed in shock as the ropes began to move like legs, transporting the cone to one of the cube’s corners, where it “stood” unmoving. It was facing the open door that Bodkin had gone through. His stomach a nest of fear and fascination, Luke wondered if the thing was watching whatever Bodkin was doing. Not that he could make out any discernible eyes in the cone.

In the cube to the right of the cone-thing was a horror. Its prison a little larger given its size compared to the other occupants, the beast’s demonic form consisted of what was essentially a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth from whose sides radiated a terrible number of multi-segmented legs. Luke watched as the dreadful teeth parted and a faint green gas emerged from the mouth. He gazed, transfixed by the nightmare.

Remembering Bodkin, Luke snapped back into action.

“Lloyd.”

He looked sideways to see Lloyd staring at the control pad screen, his thumbs unmoving on its two joysticks. Lloyd's eyes were orbs of shock.

"Lloyd."

Lloyd merely blinked a few times.

"Lloyd, I want to see what Bodkin is doing."

Lloyd's fingers remained inert on the joysticks. Luke clicked his fingers in front of the screen.

"Snap out of it, will you? Those things aren't in the room with us, Lloyd. They mightn't even be real, man! For all we know this guy does special effects shit for the movies!"

Luke was surprised at how quickly he'd come up with that, even though he didn't really believe it. Something told him the things in the cubes were pretty real, alright. Amazingly though, it thawed Lloyd out a bit.

"Ok" Lloyd managed. "M ... maybe you're right." His thumbs shook as they began to operate the joysticks on the control pad. The view on the screen was correspondingly jerky as the drone made a drunken flight toward the open door on the right of the room. As the drone drew closer to the cubes, the multi-legged mouth-creature began jumping wildly in its prison as though excited by the proximity of this airborne interloper.

"Jesus Christ," Lloyd whimpered.

The drone bumbled along and turned to face the open door, the view bobbing about in tandem with Lloyd's quivering thumbs.

A bomb went off in Luke's gut.

"God ... oh God ... oh God," he heard Lloyd gasp.

In the room beyond, Bodkin was completely naked and he was ... fading. The left side of his body not far beyond the door, his form was half see-through, as though he were trying to disappear, and succeeding. The air around his form was shimmering like a heat haze. Luke was dimly aware that he could smell urine. Barely realizing that he hadn't pissed himself; it had to be Lloyd.

Bodkin turned his faint head toward the open door, his transparent eyes fixed upon the drone.

"AAAAH!!!!!" Lloyd shrieked and dropped the control pad. He fled from the room and was down the stairs in seconds. Luke heard the front door open but not close.

His own hands trembling, Luke picked up the control pad and looked at the screen. Bodkin was looking directly into the camera. Luke saw that Bodkin's arm was extended, so he had to be holding the drone between his fingers.

"Hello, Luke," Bodkin said, his usual calm expression on his face. "Come over. I'll explain everything to you."

* * *

Bodkin placed a glass of lemonade and the drone on the table in front of Luke. They were in Bodkin's kitchen. It had taken Luke ten minutes to muster up the courage to cross the road. And he'd almost fallen twice as he'd made the walk, such was the fear in his rubbery legs.

“How did you know it was us?” he asked, looking at the drone. It appeared to be unharmed.

“I watched your little friend having some fun with it in the park the other day,” Bodkin answered, smiling softly. “Guess he was too busy studying the footage to notice me. I wasn’t even ten feet away from him.”

“Those things in the vault. What happened to you ... you know, when you were ...” Luke trailed off.

“Becoming invisible?” Bodkin finished for him.

“Yeah. Was it real? Or ... are you some movie effects guy in Hollywood?”

Bodkin chuckled softly. “What you saw was real, Luke.”

Luke gulped, his heart suddenly racing again.

“Are you ... human?” he asked.

“Yes. But I can do things that ... regular people can’t.”

“Like disappear.”

Bodkin smiled. “Have you heard of the Hadron collider?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what its intended purpose is?”

“To give us an idea about how the universe began.”

“Right. Did you know that back in the 1990s the US had plans to build a particle accelerator of our own?”

“Yeah. In Texas. The Superconducting Super Collider. Much bigger than the one in Switzerland. And construction stopped when the costs of building it started spiralling out of control.”

“Hmm. That’s the story that the press got. But the *real* reason was that they changed their minds. It wasn’t big *enough*. And they needed a more isolated area for the huge project they now had in mind. So they went to Alaska and started digging the tunnels for what they simply called the Master Collider. I don’t know how they managed to keep it from the public, but they did. I was one of the scientists involved in testing the completed machine. To cut a long story short ... something happened to me in the testing. I lost most of the hair on my head in a couple of days. The doctors pricked and poked me, but outside of the hair loss, they could find nothing wrong with me. After a week I hadn’t a single follicle left on my body.”

Bodkin smiled slyly. Up to that point Luke had only ever experienced the man’s calm, reassuring smile. This new smile he didn’t like at all.

“That was the only thing I *lost*,” Bodkin went on. “I developed incredible strength. It grew exponentially as the days went by. Two weeks after the accident I was able to push a weight of a thousand kilos up a twenty-degree slope. I could crush a steel pipe in my hand like it was a piece of tinfoil. I couldn’t feel pain anymore. By then, the military were beginning to get really concerned about me. Were they going to kill me, or use me as a weapon? Well, I didn’t fancy either scenario, and luckily for me by that stage I’d developed the ability to simply *will* myself

from one place to another. So ... that's what I did. I left. I wandered around the world, staying in no place for too long in case they found me. I funded myself by robbing banks. I simply smashed my way into safes and took as much money as I could." He paused. "And then ... *they* started to come."

"Who?" Luke asked, knowing that Bodkin didn't mean the US government.

"The Gamli. An advanced alien race with the capability to detect beings of incredible power, like myself. In any corner of the universe. They offered me ... work."

"Work?"

Bodkin snorted humourlessly, his eyes dropping to the table. "That's what they called it. But the proper term for it was ... genocide. They paid me to destroy planets."

"To destroy planets?" Luke could only repeat the words, barely able to process what he had heard.

"Yes. And moons. All inhabited. Some by billions of individuals."

Luke stayed silent.

"Of course, none of them were inhabited by *humans*, so ... that was how I *coped* with my actions. I told myself that it was no worse than ... killing flies."

"How ... how did you do it?"

"How did I destroy the planets?"

"Yeah."

Bodkin took a deep breath.

"It turned out that not only had I the ability to will myself around Earth ... but I could also skip right around the entire *universe*. The Gamli enlightened me to that. They also informed me that I could increase my physical size to ... well, bigger than the planets they wanted destroyed. Much bigger."

Luke blinked as he tried to take this in. *A man bigger than a planet*. "How big were these planets?" he eventually managed to ask.

"The moons were bigger than our own. Most of the planets were bigger than Earth. Some were bigger than Jupiter." He paused to let that sink in. "The Gamli told me how they wanted each one destroyed. Some I threw into black holes. Others I hurled into the star they orbited around. Two I smashed against each other over and over until there was nothing left but dust. And some I crushed in my hand until they were no bigger than a baseball. You've seen those ones. In the cubes."

Luke's stomach boiled. In his mind's eye he saw the six floating rocks in Bodkin's vault. *Squashed planets* he thought in mortified wonder.

"What about the things in the other cubes?" he asked. "What are—"

"Payment."

Bodkin sat back in his chair.

"Payment for my last job. Everything in those cubes is the last of

their kind. The Gamli took them from their planet—which was called Sothrat—before I destroyed it. They gave them to me as a down payment. After I did the job, they gave me a billion dollars worth of gold, diamonds, and platinum. Then I sold all the species in the cubes. They weren't worth anything before the end of their world, but after that they were worth a fortune. Rarity value. The purchasers are scattered all over the universe. They'll be coming to collect in a few days." He paused. "Did you see the spheres? The ones that rolled around the cube together?"

"Yeah."

"That's a Korenais. Fifteen spheres constitutes one individual. They were the dominant species on Sothrat. The Gamli are a brutal, intolerant race, intent on taking over their entire galaxy, but the Korenais were no saints. They hunted and tortured the Trilikay—the scary spider creature with the mouth—for sport. Did you see the cone-thing in the cube next to it?"

Luke nodded. He was having trouble imagining how a collection of spheres the size of large marbles would torture a monstrous thing like the Trilikay.

"That's a Krelix. The Korenais kept those as slaves. If a Krelix was disobedient or misbehaved, the Korenais would frequently cut their legs off to teach them a lesson. The legs of the Krelix would grow back, but it would take a month."

Bodkin took a drink from the glass of lemonade before him. He looked at Luke in silence for a while.

"So. What do you think of what I've told you?"

Luke blinked uncertainly.

"Do you believe me?" Bodkin asked.

Luke put his hand on his own glass of lemonade, studying it.

"I've no reason to lie, Luke."

"You could be mentally ill."

Bodkin chuckled softly. "Then you'd better call someone to take away the things in the vault."

Luke didn't respond.

"I could disappear again, if you like."

Luke looked at Bodkin. "Why were you naked when you did that?"

"I can't take anything with me when I do it. No clothes, nothing. Only my body goes."

"Did you ever do any *good* with your power? Did you just ... destroy things?"

"At the start I saved a lot of lives. And stopped a lot of bad things from happening. But you get tired of people saying thanks and then going about their business. People say you eventually get desensitized after doing enough evil ... but ... it works the other way, too." Bodkin paused. "And destruction *pays* better, Luke. Heroes are poor."

Luke didn't respond immediately.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" he eventually asked.

“Because I don’t want it anymore. This ... thing. I’ve had it for nearly twenty years. I want to have a normal life again. I don’t want to be a ... freak anymore. I want to be human. I want to value being alive again, because now I don’t. I’m numb. How old would you say I am?”

“Ah ... fifty?”

“I’m seventy-five. I haven’t aged a day since the accident. I haven’t been sick since, either. Not even a cough or a cold.” Bodkin paused. “You can’t appreciate youth if you’re never going to get old, Luke. And you can’t appreciate health if you’re never going to get sick.” He took a deep breath. “I’m telling you all of this because I want you to know what you’d be getting yourself into if you decide to take it from me.”

“Take what?”

“The power.”

Luke didn’t understand. “What do you mean ... *take* it from you?”

“Let me clarify—I’ll *give* it to you. If you want it. It’s the only way I can be free of it. A willing recipient.”

“Me?” Luke asked dubiously. “A *kid*?”

Bodkin shrugged. “Why not?”

“Have you tried to pass it on to others before?”

“Yes. They all said no.”

“Why?”

“For the reasons I just outlined to you. People might like going to the movies to see Superman, Spiderman, and all the other superheroes, but they don’t want to *be* them. They don’t want to *be different*. But you, Luke ... I have a feeling you *want* to be different. You’re like I was when I was your age. An outsider. Am I right?”

Luke felt uncomfortable. His eyes dropped to the table.

“You don’t have many friends, do you?” Bodkin asked.

It was a while before Luke said, “No.”

“You play sports? Talk to girls?”

“No.”

“You feel invisible in school. Powerless.”

Luke remained silent. His face felt like it was on fire.

“Look at me, Luke.”

His heart pounding, Luke looked at Bodkin.

“Take what I have. Be a god. I’m the richest man that’s ever walked the earth. I’m one of the richest beings in the *entire universe*. I own large corporations in over thirty galaxies involved in banking, technology, health, interstellar travel. In the Andromeda galaxy I rent housing to over a million beings. In the Tucana Dwarf galaxy I own the exclusive mining rights on a moon made almost entirely of silver and lead.” He paused. “All this can be yours, Luke. Or you can be the do-gooder. Use your power to help people—or whatever species you choose. Hell,

don't do anything! Just travel the universe. Be a tourist! But try it for a *while*, at least. And if you don't like it ... pass it on."

A slightly cynical smile appeared on Luke's face. "If I *can*. If someone will take it from me."

Bodkin opened his hands in a yes-that's-the-catch gesture. A few seconds later he rose from the table. "Well, think about it. I'd better get back to what I was at before your little mosquito interrupted me earlier on."

"Another planet to kill."

"A moon, actually." Bodkin headed toward the kitchen door. "You can let yourself out."

"What's it like?" Luke asked when Bodkin was behind him. "The first time you do it."

It was a while before Bodkin responded.

"It's easier the second time."

Luke listened to Bodkin's footsteps as he headed down the hallway. He heard the heavy steel door of the basement thudding softly shut, and then there was silence.

* * *

The following evening Luke knocked on Bodkin's door. A few seconds later Bodkin opened it.

"My answer is yes."

Bodkin's calm smile appeared. He stepped back from the door.

"Come on in."

* * *

The following morning Luke woke up feeling more alive than he'd ever felt. He sat up in bed, feeling something brush down along the side of his face as he did so. He looked down and saw a few hairs on his duvet. Not for a second did he feel dismayed that he was on his way to becoming as bald as Bodkin. Only ecstasy coursed through him.

The power was his!

He got out of bed and started doing press-ups. Ten ... twenty ... when he hit thirty he started doing them on the tips of his fingers. On forty he lifted his left hand into the air, transferring his entire body weight to his right arm. Forty one ... forty two ...

HELLO, BOY.

Luke froze, just about to descend on his forty-third press-up. What the hell—

OR SHOULD I SAY, VESSEL.

Perturbed, Luke jumped to his feet. His heart thumping, he looked around the room, paying no heed to the hairs falling from his head as he did so. Where the hell was this *voice* coming from????!!

STOP THAT.

The commanding power in the tone caused Luke to freeze where he stood. He was staring at his bedside locker. *Hardly going to find the owner of the voice in there*, his mind mocked him just before the voice spoke again.

SO BODKIN HAS FINALLY SUCCEEDED.

Luke was shaking now, his heart hammering in his chest. He was going insane! That was the price of the power. Had Bodkin suffered this? The man hadn't *looked* insane—

CALM, BOY!!! the voice commanded. SMOOTH YOUR MIND. SMOOTH YOUR MIND.

Luke released a shuddering breath. Yes, the voice was right. He needed to calm down, control his thinking. A wave of anxiety rolled in his gut. What the hell was he doing???!!! Listening to a voice in his head!!! One that he had no control over—

I SAID *CALM*!!!

Luke's mind was suddenly empty. A few seconds passed. He blinked, dimly aware that he was still looking down at his locker. A few more silent seconds ticked by and a seed of hope planted itself in Luke's mind, and with it the tentative stirrings of relief. Was it over? Was the voice—

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF.

Luke's stomach rolled in despair and a lump rose quickly in his throat. He started to sob.

Suddenly he couldn't breathe. His two hands flew to his neck and he opened his mouth wide, gagging for air. He couldn't pro-

duce a sound. The inexplicable torture went on for a few more seconds before the blockage in his windpipe removed itself as suddenly and completely as it had presented. He breathed in deep, relieving gasps and stumbling, sat down on the edge of his bed.

THAT IS WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU CRY AGAIN.

“What are you?” Luke groaned.

A sharp pain flared in his skull and he hissed in agony, his hands flying to his temples.

DO NOT SPEAK OUT LOUD WHEN ADDRESSING ME. IT WILL BE A HINDRANCE IF THE WORLD THINKS YOU ARE MAD. I CAN HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS, SO SPEAK THAT WAY

Luke closed his eyes. He willed himself to remain calm, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. Eventually he was ready.

What are you? Why are you in my head?

I AM THE NORDROS. AND I AM NOT JUST IN YOUR MIND. I AM IN EVERY FIBRE OF YOUR BODY, STRENGTHENING AND ENHANCING IT. EVENTUALLY YOU WILL BE READY FOR WORK.

Work?

YES. YOU ARE MY NEW VESSEL. BODKIN'S REPLACEMENT.

Luke felt panic begin to rise within him again. This nightmare

couldn't be real! No way! He had to be still in bed, dreaming! *Had* to be! He clenched his fists on his legs, forcing himself to maintain his composure.

What do you mean, your vessel? What is this work that you're talking about?

The voice laughed, and to Luke it was a more terrible sound than the voice itself. It confirmed his suspicions. Bodkin had fooled him. His face flushed with dread, Luke waited in resignation for what was coming.

BODKIN LIED TO YOU, BOY. IT WAS NOT HIM THAT WORKED FOR THE GAMLI, IT WAS ME. BODKIN WAS MERELY THE VESSEL I USED TO CARRY OUT THE NECESSARY ACTIONS. I HAVE NO NATURAL PHYSICAL FORM OF MY OWN. I ENTERED HIS FORM SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN ANOTHER LIFEFORM CONVINCED HIM TO TAKE WHAT WAS OFFERED.

He told me he got the power twenty years ago in an accident!

MORE OF HIS LIES. SOMETHING HE HAS GOTTEN GOOD AT OVER THE DECADES. YOUR SPECIES HAS A SAYING DOES IT NOT—PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

Luke felt lightheaded with the enormity of this. Bodkin had had this thing inside him for *decades*?

THE WEALTH BODKIN SPOKE TO YOU OF IS, OF COURSE, MINE. ACCUMULATED OVER A PERIOD OF SIX HUNDRED YEARS OF WORK. YOU ARE THE SEVENTH VESSEL I HAVE INHABITED IN THAT TIME. HOPEFULLY YOU WILL BE THE LAST. MY GOAL IS

WITHIN SIGHT.

Feeling weak, Luke tried to process all of this.

What is your goal?

TO ACCUMULATE ENOUGH RICHES TO PAY THE PIERCER AND THE CRAFTSMAN.

Luke fought to keep his concentration from being engulfed by all of this.

The piercer and the craftsman?

THE PIERCER IS THE ONLY ENTITY CAPABLE OF PUNCTURING THE WALL OF OUR UNIVERSE AND VENTURING BEYOND INTO THE NESTRA. IN THE NESTRA THERE ARE MATERIALS CAPABLE OF HOUSING MY UN-ATTENUATED STATE. WHEN I HAVE PAID THE PIERCER, SHE WILL RETRIEVE THESE MATERIALS AND GIVE THEM TO THE CRAFTSMAN, WHO WILL IN TURN FASHION A BODY TO HOUSE ME AT MY FULL STRENGTH.

You're not at your full strength within me right now?

There was silence for a few seconds.

IF I UNFOLDED MYSELF COMPLETELY WITHIN YOU, HALF YOUR PLANET WOULD BE VAPORIZED.

Luke swallowed. He felt as though he were in a daze.

Did Bodkin ever refuse to do what you told him?

ALL THE VESSELS DID. AT THE BEGINNING.

How did you get them to obey you?

Luke had a feeling he knew the answer, although he didn't expect what happened next.

There was an explosion of pain in the middle finger of his left hand as it flew backward and nearly made contact with the back of his hand. It broke loudly. Luke opened his mouth to shriek but no sound came out. He gazed in mortified agony at the horribly angled finger. A few seconds later the pain level went up a notch and Luke felt a dreadful grinding sensation in the aggrieved digit. Very quickly though, this new pain began to recede and Luke realized that the bone was miraculously re-connecting itself, mending the damage. Eventually the pain was completely gone, and the finger looked as though nothing had happened to it at all. Breathing hard, his entire left hand shaking after the appalling experience, Luke hazarded bending the finger. It was fine.

THAT IS HOW I ENCOURAGE COMPLIANCE. I CANNOT FORCE YOU TO WORK, BUT I CAN SHATTER EVERY PIECE OF YOUR BODY UNTIL YOU ACQUIESCE. THEN ALL DAMAGE IS REPAIRED, NO MATTER HOW CATASTROPHIC.

Luke closed his eyes. It was a while before the voice spoke again.

BODKIN LIED ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE. HE TOLD YOU THAT NONE OF THE PLANETS HE DESTROYED WERE POPULATED BY HUMANS. THAT IS NOT TRUE. ONE TIME, OUTSIDE OF EARTH, THERE WERE SIX OTHER PLANETS IN THE UNIVERSE WITH HUMAN

POPULATIONS. NOW THERE ARE FOUR.

Luke had endured so much horror up to that point that this latest revelation only caused his guts to pitch mildly.

I don't want to know how many people he killed.

HE SHOWED NOBILITY WHEN I ACCEPTED THE CONTRACT TO DESTROY THE FIRST HUMAN PLANET. HE REFUSED TO DO THE WORK. IT TOOK NINE BROKEN BONES AND A PUNCTURED EYEBALL FOR HIM TO RELENT.

An image of Bodkin on the ground in agony, his broken body twisted at impossible angles and one blind eye dribbling its contents down along his cheek, filled Luke's mind. To purge the ghastly vision, he looked out his bedroom window and down at the pool below. His sister was smiling and chatting with the pool-guy, a college student. Luke knew that Shauna had a crush on him. There they were, out in the sun enjoying another beautiful California day, while he, Luke, was in his bedroom scarcely fifty yards away, trapped in some impossible nightmare. A flood of sadness rushed through Luke, and he felt a lump rising in his throat again. He swallowed it away, hardening himself. He did not want the demon, or whatever it was, throttling him again. He turned away from the window. He thought of what Bodkin had done to him and very quickly his despair morphed into rage. The snake and his treacherous lies! Him and his calm, condescending smiles!

IF YOU CHOOSE TO KILL BODKIN, I WILL ALLOW IT.

Luke blinked. What a wonderful idea! With his newfound strength he would do it with his bare hands. He would crush the man's skull with one murderous punch. He bolted from the

room and dashed down the stairs, still clad only in his bed t-shirt and pyjama bottoms. His mother was in the hallway, texting. At his dramatic approach she looked up and was about to ask him what the commotion was about when her eyes widened.

“Luke! Your *HAIR!*”

Luke went past her out the door without acknowledging her. He raced across the street without looking left or right, and when he reached Bodkin’s front door he shoulder-charged it without slowing down. It flew in before him, coming to rest on the last few risers of the staircase ten feet away. He ran into the kitchen. It was empty. He was about to leave and head upstairs when he saw the note on the table. He went to it. It read:

Luke

I’m so sorry – I hope one day you will forgive me.

G

His heart pounding, Luke took long, deep quivering breaths, trying to quell the rising wave of rage and frustration flooding into him. In the end, he simply gave in. He threw back his head and roared, the Nordros making no move to silence him.

“RRAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!!!”

Every window in the house shattered and blew outward in a rain of glass.

* * *

Bodkin started awake. He opened his eyes and studied for a mo-

ment the vast trunk of the towering redwood tree ahead of him. He’d fallen asleep with the radio on. The volume was set low, and he could just about make out the sound of a female voice that was vaguely familiar to him. Some tall British woman with red hair. Florence the Machine, or something. Movement caught the corner of his eye and he looked to his left. The driver’s door was open and a few feet away was a squirrel holding a large nut. Its nose twitched in the air as it studied him. When Bodkin raised his arm to look at his watch the squirrel skipped away. He saw that he’d been asleep for half an hour. Before he’d pulled in for a break he’d been driving for nearly ten hours.

He took a deep breath.

Sixty-five years.

A lump began to rise in his throat as he recalled all the suffering he’d inflicted and endured over the decades. But now the Nordros was gone and was the boy’s problem. He felt sorry for the young man; indeed, it was a terrible load for a young person to be saddled with. But the truth was, Bodkin would have foisted his tormentor on a baby or a sick old woman if it would have meant being released.

He pulled the driver’s door shut and started the engine. He turned the car and left the layby. As he gathered speed on the highway, headed north, he looked at himself in the rear-view mirror.

The world’s youngest-looking one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old man.

He wondered if his hair would grow back now. Not that it mattered. All that mattered was that he was free.

Alien's Magic

by Sonali Roy



Erd Hated

by Adele Gardner

I'm just along for the ride.
I might have been anything—
plush velvet, carmine folds, beautiful opera-wear
to stand out in a crowd. But it's been so long,
I remember little beyond the crypt:
a blood-spattered funeral drape, tattered at the edges,
chewed by mice and moths—
by the clawing hands of too many victims.
They take hold of the hem of my garment,
and I drag them along for a time
while they plead with me to change their fate—
but they all drop off in the end.
I am not the one who chooses.
They choose.
We traipse through these rooms, fantastically decorated—
blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet—
and black, suffused with a crimson light,
the rich shade of the ever-living, ever dying blood
that stains my folds.
They scream, they cry, but I didn't ask to be here either,
though I'm enjoying the whirlwind rush of the whole party atmosphere.
They wilt more swiftly than blood flowers that bloom and fade,
and I—in the end, I lie here on the floor to mop them up,
just one more funeral cerement, not big enough to cover
an entire party full of revelers, whose death strips them of form,
of fashion, of the wealth that made them think they had the right
to sequester themselves and party
while the rest of the world burned.

—with thanks to Edgar Allan Poe

The Line

by Michael VanCalbergh

When you live on the line, you wait for darkness. Darkness never decides what I'm worth. It comes. It goes. It doesn't pretend that death only happens to those of us in the box. It's generous.

It's nothing like us.

* * *

In the small space between the doors of Kolchuk Industries and the beginning of the line, the boxes, videos, and criers have me wishing I could work until dark. Kolchuk caps monthly overtime and I'm already over. I won't be paid for two of the hours I worked today.

The activity on the line is less intense than during the week, but it still feels like a cheese grater running through my eardrum. With fewer people going to and from the train at the other end, today is for maintenance and family. And any idiots using the bridge to avoid traffic below. Even idiots and maintenance staff have money to donate.

I put my head down and my earbuds in. I use the last of my music credits to play ocean sounds. With all my extra money going to my immunosuppressant treatments, I don't have enough to activate the noise canceling function, so I turn the volume all the way up. The messy sounds of disease that swarm like gnats fade away with the waves. Headphones rarely deter the most desper-

ate of families, but they are a screen between me and the noise. It's a mile and a half of vibrating HealthCare Stalls begging for loose change. I try to exude indifference. I get lost in the sound. Lost enough that my gaze wanders.

The sky is a bright, off grey and the air cool. The little bit of sun that peeks through bounces off the overly polished railing to the boxes on the line back to me. The breeze is enough to mask the smell of the disinfectant used to clean a box for a new patient. It's enough to imagine this bridge over water. The gentle waves, the spray of salt. No machinery, no tubes. The solitude. Peace.

Lost in this fantasy, my eyes drift to one of the boxes. The woman behind the glass is strapped in at the waist, her head on the glass she's trapped behind. She bangs in a rhythm only she can hear. It resonates like running. The hiss of the box increases in tempo as she exerts herself. Her eyes are brown seas of suffering. I don't look away. She has me.

She cries and shakes her head saying thank you. I can't tell if she is grateful for the attention or trying to layer the shame: if she thanks me, what kind of monster would I be if I didn't donate?

I walk closer to the box and take the change from my morning coffee, dump it in the tray to the right of the glass enclosure. The box churns and counts the offering, announcing, "Seven more minutes added. Thank you for extending my life" in what I

imagine is her voice. I think I recognize it but can't match it with her face. That's a relief. Maybe she worked in my department?

"I'm sorry, that's all I have."

I'm not sure why I lie. It feels like the only thing to say.

I stare at boxes now. I can't take my eyes from them. I try not to see but I've broken the barrier. There's a kid in one, with a dad leaning against the glass, reading a story. I recognize the father from the train into work each morning. In another, there's a man pacing back and forth; two steps, turn, two steps, turn. It looks like he's screaming. A young woman has only a few hours left. Her mother or grandmother is draped across the box as if she's trying to lift the three-ton object from the ground. Even the empty box, being hosed down with disinfectant for the next patient, is a hole punched through me.

I don't want this power over them, I want it over my own body. Insert money here, in my chest, and see how much longer it gives me. Track my life through dollars, not through the vague guesses of nurses after they administer another round of foggy liquid meant to keep my body from eating itself.

I miss a thick wire jutting out from the ground and fall to my knees. The shock tears my eyes from the boxes. The throbbing in my ankle makes me panic. I check for blood.

"That was graceful."

I hadn't realized how far I'd drifted towards the boxes and was now only four or five feet away. An older man sat in the box to my left, tubes coming out of his arms and nose, smiling. His

breathing was heavy.

"I'm okay. Thanks."

As I start to get up, he says, "That was the most entertainment I've had in a week. Best donation a man could ask for." He kind of choke laughs and the box whirs, shoving more oxygen through the tube attached to his nose. He takes a few deep, clearing breaths and says, "Seriously though, thank you."

"No problem. I, uh, have to catch my train. I'm sorry that ..."

"Hey, I get it. You don't know me, and I don't know you, Graceful. Go. No need to make this interaction any more awkward than it already is."

I'm grateful for the quick exit. I look up to see his name and how much longer he has care. I feel my guilt eased because he has eight weeks. I follow the tube running from the top of the box to his nose, and a small flash of purple on his upper arm looks familiar under his shirt. "Thank you. Goodbye, Thomas Riotto." The formalization is forced but less personal.

He smiles again. "Til next time, Graceful."

* * *

I was on the outside looking in too; dropping loose change into the machines. Their pleas felt pathetic. Their need, always their need, pierced my body. It took all I had not to scream at them to just die already.

And when I heard the voice thanking me for my donation, I felt powerful. Their lives, what was left, was in my hands. I chose

who lived and for how long.

I was a god.

* * *

This whole week, every time I walk to the train after work, Thomas Riotto says, “There goes Graceful!” or “Be careful now, don’t wanna trip.” or “Hey there Graceful. The ground told me it misses your beautiful face.” Each comment followed by the whir and pump of air from the top of the box through the tube in his nose. It’s a refrain I keep hearing in my head. Last night, the nurse asked me, “Who’s Graceful?” I’d been muttering it during treatment.

Today, my plan was to stay late enough that he would be sleeping, or the box blacked out for the evening. New month, new overtime cap. But even though my desire to not see Thomas Riotto helped me burn through the ever-growing pile on my desk, the work was so tedious, so soul destroying that I couldn’t keep up the pace considered “on the clock.” My email pinged and the Wellness Administrator told me to go home, rest, and “take time to be with yourself.”

Now, I’m hoping the man enjoys a midafternoon nap.

I’m making it through the line quickly. Everything is going so well. The boxes are unusually quiet, empty, or have brand new patients. As I get closer to Thomas Riotto’s box, I feel a bit of hope propel me forward. I’ll make it for the first day this week without incident, without hearing his strained voice.

Then, “A bit early to go home, ain’t it Graceful?” So close.

Pissed about getting sent home, just hearing his voice is too much. I turn to him and say, “What the hell do you want? Do you want money? Here. Here’s twenty.” I struggle getting my credit card out of my wallet. When I do, I jam the button for twenty and wave the card in front of the scanner.

The counter at the top of the box doubles what I paid for and a child’s voice thanks me for the donation. Both are unusual. Expecting some of my confusion, he says, “This month my son-in-law is matching donations up to \$300. He feels bad that he was such an asshole when I wasn’t on the line. Personally, I feel like this is his way to keep me slowly dying instead of letting go. He’s still an asshole.”

I want to leave but I stand here, staring. He’s pale, but so is everyone in a box. The box itself drains all the color from patient’s bodies. In places where the sun hits the glass more directly, his skin is darker, healthier looking. He looks carved from stone. Even sitting, he’s an imposing figure. His hands are massive and his eyes alert. He’d have been a pain when he wasn’t in the box. Maybe the son-in-law was getting even. The thought brings me joy.

“Whose voice was that?” I ask, though I’m not sure why. The child’s voice was so soft and kind and genuine that it feels important.

“That’s my youngest of five grandkids. I don’t see him much because the aforementioned asshole and my daughter live two counties over. But my eldest granddaughter, Emily, stops by some mornings before I wake up and leaves messages. This one’s from Tuesday.” He points near the bottom of the right side of the box and I see, in white marker, a heart with the word “Em” inside. It’s small and written backwards so he can make it

out through the glass. “She’s a saint. Don’t know how she’s related to me.”

He laugh-coughs and, again, the box whirs to life. I have to get out of here before he ropes me in further. I can’t afford this time.

“Okay, well, I hope you have a good rest of your day Thomas Riotto. I’m glad you have family to come see you through this difficult time.”

“Enough of the full name stuff, it makes me feel less human. Call me Tom, okay?”

“Okay. Of course, Tom.” I take two steps away and look back. “Could you stop calling me Graceful then? I have a name too.”

He takes a deep breath and looks more tired than before. Closing his eyes, he says, “Not a fucking chance” and drifts off to sleep.

* * *

You’ll end up here too. We all end up here. The line will be your home. You’ll die on the line like all of us, the smell of sick in your nose. And when you die, they’ll wash your box with chemicals specially made to clean without destroying the smell.

* * *

I’ve spent the last twelve days in and out of my bedroom, work, and doctor’s offices hoping this new transfusion is the one. This one will set me free. During work I got the blood results back.

My body still devours itself.

I take off early, risking a reprimand from my supervisor. I wander down the line. I need to wait a month before doctors will start the management infusions again. A month of my body consuming my body with nothing to slow it. Nothing to stop it. I don’t want to go home. Not yet.

I take all the coins and cash I accrued over the past couple weeks and donate to every box with the bag icon for weekly infusions. When I finish with my change, I swipe my card. A dollar, five; I’m their savior. I say they get an extra ten or fifteen minutes. I decide. I choose. I control who lives longer, who deserves it. I deserve it.

By the time I reach Tom’s box, I’ve lost count of how much I’ve spent. I swipe, slam a button without looking. I collapse against the glass and as soon as the machine starts the pre-recorded thank you from his grandson, I regret it. The boy’s accent reminds me of Dad’s.

I’m weeping. Have I been this whole time? I try to control it, but it pours onto the glass. What if my infusions stop holding back my immune system? What if I lose my overtime? My apartment? What if I end up in a box? I don’t deserve to be on the line. I’m stronger than them.

I hear a soft slamming from inside the box. Tom’s face is red from yelling. I can’t hear anything he is saying. I look over and realize I pushed the “Mute” button by accident. Half my money didn’t even go to prolonging his life. I’ve been standing here for a minute, so the timer ends. I start to apologize only to hear him mid-rant, “... sympathy? Huh? Do you? How dare you bring your bullshit to me! Find a friend, a partner, whatever! But don’t you ever, ever fucking come to my box, my prison, and start this bullshit. Do you hear me? Do you!?”

I back away, stunned by the anger. I'm sure I've done something wrong, though I don't understand. The fact that I can't identify it makes me feel like a shell with nothing inside.

He hasn't stopped yelling. I can hear his fury reach a higher pitch as the air whistles from the effort. The counter goes down faster.

“You selfish prick! Get out of here. GO! Leave me alone, Graceful! You little piece ... of shit. I have no pity left ... I'm fucking locked in here! You ... little ...” Someone behind a desk must have gotten a warning that Tom's box was overworked. The box could handle whatever Tom needed, but it must have hit the point where the amount of care exceeded what they could legally charge him.

Tom fades. His eyes flutter, his body relaxes, and the air flow becomes steady, silent. A convenience fee is applied to his remaining time.

* * *

Our one birthright: to live in service to a company that writes your name in a ledger, inputs a number in a computer, and stores these final two memories of you when you die for tax purposes, set to be purged from the record in seven years.

* * *

Six days a week, for three weeks Tom screams at me as I pass his box. It doesn't matter if people are around or if I'm the only one walking, he screams. I want to say I'm used to it, that it lost its meaning or its punch, but it hasn't. Without truly knowing why, I cry on the train home every day.

So, today, on a Sunday, I'm here. Because it isn't a workday for most, many of the boxes have family or friends visiting the patients. It's the only time they can be out of the way of potential donors.

I hoped to see Tom's family by his box, but there's no one. It takes a long time to work up the courage to walk over into his line of sight. The wrapping around the gift in my hand is wet with my sweat. I take a deep breath.

Tom looks more tired than usual. He's slouched in his chair. The whirl of the machine is different. It's a sucking sound now, like it's drinking from him. He's still imposing, but his clothes look like they're melting. You could fit two of him in the extra space they hold.

He sees me and closes his eyes. He straightens. “Today is ... supposed to be ... the one ... day ... I don't ... have to deal ... with ... your shit.” The machine settles into a medicated hum and he looks relieved. “What ... do you want?”

“Nothing. I ... um ... listen, I. Here. I brought this.” I hold up the little wrapped gift in front of the glass and smile. In the reflection of the glass, I see how idiotic I seem. I look down to avoid my own gaze. There are fresh notes on the bottom right of the glass from Tom's granddaughter. Tom has writing too from his side in a scratchy, tiny font. I attempt to make out the words but they're small and layered on top of each other. I bend down for a closer look and realize what I'm doing.

Embarrassed, I rise to meet Tom's gaze again. He looks with such indifference that I explain, “It's a gift.”

“Yep. I can ... see that. Not much I can do ... with gifts.” His

breath normalized, he starts to gain back a little bit of color in his face. This made his frustrated sarcasm more damning. Each pause, a new judgment.

“Well, yea. Wait.” I open it and show him a new package of nicotine patches I picked up that morning. He looks at it and then at me. His confusion makes me proud and I say, “I noticed you have the generic purple patches, so you must have been a smoker.”

As I talk, I open the donation drop for meds and enter the information on the back of the box. “Those patches don’t really work that well or, at least, that’s what my dad used to say. So, I bought these. I couldn’t afford the bigger one, but you’ll have a few days, at least, with an actual nicotine kick.” I slide the patches in, and Tom grabs them, moving them back and forth in his hands.

He says, “You’re a piece of shit, Graceful. But this is nice. Thanks.” He puts them on his lap. We stare at each other in silence.

This goes on for some time.

The box makes three, loud consecutive beeps interrupting our stare. Tom’s counter is red and blinking two hours. And it’s going down faster than time moves.

When I look back at Tom, he’s looking up. He leans back, shrugs his shoulders, and slaps a new nicotine patch on his arm. He’s unphased.

The timer continues to tick and some of the services of the box start to deactivate in preparation for the end. The PICC line in

his arm is slowing its steady flow. There’s a deep hiss from the bottom as the vents below shut. For the first time, I can smell Tom. It’s so raw and sick I cover my mouth to avoid the taste.

The smell brings me back to the box Dad died in. How ancient it reeked at the end, though Mom had been shelling out for the Premium Airflow package. When Mom tried to get money back, insurance told her that patients smell no matter how much money you throw at them. Dad’s insurance wasn’t as good as Kolchuk’s.

I watched my father bake in his own reek, struggle for each breath. He reached out to me, touched the glass that separated us, and begged me to help. Mom was grabbing our forgotten lunches from the car. It was me and Dad and the box. I watched his eyes dim and listened to the “Thank you for using a Premium Life-Extend Stall brought to you by Green Rock Med Supplies Plus. We appreciate your business and are sorry for your loss. Please visit our website ...” message repeat, asking for authorization to have the box cleaned. I listened to it twenty-seven times before Mom’s return. Another six before she authorized, and the glass went black.

I grab the credit card I reserve for emergencies. I wave the card past the reader and pay for eighteen more hours. I was too young to do anything when Dad died. I can do something now. I just need time. I can fix this.

The box roars as the fluids start and the vents open. Tom sees me put away my credit card. He mouths something and I interrupt, “I’m going to figure this out. I can make it longer.”

As the initial shock wears off, he starts drifting. The drugs are making up for the slow shutdown. I’m able to make out, “Grace-

ful, you selfish ...” before he passes out.

“I’m going to figure this out,” I say as I make my way to the train.

* * *

Your name will be forgotten. Your life too.

But it doesn’t have to be.

* * *

I’m up all night. I spend hours researching loopholes and rules and grants to keep Tom alive. I send an email to the Healthcare division of the Human Resources department at Kolchuck only to get a response that it would be five to ten business days before they can respond to my email.

Everything takes two business weeks. Everything requires more paperwork than I have paper. Everything is too late.

As I walk up to Tom’s box, earlier than anyone starts work, there’s a volunteer there already. The man is sitting in front of the drop bin, talking quietly to Tom. I look at the counter first. With how fast it’s moving, there are less than ten minutes left.

The volunteer removes a folded paper and pen from the drop box, sliding the paper into a manila envelope. It’s rare that a volunteer would be here this early.

“Family?” he asks me.

“No, a friend.”

“Thomas Riotto needs a friend. I’ll let you sit with him.” He points to a small hole in the glass that I never noticed before. “If you want to hold his hand as he passes, you can here. I’ll leave a glove if you’re nervous.” He hands me a sandwich bag with one glove and moves away.

I sit down and stare at the hole. They didn’t have these when Dad passed.

“Give me your hand, Graceful.” Tom’s breath is labored. His chest has sunk underneath the weight of his shirt, but there’s enough lift to see how difficult it is. I slip my hand in, gloveless, and he grabs it in his. I tear up at the rubbery, cold sweat of his massive hand. It envelops mine.

As soon as his grip is solid, he yanks my arm hard. My head whacks against the glass and I’m seeing more than a few stars as Tom looks to see that the volunteer has walked far enough away. He’s whispering. I barely hear him. I miss the beginning but catch, “You got that? You be in the building when she gets there. You help her slip past the guard and you take the bag. You. She lives. You burn. You and I deserve this. We’re numbers in a computer in a basement of that building that feeds on our names then shits out code. We only cared about ourselves. We think we’re the fly stuck between the screen and the door waiting to be let in. We’re the door. Tear the door down, Graceful. Burn it a ...”

His grasp weakens. I hold his hand as the box warns me to remove mine. I wait as long as I dare. The box goes into power save mode and the thin blackout glass on the inside slides down. I pull my arm out at the last second. Tom takes his last breath as it all goes dark.

I rest my head on the glass, mostly relieved. It feels like I’ve

dropped a weight I'd been cradling. It was exhausting caring about someone else. But it felt good to carry. Something to distract me from my body's revolt.

The cool morning air makes my breath fog up the glass. I exhale, the fog spreads, and I see a heart with fire shooting from the top drawn on the outside.

The volunteer has returned but gives me space. I roll my head on the glass and breathe. More remnants of small, barely erased messages from Tom's granddaughter. Part of it is a plan. Something with fire. It's smudged, written over. There's writing on top of writing and I can't make out Tom's responses.

There are dates and times. Most have question marks or are smeared. Clearly circled above the burning heart is a time: 10:46 am. Above that a date. Today.

* * *

We act as though, this time, we'll be the exception. We won't disappear. We're braver, smarter, stronger. Yet, we disappear and the company stays.

What if the company disappeared with us? What if they burned too? What could our children build from the rubble? Would they be free?

Tom

* * *

I'm unsure how I made it to my desk. I can't wrap my head around Tom's raving. I can't stop thinking about Dad. I worry if

stress makes my body eat itself faster. It's going to be a long day.

I look over at the clock and it's already 9:50. In forty minutes, I get my first break. I'm actually looking forward to the burnt coffee. I'm pushing through, slightly over my quota. Work drags on.

I stretch and the volunteer from earlier appears at my cubicle's entrance. He punches in a number on the keypad outside and the glass door separating my cubicle from the hallway slides open.

"Hey. I would have given this to you this morning, but I didn't know it was for you. Sorry for your loss." He genuinely looks sad as he hands me the manila envelope.

"Thanks."

My door shuts me in. I look at my screen and it says I have twenty-two minutes of "Bereavement." Inside is the folded note I saw the volunteer stuff in this morning along with an official letter from Kolchuk.

I open the official letter first. The glass door catches me as I slump to the ground. I go empty.

It's heavy with pages of costs and charges and surcharges all neatly laid into rows. The first page describes it as a "courtesy notice." The second to last page highlights a number three times the amount I originally agreed for Tom's care. The last page explains that my pay will be garnished to cover the amount that exceeded the credit card balance. It tells me that for my convenience they will take the full amount they legally can, 76%, from each paycheck until the bill is paid. In bold letters at the bottom it reminds me that because it was a donation, they charge no interest or overdraft fees.

My computer's alarm goes off. Work pops up. I'm in default mode. I go to my chair. I press buttons. I click. Nothing processes.

The alarm goes off again. Break. My door slides open. I get up. The envelope falls. I pick it up. Tom's note is there. I forgot it. It starts:

Graceful,

When you live on the line, you wait for darkness.

I read the letter. The jagged writing on the lined paper feels like Tom. I read it again. I'm ripped back into myself.

The box's glass and the letter weave together. I'm not sure what it means, but if I'm at the entrance in eleven minutes I'll find out. Why did I keep Tom alive all night?

I get to the main entrance. There's six minutes left in my break. Seven until 10:46. I watch seconds tick from the clock, listen to the sweep and beep of passes scanned. Coworkers slip by. It's all routine.

In the middle of the hustle, there's one woman who stands still. She waits. Her face is set. She's intimidating, imposing. Her massive hands grip the straps of a heavy-looking backpack. Her scowl seems cut from stone.

She sees me. We freeze. I nod my head to assure her I understand what I'm agreeing to. She nods back. Everything around her screams love. She looks like she's about to ignite.

"Hey, that's for me." She looks terrified. I move past the guard, who barely notes my presence. "Thank you. Tom said it would

be here at 10:46. I didn't expect it to be so heavy. Here." I hand her my wallet.

She palms it and stares hard. Her eyes are alert. She smells like a recently smoked cigarette. I can see her jawline quiver.

I feel the warmth of the bag against my chest as I squeeze it tight.

She backs away slowly and pulls a phone from her pocket. She only breaks eye contact after she presses a large red button on her screen, and it starts counting from two minutes.

She doesn't run but moves quickly down the line towards the train. I watch Emily get to live.

Break ends while I stand there. I have five minutes before I get a warning. The fact I'm not there now has been noted. I put my earbuds in, pay extra for the noise canceling function.

I scan in. The guard barely checks his screen. It lights up. He motions for me to stop and pass through again.

I keep walking toward my desk.

The guard yells. Another brings me down to the floor.

I go limp. A guard's knee pins my back. My body will be consumed by something other than itself. I decide no one else gets a choice. The floor is cold and hard then hot. I finally feel free. I feel but then don't. I'm less body, more breeze.

I can hear the ocean.

Progress

by Jamal Hodge

“We shall conquer the stars.”

Infection
on a mission,
of cosmic change.

Though
what remains,
left behind,
has long,
run out of time.

“We shall conquer the stars.”

Inheritance,
of collective
greed, carrying
sharpened need.

Progress,
progressing
towards identical

regrets.

Contributors



AMANDA BERGLOFF is a mixed media/digital artist of the weirder things in life. Her cover art has been published by the *Jules Verne Society's Extraordinary Visions Anthology*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, *Fear Forge*, *Orion's Belt*, *NonBinary Review*, and others. She lives in Denver,

Colorado and is a shameless collector of over 4,000 horror and science fiction paperback books, along with vintage toys and comics.

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BARBARA CANDIOTTI is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

You can find her website at www.artstation.com/bcandiotti.

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DOUG DONOVAN is a reporter-turned-fiction-writer based in Baltimore.

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CORINNE ENGBER is a genre fiction writer and professional working stiff. Her work has recently appeared in *A Midnight*



Kind of Place and *Tales to Terrify*. She lives in Boston with her wife and cat. Find her on Tumblr @synonymsfordismember.

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ANDREW FRAKNOI is a retired astronomer and college professor. He has had twelve stories published so far, two in anthologies, and ten in magazines. He is the lead author of the free, online book *Astronomy*, published by the nonprofit OpenStax project, which has become the most frequently-used introductory astronomy textbook in North America. He has also written two children's books and some manuals for teachers. The International Astronomical Union has named Asteroid 4859 Asteroid Fraknoi, in recognition of his contributions to the public understanding of science. For more on his educational work, please see: <https://fraknoi.com>

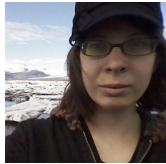
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ADELE GARDNER (they/them, Mx., <https://gardnycastle.com/>) has a poetry collection, *Halloween Hearts*, released by Jackanapes Press (<https://www.jackanapespress.com/product/halloween-hearts>) and over 500 stories, poems, art, and articles published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Pod-*

Castle, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and more. A member of SFWA, HWA, SFPA, and the Poetry Society of Virginia, and graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, Adele coedited SFPA's short poetry anthology *Dwarf Stars 2022* with Greer Woodward (<https://sfpoetry.com/ds/22dwarfstars.html>) and guest-edited the Arthuriana issue of SFPA's poetry journal *Eye to the Telescope* (Issue 27, January 2018, <https://eyetothetelescope.com/intros/027intro.html>). Twelve of Adele's poems won or placed in the Poetry Society of Virginia Awards, Rhysling Award, and Balticon Poetry Contest. Adele serves as literary executor for father, mentor, and namesake Delbert R. Gardner.

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AMELIA GORMAN lives in Eureka where she spends her free time exploring tidepools and redwoods with her dogs and foster dogs. Her fiction has appeared in *Nightscript 6* and *Cellar Door* from Dark Peninsula Press. You can read some of her poetry in *Vastarien*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her first chapbook, the Elgin-winning *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, is available from Interstellar Flight Press. Her microchapbook, *The Worm Sonnets*, is available from The Quarter Press.

* * *



JOHN GREY is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *New English Review* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books, *Subject Matters*, *Between Two Fires* and *Covert*, are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Broken Plate*, *Amazing Stories* and *River and South*.

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DAVE HANGMAN is Spanish writer David Verdugo's pseudonym. He has published short stories in the anthologies *Superstition* by Redwood Press and *Cryptids from the Rock* by Engen Books, and in *Creepy Podcast*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Swords and Sorcery Magazine*, *The Brussels Review*, *Philosophy Now!*, *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *East of the Web*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Twenty-two Twenty-eight*, *The Dirty Spoon*, *Hyphen Punk*, *Havok*, *The Sprawl Mag*, *History Through Fiction*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. His story "Eternal Fall" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2022. He has received four honorable mentions in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contests.

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JAMAL HODGE is a Bram Stoker Award winning writer, a Nebula award finalist, and an award-winning director. His producing credits include the Academy Award-nominated documentary *Armed Only With a Camera: The Life & Death of Brent Renaud*. In literature, he is an Elgin Award winner, a Dwarf Stars Award winner, and a Rhysling Award finalist whose work appears consistently in anthologies and magazines. His anthology *Bestiary of Blood: Modern Fables & Dark Tales* debuted as Amazon's #1 New Horror Anthology Release, and his forthcoming books, *I'm Not a Good Person, I'm a New Yorker*, to be released in July 2026 by Crystal Lake Publishing; and the anthology *Shards of Gotham: New York City Through The Looking Glass* from Ruadán Press, to be released in 2027, continue his exploration of pain, identity, and redemption.

* * *

JANIS BUTLER HOLM served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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JOHN LEAHY is the author of three novels — *Harvest*, *CROGLAN*, and *Unity*. He has received three Honourable Mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest, and his short story “Singers” appeared in Flame Tree Publishing’s 2017 *Pirates and Ghosts* anthology, alongside work by writers including Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. P. Lovecraft, and H. G. Wells. A past prize-winner at Listowel Writers’ Week, his story “Do You Dream of Oil?” has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives in Killarney, Ireland.

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RICHARD MAGAHIZ tries to live an ordered life in harmony with all things natural and created but one that follows unexpected paths. He's spent much of his time wrangling computers as a day job but now when he's not making music he is writing speculative and mainstream poems. This he has written for over twenty years, and has received nominations for Rhysling, Dwarf Stars, Pushcart, and Best of the Web awards. His chapbook collection *The Reducing Flame* was published in 2025. His website is at <https://zeroatthebone.us/>.

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DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

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BRIAN MALACHY QUINN uses watercolors, pen and ink, digital media, block prints, and etchings. As an artist he has won 23 international juried awards in last 26 months and sold 45 illustrations to date. He has always created art since early childhood. His style can be surreal for speculative fiction or literary fiction, or realistic for his fallback of lion paintings. He is compelled to create art and does so every day and finds it as a way to put aside his worries and stresses and produce "good brain chemicals".

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ADAM ROSS first started writing seriously whilst studying at university, working on numerous student film productions. His short film *Plan C* was screened at "Screentest", the UK's National Student Film Festival. In 2011 he was long-listed for the BBC's Future Talent Award. However over the past few years, Adam has increasingly dedicated time to writing prose and his first published story appeared in the 2017 anthology *Realities Perceived*. He also has a PhD in Modern British History, though he is not entirely sure why.

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A freelance science journalist & photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including a passionate traveler, music composer, singer, pianist, lyricist, painter, 3-D art designer and practices yoga & meditation regularly. Devoted to vegan diet, she enjoys creative writing. Sonali is accompanied by the sweet memories of her canine friend (and her best friend) Fuchoo, who left her forever in July 2023 at the age of eight. Last year in September, she joined the Society for Ritual Arts (*Coreopsis Journal* and *Roses & Wildflowers*) as art editor on a volunteer basis. While not working, Sonali enjoys listening to songs.

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JADE SCARDHAM is an artist and writer focusing on fantasy, horror and sci-fi. She particularly enjoys writing creepy stories and designing creatures and characters. You can find her on Bluesky (@arcanepixels744.bsky.social) and Instagram (@arcanepixelsart).

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net

Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

* * *



MIRA SINGER spent her childhood in New England sword fighting with friends and searching for magic, and currently roosts in a tree house in the wilds of Yonkers. “The World is Raining” was originally published by *Flash Fiction Magazine*. Other previous publications include “They Live So Little and They Die So Fast” first published in *Flash Fiction Magazine* and reprinted in *Small Wonders*, “Actual Intelligence” in *The /tEmz/ Review*, and “The Parrots of Chelm” with *Liar’s League*. Learn more at <https://dragonsathenaeum.weebly.com/>.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award® and Elgin Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *The Gravity of Existence*, and with Geneve Flynn, Lee Murray, and Angela Yuriko Smith, *Tortured Willows: Bent, Bowed, Unbroken*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbric*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect @christinasng.

* * *

D.A. XIAOLIN SPIRES steps into portals and reappears in sites



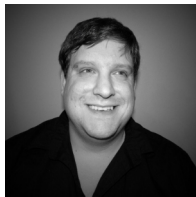
such as NY, Hawai'i, various parts of Asia and elsewhere, with her keyboard appendage attached. Her work appears in publications such as *Clarkesworld*, *Analog*, *Nature*, *Terraform*, *Star*Line*, *Escape Pod*, and anthologies such as *Make Shift*, *Ride the Star Wind*, *Sharp and Sugar Tooth*, *Deep Signal*, and *Battling in All Her Finery*. Select stories can be read in German, Spanish, Vietnamese, Estonian, French and Japanese translation. She is guest editing the Aliens issue of *Eye to the Telescope* poetry magazine. Her sci-fi novella *Ellipses* is forthcoming from Infinivox. Besides writing stories, poetry and non-fiction, she also teaches martial arts and paints fantastical art in sumi ink, watercolor and acrylic.

* * *



BAILEY THOMAS is a writer and healthcare worker living in Pennsylvania, USA. She has been published in *Androids and Dragons Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Star*Line*, and others. She can be found on twitter/X @bailey_thomas92, Bluesky @baileythomas92.bsky.social and Instagram @bailey_thomaswriter.

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MICHAEL VANCALBERGH currently lives in Normal, IL. His work has recently appeared in the *Chicago Reader*, *After Hours Magazine*, and many other spaces. He edits for the poetry journal *SRPR* and writes reviews of comics for the *Comics Beat*. You can find him running the website Widely Read (<https://widely-read.ghost.io/>) or on BlueSky (@mvpocet.bsky.social)

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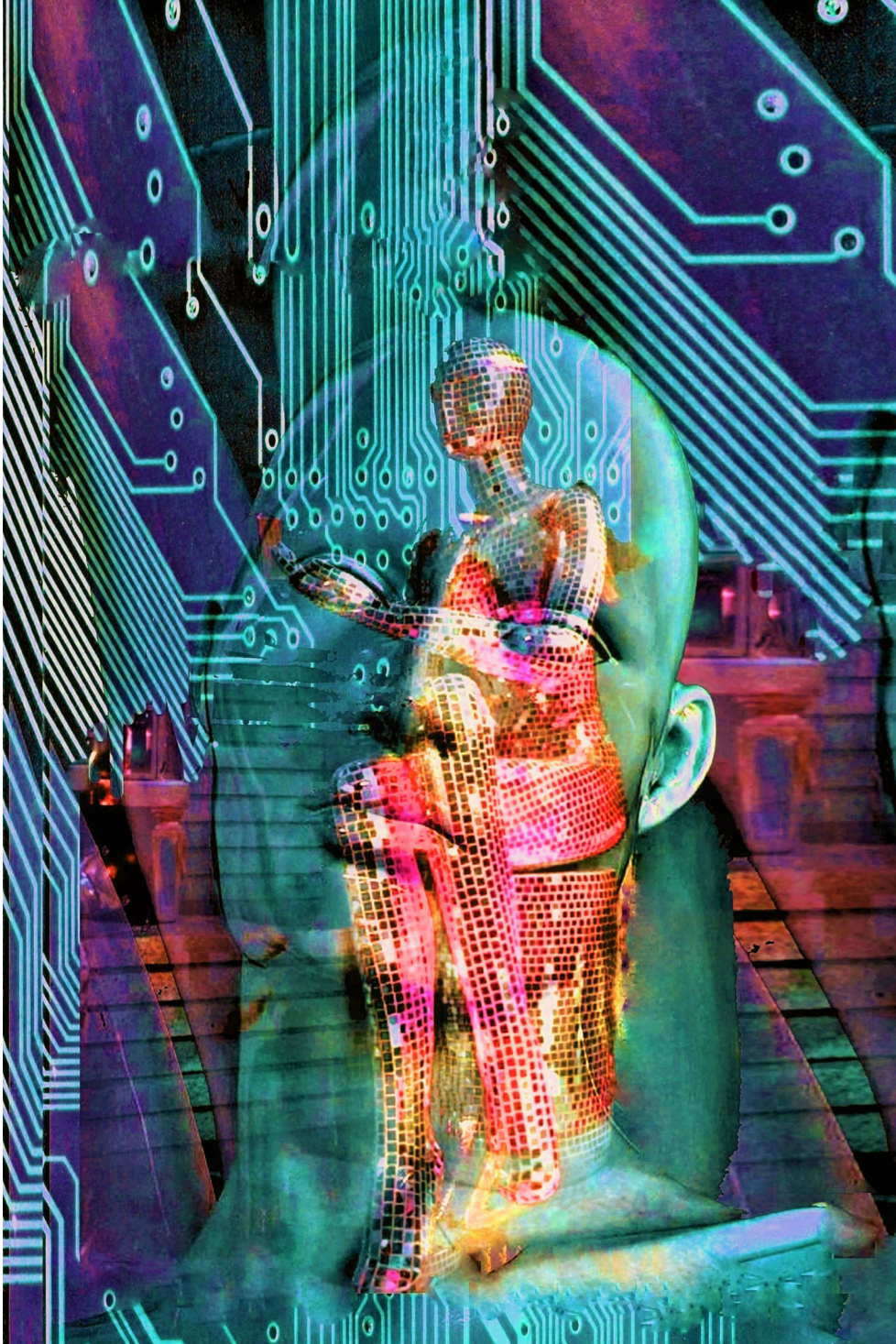


OLGA VRUBEL lives in London, Great Britain, with her family and old-house ghosts. Whenever she doesn't write or read horror, she enjoys watching football (London is Blue!) and travelling. You can find her on Twitter (@VrubelOlga) where she posts reviews of books and likes interacting with other authors.

* * *



MARCUS WHALBRING is a poet and author who's been nominated for a Pushcart and Best of the Net. His poetry collections include *A Concert of Rivers* (Milk & Cake Press) and *How to Draw Fire* (Finishing Line Press). A graduate of the MFA program at Miami University, his poems and stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Space & Time*, *Haven Spec*, *Illumen*, *The Dread Machine*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, and *The NoSleep Podcast*, among others. He's a high school teacher, a father, and a husband. Learn more about his work at marcuswhalbring.com and [instagram.com/marcuswhalbring/](https://www.instagram.com/marcuswhalbring/).



Android 9

by Amanda Bergloff

(full image)