

penumbra



speculative
fiction mag

Apr 2k21 • vol iv issue 6

Climate Change

Can we fix
what we've broken?

Environmental
researcher

James
Cannon

an interview

plus

Christina Sng • Jay Caselberg • Grace
Wagner • Elby Rogers • Martins Deep •
Lizz Shepherd • Nathan Batchelor •
Novyl the Mysterious • Carl Scharwath •
Matthew Hooton • Claire Smith • Robert
Alexander Wray • Jennifer Lee Rossman
• Tylor James • Lorraine Schein • Peter
Alterman • Anton Cancre • Nyamweya
Maxwell • T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2021 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

We are open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We will reopen for fiction and poetry submissions 15 June 2021. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

Table of contents

from the editor

articles

article
interview

Nature and/vs Technology: Can we fix what we've broken?

Climate Change: An interview with James S. Cannon

fiction & poetry

by Jay Caselberg
by Robert Alexander Wray
by Grace Wagner
by Peter Alterman
by Nathan Batchelor
by Matthew Hooton
by Claire Smith
by Jennifer Lee Rossman
by Tylor James
by Nyamweya Maxwell
by Lorraine Schein
by Lizz Shepherd
by Anton Cancre

Fugue
Melancholy Echo
Super Volcano
The Book of Father Dominic
The City Within
206
Roses
Ice
Godly Business
Death Everlasting
Dream Pillow 1
The Everglades
Queen of the Fucking Butterflies ...

art & g. narrative

by Christina Sng
by Martins Deep
by T. Motley
by Novyl the Mysterious
by Elby Rogers
by Carl Scharwath
by Jesper Nordqvist

Starry Night
self-portrait as a broken boy
The Road to Golgonooza
Marked and Owned
My Son Is Nothing but a Pez Dispenser
One in Nature
Mondo Mecho

contributor's

bios

cover: Omi Wilde's An Argument
in a World of Wonders

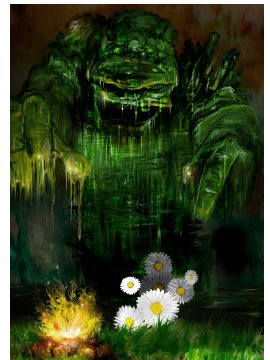
by toeken



*self-portrait as a
broken boy*



Marked and Owned



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Welcome to the sixth “new” issue of *Penumbria*! This marks a full year’s worth of issues since restarting, and I couldn’t be happier with the way it’s gone. You all have made this a blessing, and hopefully we’ve lived up to (or even gone a bit beyond) your expectations.

As it’s spring, and Earth Day, we’ve put together an article/interview combination about the climate. Did you know on average the cherry blossoms in Japan are coming out about 10 days sooner than “normal”? This might not sound like much, but it’s like the canary in the coal mine—it indicates CO₂ and temperatures much higher than normal (Kyoto is about 6°F warmer on average than in pre-industrial times), and trends over time show this continuing, to the detriment of glaciers, permafrost, “normal” weather patterns, and “normal” human life across the world. And at some point, this average temperature rise and climate change generally (which is not the same as just rising temps) will become self-reinforcing, a sort of planetary fever we’ve caused ... and fevers are attempts to get rid of infections, in this case, us.

Let’s not be the infection. Let’s try to be the cure instead.

To that end, our article, “Nature and/versus Technology,” discusses not only what’s happening out there right now and what we’re doing to cause it, but also the things—both natural and technological—we can do to try to stop it, or at least slow it down. And, hint, the Paris climate agreement barely replaces the tip of the iceberg. We talk everything from peat bogs to nanomaterials in an attempt to find something we can do in a short period of time to fix what we’ve wrought over hundreds of years.

In addition, we interview James S. Cannon, environmental

researcher and publisher of the *Clean Fuels and Electric Vehicles Report*, which for over 20 years kept abreast of the latest developments in alternative fuel and vehicle technology. We talked about Paris, vehicle tech, and what the upcoming generation, the Greta Thunbergs of the world, can do (and what all of us should be doing, honestly).

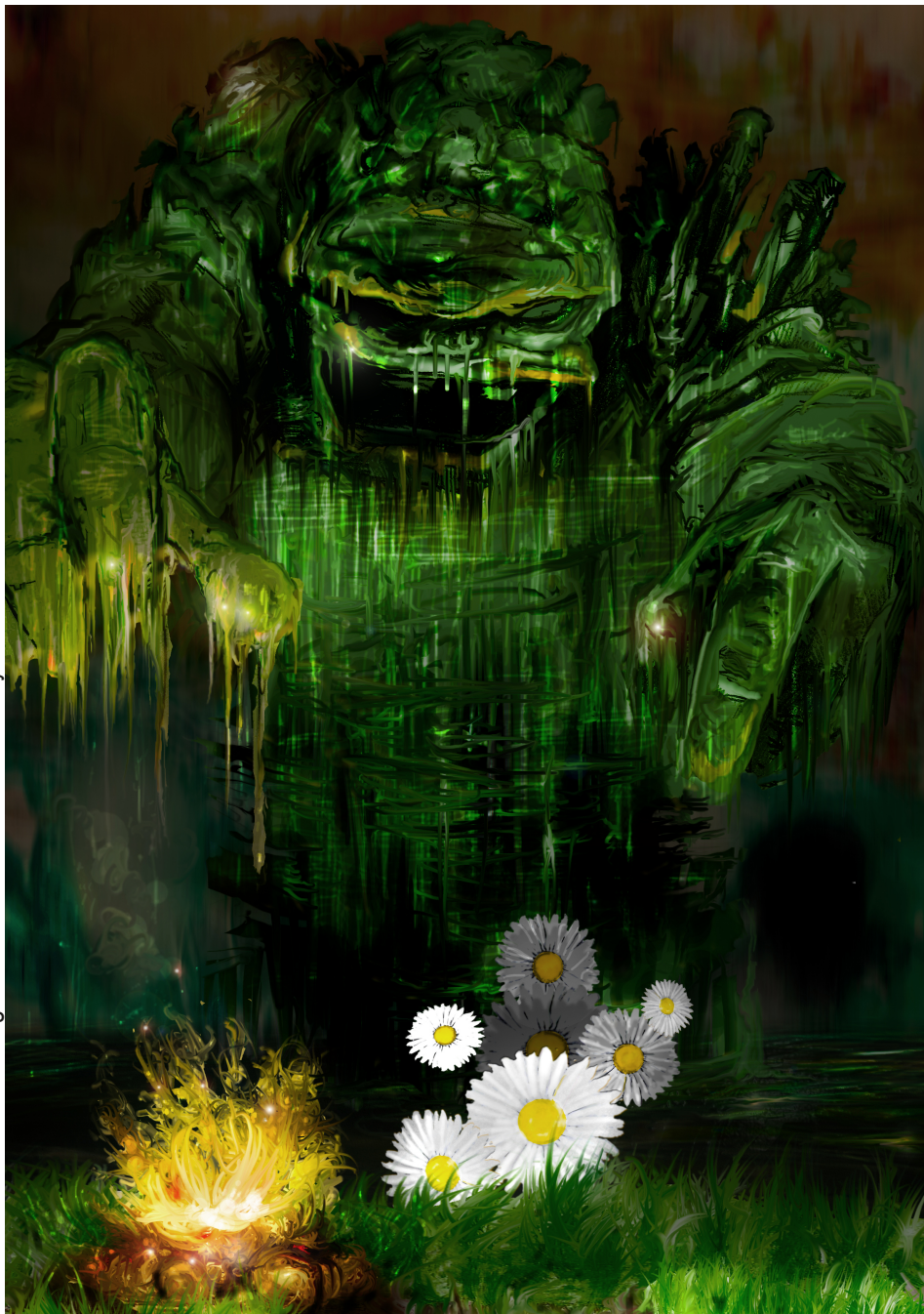
The works in this issue follow a theme, but it’s not quite about climate—it’s more about nature and about new beginnings/endings. Some, like Grace Wagner’s “Super Volcano,” Jennifer Lee Rossman’s “Ice,” Lizz Shepherd’s “The Everglades,” and Christina Sng’s *Starry Night* and Carl Scharwath’s *One in Nature*, feature nature or natural systems—as does our cover by toeken, *Omi Wilde’s An Argument in a World of Wonders*. Others feature nature in a slightly different way, as in Claire Smith’s “Roses” and Anton Cancre’s “Queen of the Fucking Butterflies, Drunk and Expounding on Existence to Her Subjects.” Others speak of endings, as in Jay Caselberg’s “Fugue,” Nyamweya Maxwell’s “Death Everlasting,” Peter Alterman’s “The Book of Father Dominic,” and Matthew Hooton’s “206.” And still others have both beginnings and endings, whole civilizations rising up in Tylor James’ “Godly Business” and Nathan Batchelor’s “The City Within,” more personal worlds being created in Lorraine Schein’s “Dream Pillow 1.” And sometimes the journey is as important as the ending/beginning, as in Robert Alexander Wray’s “Melancholy Echo.”

We again are honored to have the art of Martins Deep (*self-portrait as a broken boy*), Novyl the Mysterious (*Marked and Owned*), and Elby Rogers (*My Son Is Nothing but a Pez Dispenser*), as well as Sng’s, Scharwath’s, and toeken’s works mentioned above, and of course the continuing sagas of both T. Motley’s *The Road to Golgonooza* and Jesper Nordqvist’s *Mondo Mecho*. Many of these

have been with us since our own “new beginning,” and hopefully, along with all the authors we’ve published, will continue to be as we move forward into the brave new world. I am happy that it has such people in it.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

PICTURED: Omi Wilde's An Argument In A World Of Wonders by toeken



Nature and/versus Technology

Can we fix
what we've
broken?

THE CLIMATE IS A'CHANGIN'. Even most conservatives in the US believe that now (although that may regress given the influence of Trumpism), although many still say it has to be due entirely to non-anthropogenic forces from volcanoes to the farts of cows, claiming humans aren't powerful enough to change the climate. But whether it's human-caused or not, wouldn't the end result still be catastrophic?

And if we are powerful enough to change nature to at least some extent, shouldn't we at least try to either a) modify our behavior so we don't make our own planet unlivable or b) if we can't manage (a), then reverse what we have wrought?

In this month's *Penumbra* we discuss climate change technology—what we can do now to slow down or reverse climate change, and what we may have to do in the future if we don't do enough now. We also talk to James Cannon, formerly of Energy Futures, Inc and—full disclosure—my boss at the *Clean Fuels and Electric Vehicles Report*, about climate, climate change, and what's being done about it.

It Started in the Ozone

And first, yes, we can affect nature/the atmosphere in a very big way. In the mid-1970s, Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina described how chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in many common products (mostly aerosol sprays) rose into the atmosphere and triggered a process whereby the Earth's ozone layer, a shield protecting life on the surface from dangerous UV radiation, was being destroyed. Much as hypotheses about CO₂/other greenhouse gases and global warming many years later, there were various reactions: warnings from scientists, some of the public shunning aerosol sprays, and companies denying science or coming up with their own. However, in 1985, three British scientists, Joseph Farman, Brian Gardiner, and Jonathan Shanklin, published a paper in *Nature* demonstrating a massive hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic that fluctuated but overall was growing in size, and proving that CFCs were to blame. Further research by many scientists worldwide merely reconfirmed what had already been confirmed, and despite recalcitrance from some quarters (in the US, President Reagan's Interior Secretary Donald Hodel claimed we could just adapt and wear hats and sunglasses¹), the world actually came together and created a treaty—the Montreal Protocol—eventually supported by every country on Earth, to phase out the use of CFCs and other substances that deplete the ozone layer.

The treaty worked; not quickly, as the damage we do to our environment is often not fixed quickly, but it is estimated that the

ozone layer will heal itself in the second half of this century.²

Kyoto/Paris Protocol/Agreement/Definitely Not Guarantee

On the current issue of broad climate change, however, there has been more pushback from conservative and other forces (especially the oil and gas industry, paired with factories of many sorts)—so much so that nothing seems to be done. From the Kyoto Protocol (1997, where everyone almost agreed to do something and then reneged) to the Paris Agreement (2015) and onward (each year ending up as more of a photo op for world leaders), all we seem to do is have grand conferences where everyone says something should be done, points fingers at those they think should be doing it first, sign a watered-down agreement that scientists then look at and tell us won't solve the problem, and then go home and do little to nothing anyway, claiming it's too hard or will hurt the economy or that climate change is a farce ... and since there is no real enforcement mechanism, no real guarantee of anything, everyone can grumble at each other but do little else.

And even if we were to do the absolute least we can do, and follow the agreements made in these conferences, we would see catastrophic levels of global change. The agreements to date merely slow emissions growth, still leading to temperature increases well above the critical 2°C (actually, 1.5°C is the first "critical" number, but we have very little chance of making that one) by 2100³ at a cost of tens of trillions of dollars.⁴ In fact, according to Bjorn Lomborg, author of *False Alarm*, to keep temperatures below a 2°C increase would mean "cutting eighty times more carbon emissions than were actually promised" in Paris—and the reality is we're not even achieving the promises, let alone multiples of those.⁵

So much more needs to be done it's mind-boggling.

On some level we obviously know we need to make a choice, even if that choice is to do nothing and hope that somehow the Invisible Hand of the Markets moves to save us (which I have to admit is possible, but would happen after much pain and misery and death, as markets react; they don't proactively plan for the future; heck, they don't plan for even tomorrow, let alone years from now). And since

Kyoto and Paris: Promises, Promises

THE KYOTO PROTOCOL AND THE PARIS AGREEMENT, while not the only climate declarations (there are conferences every year at which some kind of something is announced), are two instances of countries making relatively major climate commitments (unfortunately, in the loosest sense of the word). Here's a little about each.

Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol was agreed to in Japan in 1997 by 84 countries (one of which later withdrew [Canada] and another which never ratified it [the US]). It was the first agreement to really try to combat climate change on a global level. It entered into force in 2005 and included emission targets for developed countries, as those were agreed to have been responsible for the bulk of emissions. (This, of course, became a sticking point later for those opposed to it—"Why should we suffer when other countries like China are now industrializing?")

It seems like a fairy tale now, with countries promising to reduce their emissions by an average of 5 percent over a five-year period ending in 2012. The actuality showed us that we were no longer ready to show an ozone-fighting solidarity and had little political will to do even this much. China and the US, the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases, didn't follow the protocol (China wasn't considered a "developed" country, and the Republican-controlled US Senate never ratified it).

While there is disagreement as to whether Kyoto would have

significantly reduced global temperature rise even with US participation, we would definitely have had a better chance of doing so by starting reductions in the early 2000s. Instead countries bickered and bickered, and really very few made their targets regardless.

Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement (2015) was intended to be a better-functioning replacement of Kyoto. It was supposed to have been a legally binding treaty that required all major carbon emitters—including the US, China, and India—to reduce emissions by a significant amount. And it did come out with a major commitment—agreeing to limit global temperatures increases to no more than 2°C above preindustrial levels (and attempting to keep the increase to below 1.5°C). Bonus: 196 countries signed it. Anti-bonus: It was a nonbinding agreement and only hoped to "promote compliance." And once again, the US tried to back out of even that (although the current administration has rejoined).

Progress given these caveats has been mixed. China claimed to have met its 2020 commitments three years early, in 2017. The EU rapidly fell behind its own targets, and the US, while showing progress in individual cities, created backwards-facing policies overall during the Trump administration that are only now being rectified. And as noted in our article, even if every country did what it originally promised in Paris, it wouldn't be anywhere near enough to stop the juggernaut of warming we have created.

no one (or very few) want to revert to a pre-industrial lifestyle (which, although romanticized, would actually be very unpleasant), we need to use technology to get us out of what our technology has created. And that starts with the fuel that keeps us going.

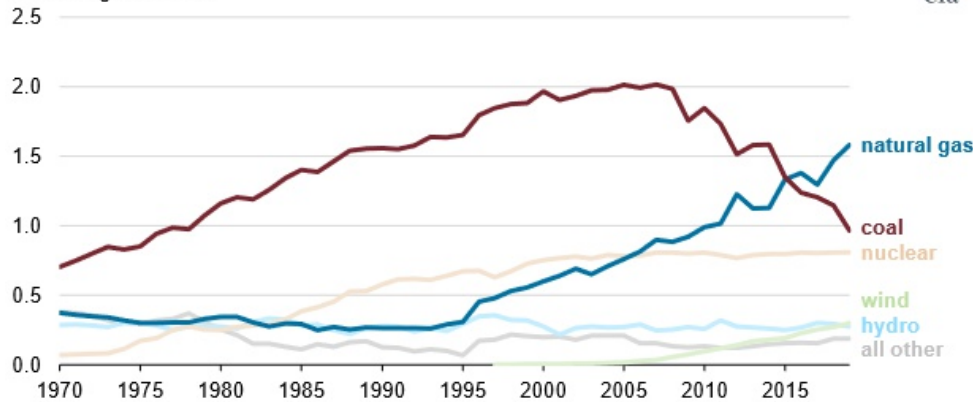
So Much Gas, So Little Wind

As I write this, Colorado's fossil fuel industry is desperate to get us to believe that only they can get us back up and running after COVID, running ad after ad telling us how only they can power us

into the future, reminding us that they have powered and profited the state since 1860, telling us that innovators only innovate because they have the power of oil and gas behind them. It's not immediately obvious why they're blitzing us this way; the ads don't attack any specific bill in the legislature, or any specific alternative energy, and I doubt the general public is thinking about oil and gas except in terms of what they put in their cars. But the industry obviously thinks there's a chance environmentalists or other groups might be able to gain a greater foothold after COVID, and in general the state is

U.S. annual electricity generation by energy source (1970-2019)

billion megawatthours



PICTURED: US electricity generation by energy source (1970-2019). Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

moving toward cleaner fuel solutions—as is the world.

Although cheaper oil prices have retarded interest in hybrid and electric vehicles, there's been a growing revolt against fully gasoline powered vehicles. Well, revolt is too strong a word, but the interest is strengthening. In 2018, a AAA survey found over 30 percent of US adults were likely to buy a hybrid vehicle the next time they bought one, and around 20 percent of adults overall were interested in EVs.⁶ A 2020 survey by Consumer Reports found 71% of US adults had some interest in EVs, and over 30% would look at EVs for their next vehicle. This interest is especially high among the younger generations, as powerful activists like Greta Thunberg and others have not only raised climate awareness but been very effective voices countering those of Trump and his allies—nearly 80% of Millennials (which, yes, still count as a younger generation) are interested in getting an EV at some point, according to that same survey.⁷ And the general trend worldwide is for more stringent fuel economy and pollution controls on vehicles—not only passenger cars, but also buses, trucks, and more broadly other transport sectors, such as aircraft and even, to a lesser but important extent, oceangoing vessels, which use some of the dirtiest fuel in the world.



And of course there are pollutants beyond those in transportation; there's the electricity and gas we use to power everything else, from lights to TVs to furnaces and air con in homes, to shopping malls and factories and manufacturing and ... The bulk of this power still comes from natural gas and coal (of which there is no “clean” variety, no matter what a politician says). In Colorado, for instance, coal leads in electricity generation, although renewables have overtaken natural gas for second place.⁸ In the US as a whole, natural gas leads all sources, followed by coal and nuclear (renewables as a whole come in a very distant fourth; see table). And this is after years of environmental awareness.

Replacing this, or the sheer amount we use, is difficult, even without political and corporate opposition. We can't just switch to EVs and hybrids and feel good about ourselves—the batteries used to store electricity in these vehicles are themselves made of many rare metals that must be mined from the earth, and emissions are also generated during manufacturing. This is the “well-to-wheels” analysis you may have heard about, where in order to truly calculate environmental impact, you have to go through the vehicle's entire manufacturing process before you even get to the fuel used to power it.

So what can we use instead?

The two power sources most people turn to when asked about non-fossil-fuel alternatives are solar and wind power, which have come a long way since the 1960s and 1970s when environmentalism became a big deal, but still, honestly, have a ways to go. Part of this is because we still have issues with storage technology—because the sun isn't always out, and because the wind doesn't blow all the time, we can't use these as continual sources of energy, and regardless to get the generated power to somewhere it can be used requires some sort of transportation and storage. For liquid or gaseous fuels, we



PICTURED: Toyota's Prius XLE AWD-e 83 shown in Electric Storm Blue, whilst in a storm of Nature's creation. Source: Toyota's website gallery, <https://www.toyota.com/prius/photo-gallery/exterior>.

have pipelines and storage tanks. For solar and wind energy, we have batteries. Unfortunately, batteries are not perfect storage items—they lose the ability to store power over time, and their manufacturing (and disposal) process is highly polluting. So the first big tech that would help would be better storage for alternative energy. This can be anything from better batteries made of less toxic materials (such as zinc-air batteries) to hydrogen fuel cells, which are efficient and carbon neutral, generating only heat and water as outputs (but are still made of rare materials).

(In addition, solar panels themselves can create environmental problems, as their own “well-to-wheels” process generates toxic pollutants, including lead, cadmium, and more.)

On the “wheels” end of the process, we do have advances in vehicle technology. Hybrids and EVs have come a long way since the late '90s, when US auto manufacturers in the Partnership for a New Generation of Vehicles basically told the government that hybrids just couldn't be done and then Toyota and Honda jumped in and did

them anyway. Toyota's Prius became the best-selling HEV, and has now been joined by dozens of others, even from those American manufacturers who thought it wasn't worth the effort.

EVs have gone from little more than golf carts to viable vehicles, although there are still the issues of miles before recharging and the sheer amount of time it takes to recharge (plus finding a decent charging point). Over the years various alternatives to recharging have been offered, such as just changing out the whole battery instead of charging it, but nothing has really stuck. However, some states are beginning to build charging networks, and of course if you can just recharge overnight at home.

As mentioned above, fuel cells offer perhaps an even better alternative to batteries, and several companies (particularly Honda, Toyota, and Hyundai) are developing vehicles using these (and in fact a few models are available in a limited way in states like California and Hawaii). They basically use hydrogen as fuel and emit only water and heat. They have several issues, however, such as being quite pricey (\$50,000 for a fuel cell Toyota Mirai vs \$25,000 for a Prius vs \$20,000 for a conventional Corolla), lack of hydrogen filling stations, and durability issues. However, they have a range similar to that of gasoline-powered vehicles (or better), at over 350 miles per "tank," and get over 60 MPGe (miles per gallon equivalent, used for comparing alternative fuel vehicles to gas-using ones).

At the current price of oil and gas, however, there is little market incentive on the ground for people to change to these more expensive vehicles. This is where governments have stepped in, with more and more stringent fuel economy measures and pollution controls. Even though these controls seem to be intermittently relaxed (by Trump's government, for example), manufacturers seem resigned to the idea that they need to do better and better, and so these kinds of tech are moving forward all the time—but really not quickly enough.

Cozying Up to Nature

Every year we destroy 15 million hectares of rainforest⁹ for various reasons (manufacturing, farms, just toxic destruction, paper, etc.). According to the World Wildlife Fund, "in 2019 the tropics lost close

to 30 soccer fields' worth of trees every single minute." Forests generally act as natural CO₂ sinks, purify water, and are home to 80% of earth's land-based species.¹⁰ If we could reverse this, and reforest the forests, we would be creating a natural climate change barrier without really stretching ourselves technologically.

Simple, right? ... Well, not so much.

In reality reforestation is not having the effect we'd like, partly because we're reforesting with an eye toward economic gain. According to an article in *Nature*,¹¹ much of the new forest going into the ground is "plantations of commercial trees," which are regularly harvested (e.g., for paper) and thus release their stored CO₂ right back into the atmosphere every 10-20 years. We also tend to plant trees that we can harvest fruit or nuts from, which usually aren't the "natural" forest the International Panel on Climate Change recommends. In total, about two-thirds of reforestation efforts are devoted to trees that don't replace what was lost. And the one-third that is left? Well, these can take 70 years to mature. And we haven't exactly left ourselves that kind of time.

But it doesn't need to be something as large as trees. Peat bogs (or moors, fens, places you'd find hounds that haunt Baskervilles) are intense stores of CO₂ due to their makeup—layers and layers of organic materials that haven't decayed. Permafrost stores CO₂ for similar reasons (non-decayed organic matter is frozen). When burned (or defrosted, if permafrost), these bogs release massive amounts of CO₂. Bogs cover only about 3% of our planet's landmass; we've drained or burned about a ninth of that, yet this destruction contributes "up to 5 percent of global CO₂ emissions per year."¹² If we can "reforest" these bogs ("re-peat" them?), we can stop this release and even begin to reverse it, as they are doing in Scotland.¹³ The hope is that within five to fifteen years, the bogs can be back to their CO₂-storing selves.

Of course, not everywhere is forest or peat bog, and I doubt we will voluntarily turn our cities into reforestation projects. However, even in urban areas, we can do something. Simple steps like painting roofs white, or planting rooftop gardens, can help lower the urban

temperature (which can be several degrees hotter than the surrounding rural areas). We can improve public transport options, and increase the amount of land given over to parks and other green spaces. And, of course, change the cars we drive and the energy efficiency of buildings, all of which are developing technologies.

However ...

Honestly, though, even doing all of this at levels humans are probably capable of will not be likely to keep change from happening (although of course they will help!). And it's not just me giving in to these pessimistic thoughts. According to Lomborg, even fully and completely efficiently implementing the promises governments made in the Paris Agreement will only reduce the rise in temperature by 0.05°F—note that that's not a reduction in temps, it's a reduction in the rise in temps as compared to doing nothing, which means effectively letting temperatures run away to very nearly +7.5°F above preindustrial levels. In fact, some studies¹⁴ say that, if we were to stop all CO₂ now, the planet would continue to warm because we've already gone over the edge, as it were ... self-reinforcing warming mechanisms are already in play, and the temperature could keep rising regardless.

So what do we do? Give up and leave the planet?

Starships Aside ... Nanotechnology, Geoengineering

We will not manage to do that—we can't even get our asses to Mars, as Arnold said in *Total Recall* (1990). And that doesn't solve the problem, other than that if we can stay on Mars until the Earth is better, maybe we can move back, alternating between planets ... oh God, that almost makes a kind of sense. But that is definitely distant sci-fi (and continues to make us destroyers of worlds, rather than caretakers).

We can work more quickly toward cleaner fuel sources than fossil fuels. Clean, perfect fusion power is often brought up as the best power source—but I've heard we were on the brink of fusion power about as many times as I've been promised houses on Mars and flying cars, and we see where that's gone. (Although for you optimists out there, there is some evidence that we could have fusion

power online by 2035.¹⁵ But as I said ...)

What we are more likely to do is try to actively remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere or reflect the incoming energy from the sun ... but try to do it in just the right way that it has an effect, but not so much that we're stuck living in an ice-breaking train that crisscrosses the snowy world for no apparently good reason. This is geo-engineering, and is unproven on the scales we'd need to make a real difference, but for better or worse, it offers us a way out even if we continue to emit CO₂ like we're some kind of earth-warming dragons.

Some geoengineering techniques are being tried today, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS; some of which is already part of the International Panel on Climate Change's calculations). With this we capture CO₂ emissions and then store them deep underground. We have, however, not the best track record for storing things (see, e.g., nuclear waste), and we'd need to be careful not to cause some kind of unintended consequence, such as can occur with fracking—earthquakes, water contamination, etc.

A better CCS solution might be storing it in the soil via plants and a sort of CO₂ “farming”¹⁶ or through getting the soil to take up more carbon. This could both store the carbon and help with food or other biomass production and seems similar to reforestation and peat bog restoration, although it isn't; it's more like the way the ocean acts as a giant heat and CO₂ sink, just land-based. It can store carbon for centuries. However, as with using the ocean in this way, there are limits. In fact, an article in *The Guardian* points to research that has found we've overestimated the ability of soil to soak up CO₂.¹⁷

We can also capture CO₂ using biomass, like the giant oceangoing algae platforms described in an article on Quartz¹⁸ and other studies. Algae is much more efficient than trees at storing CO₂, grows quickly, and can be used as a food source and fuel source. Start-ups are springing up to try and take advantage of this (iWi in the US for food; Exxon and others looking at making it a fuel source), but no one has it at the kind of scale necessary to be a CO₂ sink.

No one has yet realistically proposed a giant atmospheric Hoover, or

nanobots that float around in the atmosphere and eat CO₂, but I expect that if I've thought of these things, someone else has. And there's incentive: Richard Branson and Al Gore's \$25 million Virgin Earth Challenge reward!¹⁹ (No, wait ... that reward is no longer being offered, and no one claimed the prize. I'll just have to develop my nanobots for free ...) But in terms of nano-things, there are scientists developing nanomaterials that can "efficiently use carbon dioxide from the air, capture toxic pollutants from water and degrade solid waste into useful products," according to an article in *Scientific American* from 2017.²⁰ However, we are still uncertain as to the lingering effects of nanoparticles in the environment. It wouldn't do to come up with the next version of plastic.

In terms of reflecting sunlight so as not to warm the earth quite as much, there are many untried technologies. One uses the idea of spraying reflective aerosols into the atmosphere, much as happens during a major volcanic eruption. In 1991, Mt Pinatubo in the Philippines erupted and sprayed 15 million tons of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere—into the stratosphere, to be exact. This reacted with water to create aerosol particles that persisted for two years and lowered temperatures by about 0.6 or 0.7°C. This was not evenly spread across the globe, however, and only lasted two or three years. And while we might be able to extrapolate the amounts necessary to lower global temps even more, or reinject aerosols every so often to keep up the right amounts, we don't ultimately have any sort of fine-tuned control over the process, and we could trigger any number of other issues (e.g., changes in weather or rainfall patterns) and, in the end, only mask our greenhouse gas problem—and unless we also continue to lower emissions, and also are able to fine-tune our atmospheric meddling to adjust for changing conditions on Earth, we could end up with terrible, sudden problems later on.

I can imagine satellites that control "fields" of reflective objects that would give us more control than just spraying aerosols into the atmosphere, but again this would just be a gigantic, costly band-aid that buys us time but doesn't solve our problems. We're also better off if we can come up with some other solution that also has an economic benefit, which is not only helpful to convince people and companies looking only at the short term to take action, but an easier

sell to politicians as well (if politicians were thinking logically). (Although of course it's more than a bit sad that "inhabitable planet" has to come with some other benefit before people will listen.)

While each of these "solutions" comes fraught with uncertainty when applied to something as vast and unpredictable as planetary climate systems, we may have no choice but to tiptoe into some of these technologies while also lowering our day-to-day emissions. Trying to get our industries and politicians to lower emissions when they think they have an "out," however, has always proven near-impossible.

So Give Up?

Assuming we can adapt to most situations, we could just give up and try to live with it. But, well, look at what can happen—we could end up like Venus, where runaway warming due to greenhouse gases has made the place uninhabitable (by human standards). (Wouldn't it be hilarious if somehow we were to blame for that planet's problems, and we moved to Earth and then forgot what we'd done? That'd require also forgetting what we know about planetary formation, but it'd make a good 1950s sci-fi story.) Now, that's probably a horror tale to be told whilst everyone camps out around the pile of ice cubes we're trying to chill ourselves with.

Hyperbole aside ... Doing nothing would be a huge sacrifice of people AND economies, of individuals and nations. And I think this is selling ourselves short—which we may be wont to do, in a world where we don't even value one another and can't think far enough into the future to even wear masks until a pandemic is over. But even my limited optimism believes that if we actually get ourselves motivated to do something to save the world we live in, we can do it, and it has to be not only the Greta Thunbergs of the world doing it, nor even just the younger generations. It has to be everyone, and it has to move beyond just talking or writing about it to doing something.

Notes:

1. David Doniger, "We Saved the Ozone Layer. We Can Save the Climate," NRDC, April 17, 2019. <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/david-doniger/we->

2. Robin McKie, "Thirty years on, scientist who discovered ozone layer hole warns: 'it will still take years to heal,'" The Guardian, 18 Apr 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/18/scientist-who-discovered-hole-in-ozone-layer-warns>

3. Jen Iris Allan, "Dangerous Incrementalism of the Paris Agreement", MIT Press Direct, February 1, 2019. <https://direct.mit.edu/glep/article/19/1/4/15032/Dangerous-Incrementalism-of-the-Paris-Agreement>

4. Bjorn Lomborg, False Alarm. Basic Books: New York, 2020. p. 110.

5. Ibid., 120.

6. Keith Barry, "More American Drivers Want Electric Cars, AAA Survey Says," Consumer Reports, May 8, 2018. <https://www.consumerreports.org/hybrids-evs/more-american-drivers-want-electric-cars-aaa-survey-says/>

7. Fred Lambert, "Interest in electric cars increases, but survey shows big shift in consumer thinking yet to happen," electrek, December 21, 2020. <https://electrek.co/2020/12/21/electric-cars-interest-increase-but-survey-big-shift-consumer-thinking/>

8. Energy Information Administration data, Colorado state profile and energy estimates, Colorado Net Electricity Generation by Source, Dec. 2020 (graphic). <https://www.eia.gov/state/?sid=CO#tabs-4>

9. "Rainforest Destruction," Rainforest Facts. <http://www.rainforest-facts.com/rainforest-destruction.html>

10. "Deforestation and Forest Degradation: Overview," World Wildlife Fund. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/deforestation-and-forest-degradation>

11. Simon L. Lewis, Charlotte E. Wheeler, et al. "Restoring natural forests is the best way to remove atmospheric carbon," Nature, April 2, 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01026-8>

12. Irene Banos Ruiz, "Peatlands: Neglected piece of the climate puzzle," Deutsche Welle, December 21, 2017. <https://www.dw.com/en/peatlands->

13. Joe Lo, "Scotland restores its peatlands to keep carbon in the ground," Deutsche Welle, October 31, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/scotland-restores-its-peatlands-to-keep-carbon-in-the-ground/a-50915166>

14. Jorgen Randers and Ulrich Goluke, "An earth system model shows self-sustained thawing of permafrost even if all man-made GHG emissions stop in 2020," Scientific Reports 10, November 12, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-75481-z>; Thomas Frölicher, Michael Winton, and Jorge Louis Sarmiento. "Continued global warming after CO2 emissions stoppage," Nature Climate Change 4, 40–44 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2060>

15. Rosamund Hutt and Keith Breene, "Scientists just got closer to making nuclear fusion work," World Economic Forum, May 14, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/nuclear-fusion-could-solve-the-world-s-energy-problems-and-scientists-just-got-closer-to-making-it-work/>

16. Richard Heinberg, Will Technology Solve Climate Change?" Resilience.org, January 27, 2021. <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-01-27/will-technology-solve-climate-change/>

17. Damian Carrington, "One of Earth's giant carbon sinks may have been overestimated - study," The Guardian, March 24, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/24/soils-ability-to-absorb-carbon-emissions-may-be-overestimated-study>

18. Ben Lamm, "Algae might be a secret weapon to combatting climate change," Quartz, October 1, 2019. <https://qz.com/1718988/algae-might-be-a-secret-weapon-to-combatting-climate-change/>

19. Virgin Earth Challenge, <https://www.virgin.com/about-virgin/virgin-group/news/virgin-earth-challenge2>

20. Bhavya Khullar, "Nanomaterials Could Combat Climate Change and Reduce Pollution," Scientific American, September 4, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nanomaterials-could-combat-climate-change-and-reduce-pollution/>

*The Paris Agreement. Alternative fuels. Are these enough?
Or is life as we know it a thing of the past?*

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

An interview with James S. Cannon

James S. Cannon is an internationally recognized researcher specializing in energy development, environmental protection, and related public policy issues. He was President of Energy Futures, Inc., which he founded in 1979, until his retirement in 2019. Energy Futures published the quarterly international journal The Clean Fuels and Electric Vehicles Report and the bimonthly newsletter Hybrid Vehicles. I was privileged to work as his copy editor from the mid-1990s until he retired, and we caught up recently on climate change, alternative vehicles, and whether we can do anything about the self-created predicament in which we humans find ourselves.

* * *

After four years of stalling (or going backward) on addressing climate change, do you think the US has rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement too late to stop a catastrophic temperature rise? Was the Paris Agreement ever going to mitigate climate change enough to

avoid these kinds of temperature rises?

Unfortunately, it is already too late to stop catastrophic temperature rises, and the Paris Agreement is inadequate to address climate change anyway. Steadily rising temperatures are already causing an increased number and intensity of catastrophic hurricanes, wildfires, and extreme heat waves, causing hundreds of billions of dollars annually in damage and thousands of deaths. Coastal flooding of cities around the world is all but certain without horrifically expensive new protective barriers. Avoiding these and other severe climate change impacts may have been possible in the days of the early global climate conferences—Rio in 1992 and Kyoto in 1997—when there was at least hope, but those hopes are long gone.

We've seen hybrid vehicles becoming more common, and there are many announcements of EVs that are to come out in the next few years (e.g., GM claiming to have all sorts of electric vehicles



PICTURED:
James S.
Cannon

available by 2023 or 2025). Do you think the automobile industry should be doing more (and if so, in what way)? Has battery technology finally reached the point where EVs are practical (in terms of charging times and well-to-wheels costs, and places to recharge)? What problems remain?

I worked on transportation air pollution issues, including climate change, from the publication of my first book on the topic “The Drive for Clean Air” in 1989 to my recent retirement. Nowhere are the obstacles to replacing fossil fuels, the chief source of climate changing gases, with carbon neutral energy forms more formidable than in transportation. Despite decades of efforts, carbon neutral fuels still power only a few percent of the motor vehicles on U.S. roadways. Fossil oil still reigns supreme.

Advanced propulsion and battery storage technologies have improved to the point that high performing motor vehicles incorporating them are now fully commercial. There are a few problems remaining, including slightly higher costs, limited driving range for electric vehicles, and the lack of refueling or recharging infrastructure. The bigger problems are convincing automakers to manufacture carbon neutral vehicles now and the public to purchase them.

Are fuel cell vehicles or other "advanced" technologies still in the running? Are there other potential competitors that might supplant EVs?

Yes fuel cell vehicles are still in the running, with three models from major automakers on the market. Battery EVs are clearly dominating this phase of commercialization, however. Events are clearly defining some losers—methanol, MTBE, and propane vehicles for example—but most truly advanced technologies are still in the running. Liquid renewable jet fuel will clearly replace conventional jet fuel in aircraft. Gaseous renewable natural gas will have a long future in buses, refuse trucks, marine vessels, and select other heavy vehicle markets.

What do you think are the most effective ways we can mitigate climate change (technology-based or not)?

Replacing fossil fuel use with nonfossil energy resources, including wind and solar among others, is the only hope to avoid climate change. Any technologies for energy production and use that do not include fossil fuels are part of the answer. Technologies that seek to lessen the carbon emissions from fossil fuel burning are simply “band-aids” that divert money better spent deploying nonfossil energy resources. Nontechnology options will also be critical. These include population control, forest preservation, and lifestyle adjustments, such as favoring non-meat diets.

Related to the above question ... Do you see any technologies on the horizon that will help mitigate climate change before we reach a

tipping point?

Make no mistake, “life as we know it” is over. Like the *Titanic*, we have already hit the iceberg and life as we know it is going down. This does not mean everyone is going to die. Many survived the *Titanic*’s sinking on lifeboats and in rescue ships. Surviving climate catastrophes as we reduce fossil carbon emissions as quickly as possible is the current challenge. Recapturing a sustainable society through the transition to a carbon neutral economy is close behind.

What about technologies that either suck CO₂ out of the air (or ocean) or reflect sunlight, or other such tech that aims to solve the problem without any action to reduce emissions in the first place? Are these going to be practical? Or do we run the danger of setting off chain reactions in complex systems that we are unprepared for?

It's not nice to mess with Mother Nature! How many more times do we have to suffer the consequences before we learn this lesson?

Some authors (e.g., Bjorn Lomborg) say that the economic costs of mitigating climate change are too great and will hurt the poor, and that we should aim for a combination of some mitigation, some future tech, and some human adaptation to the inevitable human warming of the Earth. What do you think? Are the costs of mitigation too great?

Most corporations and many people believe that it simply costs too much to save the human race. Consider the alternative!

Do you see some hope on the horizon in that younger people (e.g.,

Greta Thunberg) are becoming more vocal, more political, and more insistent that climate change be addressed? What do you think would be most effective for them to do?

The craziness surrounding the cost arguments in the last question clearly show that the patterns of the fossil fuel era are an addiction. The benefits of rampant fossil fuel use peaked decades ago, but we cling to them nevertheless, to our own peril. Young people today are the only hope, if for no other reason than they are less addicted to past patterns and more willing to change.

We know a lot of places that don't work—governments, corporations, churches. Individual responsibility is still viable, however. We have converted our home to a carbon negative energy unit through investments in solar collectors and an EV, plus energy efficiency and organic gardening and landscaping, plus buying and selling carbon credits to balance the carbon “books.” Anyone can try to do this and everyone ought to at least give it a try.

In addition to the Clean Fuels Report and Hybrid Vehicles, James Cannon has written or edited several studies on climate change and alternative transportation technologies, including Reducing Climate Change Impacts in the Transportation Sector and Harnessing Hydrogen: The Key to Sustainable Transportation. Mr. Cannon's research into alternative transportation fuels took him to over 20 countries on 5 continents. He holds an AB degree in chemistry from Princeton University and an MS degree in biochemistry from the University of Pennsylvania.



Starry Night by Christina Sng

Fugue

by Jay Caselberg

Jorge had been thinking for a while about how he might change his world. The problem was that the world seemed to have a mind of its own. The skinny fingers of circumstance plucked at his thoughts, discomfiting and constant, but there wasn't a thing he could do to shift the feeling, nor to shift himself from the place in which he seemed to be stuck.

He sat now upon the sea wall, watching dirty foam swirl around the edges of boulders piled by unseen hands a hundred years before memory. Cold, cold, the gray-blue water crashed against the man-made barrier, sucking back to leave traces trickling between the cracks, the hint of salt spray casting a thin veil over sky and sea. On a day like today, he could almost be guaranteed his solitude. This was his place. His alone. The collar of his dark coat was turned up against the chill breeze, his thinning hair blowing in strands back and forth against his face. Lifetimes could pass here without him marking their passage, and that was one of the things that drew him here. Back home there were ... things he'd rather not think about while he was here in his place of refuge. But he had to think about them. Knowing what he had to do, he tossed a pebble into the water and watched it sink from view.

With a grumble deep in his throat, Jorge clambered to his feet, shoving cold, pale hands deep into the pockets of his thick coat. Steel-gray waves rolled in toward the sand, blanketed by a dull sky above, the stiff breeze whipping white spume from their tops. Back along the beach, a solitary figure walked, a mere smudge against the flat expanse.

With a sigh, Jorge turned from the faded pastel beachscape. Fine spray from the waves pattered icy droplets against one cheek, but he

was immune to the cold. Up at the beach end, thin wooden slats had been laid across the dunes between the tufted grasses to form a walkway, the wood turned white and rimed with salt, making the pale strips look old and desiccated. He was hunched, negotiating his footing slat by slat, when something made him stop, pause. Slowly he lifted his gaze, sea-gray eyes fading into the wave wash behind as if one might see right through his head to the horizon.

"We are indeed the hollow men," said the angel with a smug grin.

Jorge worked his mouth, but nothing would come. He frowned, blinked a couple of times and ran the tip of his tongue over wind-cracked lips, but still there were no words. What did you say to an angel? The sun was starting to slip behind the mountains, casting a fiery corona around the being's wings, making it difficult for Jorge to make out a face. He hadn't expected wings made of leather. No, not at all. Now he could smell, it too. Deep and rich, the scent of tanned hides and deeply stuffed couches. The wings stirred slowly, languidly, seemingly unaffected by the breeze that rippled invisible fingers through the grasses and little trails of sand around Jorge's feet. So, this was an angel. He could tell it was an angel. The white robes and everything. It wore sandals on its feet too. The sun drifted a little farther, giving Jorge a better view of the angel's face.

"All right?" he said and started to head for the top of the rise and past.

One leathery wing stretched out to block his path.

"This is the way the world ends," said the angel.

Jorge shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He stepped past the outstretched wing and headed on up the trail and over the rise, leaving the angel behind.

Anyway, how could he take seriously a creature that was spouting misplaced T. S. Eliot at him? Eliot and Prufrock. Well, it wasn’t Prufrock, but it was all so appropriate in a way. He thought briefly about rolling up his trouser legs, taking his shoes and socks off to feel his fish-white toes squeak through the sand before he reached the grassy park leading across to the road proper, but knew he wouldn’t. It wasn’t in his nature. At least not now. Especially not after seeing the angel, Eliot or not.

Time after time, Jorge was drawn inexorably back to the sea, back to that mirror glass blackness in the dead of night, the waves sucking sand grains into whispering lips, to spit them back out again with a disappointed hiss. Even here, now, in the small park, so close to the water’s edge, he could feel the pull. Behind him, though, stood the angel, and that wouldn’t do at all. At home, Caroline was waiting for him ... or would be if she even knew he had gone. There were days when she seemed to feel and hear nothing, others where her round, wide-eyed face was more animated, her frail hands moving, instead of draped together limply in her lap. It was on the bad days that Jorge knew the real traces of the fear. Somehow, though, time had done much to manage that fear, placing it in a hard, round place deep inside him. Hard and steel-gray like his eyes.

Pulling his coat more tightly about him, he headed for the roadside and his battered, green car, barely holding together now, but running all the same. Long ago he’d given up the pretense of filling the back with rods and fishing gear. He needed no excuse to be sitting out alone on the breakwater. He was just a solitary old man, these days. Nobody really paid him much mind. The car waited for him, parked by the edge of the rise leading down into the park between two large Mediterranean pines. In the warmer months, you could smell them. An old brick beach kiosk sat at one end of the park, and at the other, a path leading up to the grassy headland with a stone bench placed right out near the end, a bequest to the memory of someone long forgotten. He thought for a moment about taking that path, going and

sitting up there at the very edge of the world, staring out across the waves to the horizon of his memory, but knew he wouldn’t. Caroline waited for him at home. Who knew what she was up to right now and what might lie waiting for him when he got back? Sometimes, it was just better not to think about it.

* * *

He pulled into their street, testing random thoughts about what might be waiting in their simple shrub-dotted yard, the even flowerbeds holding thorny leavings of the roses that had bloomed there in past seasons. It had been a long time since he’d given them any attention. Once, when he’d driven home, pulled into their drive, there had been a unicorn waiting for him, but one with smoldering, fire-filled eyes, its mouth full of sharpened teeth, grinning at him with its own dark intent. As with many of the others, he’d tried to ignore it, but then he’d learned about these things over the months and years. There were better ways of dealing with them. Like the angel. You simply acknowledged their presence and wandered on. In any other direction lay the beginnings of madness, as if that state had not already begun. Today, the yard was empty.

At the rear of their simple cottage, spindle-stick trees thrust empty fingers toward the slate sky. In winter, when the sea mist rolled in from the water, it draped them, shroud-like, with a pale and insubstantial blanket, hiding threats that Jorge could barely imagine, barely dare to imagine. When the mist was in, Jorge went nowhere near the trees. He had his reasons.

He eased into the drive, parked, and opened his door, wincing a little as it creaked loudly. It was better if he didn’t actually announce his presence to the random population that inhabited his existence from time to time. He preferred to walk like a shadow amongst them, for the most part unseen and unnoticed, unless they confronted him directly, which also happened now and again. Well, that was his hope, to pass, remaining unworthy of their attention. For that reason, he left the car parked in the driveway, rather than struggling with the aging garage doors, scraping their crumbling wooden bottoms against the solid drive. It was just more noise to alert those that

might choose to listen.

There wasn't much left in the garage now, not that he'd ventured inside for a while. A few stray tools hung suspended from old rusting nails. A couple of half-empty pots and tins huddled together at the end of one shelf. A single, yellowing, grime-smeared bulb hung suspended from the ceiling, festooned with dusty cobwebs. Feeble light trickled in through the single murky window at the rear, but these days, that was the only illumination the darkened space received. One day, he supposed, he'd venture back in, but not for now. Such an action would be an acknowledgment of what had been before, and he wasn't prepared to take that particular step yet. Rather than fussing with the needs of the garden, he preferred to leave it all to the man who came weekly—the man who carried his own tools along with his tanned shoulders and face.

Carefully, slowly, Jorge eased the car door shut, applying pressure with his body till the lock clicked into place. He gave the garden one more quick glance, then headed for the back door, his keys clutched firmly in his left hand. It appeared that in the time it had taken him to drive back from the beach, Caroline had moved on. She went through phases like that. He grunted with a kind of satisfaction and stepped into the small room behind the kitchen, closing the back door quietly behind him. He listened as he shrugged off his coat and hung it on a peg near the door, but there were no sounds coming from the lounge. That could be a good thing or a bad thing. Taking a single slow breath, Jorge closed his eyes for a couple of seconds, preparing, then headed through the kitchen toward the living room.

* * *

When he first met her, it had the feeling of true accident rather than any sort of design. Jorge had been sitting on a train, half-staring at nothing in particular, when someone in his line of sight had moved to get a better grip on the handrail as the carriage rocked to one side. The man had leaned over, resting his forehead on his arm, the arm itself crooked into a curve. The space between the man's arm and his face had formed an almost round frame, and beyond it, revealed, was Caroline's face. There was something about her features, something

about the framing that reminded Jorge of Botticelli or perhaps Titian. She had that pale-faced smoothness, the roundness of feature reminiscent of their paintings. A face from another time. Jorge sat fascinated. She didn't notice him watching her. When Jorge had left the train and headed for work, he craned, looking for her, trying to see which way she went, but it wasn't long before he lost her in the crowd. Somehow, his heart had been heavy for the rest of the day, as if he knew that it was an opportunity lost. It was illogical, irrational.

* * *

The man with half a face was back again. His features flowed into some sort of formless, melted-plastic shape on the left side. He'd stand and stare at Jorge, not saying anything, just standing there, watching. This time he was across the other side of their white picket fence, a long gray-green coat pulled tightly about him. Once upon a time, Jorge had acknowledged the man, just like he acknowledged the angel, but after a time he had simply given up. The man with half a face never said anything, and in fact, Jorge wondered if he could, the way his lips had been sealed together on one side, but it made sense that it was probably enough to keep him from anything resembling real speech. Jorge merely glanced at him and continued down the driveway on his way to the shops.

Caroline, inside, was probably watching, seeing things in that inner vision that was uniquely hers. He wondered if there was some mythological root to the man without a face, but for the life of him, there was nothing that came to mind. Anyway, they'd run out of milk, and that was more important for the moment. He could hardly make Caroline a nice cup of tea if they didn't have milk. She liked her cup of tea, in the more lucid moments when she seemed to be in touch with their actual reality.

She had been a voracious reader once, drawn to histories and folklore, for they seemed to spark her imagination. That had been before her decline. Jorge suspected that many of the beasts from her landscape sprang half-formed from tainted rememberings of things she had read. Whatever the source, knowing what it might be did little to help him deal with them. When he glanced back up at the

house, the man with half a face was gone. Jorge nodded to himself and turned his attention back to the road. Milk, and perhaps he'd get them a treat. Some cake. Maybe chocolate. Maybe Caroline would be aware enough to enjoy it.

* * *

Jorge had finally met her, again seemingly by accident, in a supermarket, wandering the aisles with his solitary trolley, picking out the various meals for one that he thought might be vaguely palatable. It was always a risk. You never knew what you'd get in some of those prepackaged affairs, and he was reluctant to try anything new. Today was a little annoying, because some of his favorites were out of stock. He looked dubiously down at the new selection sitting in the trolley in front of him. He would just have to wait and see. He sniffed and wheeled his trolley out from the shelves holding the ready meals and headed for household goods.

He had just entered the aisle with the washing powders when she wrestled her own trolley around the corner at the other end. Slick fluorescents shone along the metal frame and they drew his gaze at first, rather than her. Everything felt artificial in the stark supermarket lighting. Her trolley was one of the ones you hate to get with a wobbly wheel difficult to manage, particularly around corners. As she struggled with the half-full trolley, she lost control and it careened into a shelf. Boxes of washing powder tumbled all around her, smacking of the edges of the basket and scattering about her feet. Forgetting about his own trolley altogether, Jorge dashed up the aisle to help.

Of course, he knew she was the girl from the train. He avoided looking at her face, and instead stooped to grab the dented boxes and shove them haphazardly onto an empty space on the shelf.

"This always happens to me," she said. "Oh, I feel like such an idiot."

"No," said Jorge, still not looking at her face. "It happens to all of us. You're not so special." He caught the lie as soon as it had escaped his

lips. "They just need to do something about these things." He grabbed the edges of her trolley and shook it till it rattled.

"Thanks," she said.

Jorge nodded and bent to gather more of the fallen boxes. She stooped and reached for the same box. It was like a movie. In that moment, their fingers met and a cool spark ran up his arm and settled high up in his gut. Slowly he lifted his face to meet her gaze. She was watching him, looking quickly from eye to eye, an expression of deep concentration on her face.

"You're really here," she said.

Jorge frowned, the briefest flicker. "I'm not sure, I ..."

She seemed to shake herself back to awareness. Her eyebrows flickered and then she frowned as well. "Oh, I'm sorry. Look, my name's Caroline." She thrust out a hand.

Still confused, Jorge reached for her pale fingers and pressed them gently. "I'm Jorge," he said.

They both rose slowly and stood there looking at each other. There were still boxes on the floor, but Jorge cared nothing about them just at that moment.

"Listen ..." they both began at once and stopped.

Caroline glanced down at her shopping and at the remaining boxes. She turned her attention to the shelves where Jorge had hastily shoved the damaged goods. She turned back to face him. "Tell you what," she said. "I'm bored with shopping. Do you want to go grab a coffee?"

They left their shopping carts sitting there abandoned at either end of the aisle.

* * *

When he got back to the house, swinging the white plastic shopping bag in one hand, the area was clear. No unicorns, no angels, no dragons sat waiting for him on the front lawn. Just the neatly tended flowerbeds and the tidy grass slope. He nodded with satisfaction. That was good. It meant that Caroline might be in a state to savor the cake he'd bought. He climbed the stone steps at the front of the yard, heading for the front door, then changed his mind and walked around the side of the house to the back. He just wanted to make sure there was nothing else lying in wait for him, nothing outside the periphery of his attention to surprise him. He juggled the white plastic bag from one hand to the other as he reached the back door, and digging out his keys, he opened the door, pausing for a moment to stamp his feet on the back step before walking inside.

* * *

At the very beginning, they simply decided to move in together. A cozy little apartment and not a care in the world between them. At least not at first. That initial meeting, that strange little shift from perception of reality should have alerted Jorge, but he was far too smitten to pay it any mind. He hung on her every word, watching her as she walked across the room, as she stumbled around in her half-awake state first thing in the morning before she'd had her first cup of tea, as she emerged from the bathroom with the big fluffy robe bundled around her. Little by little, however, the episodes became more frequent. Caroline would say things that made no sense at all. At first, he thought they were simply evidence of the uniqueness of the treasure he had found in her and still he couldn't believe his luck. She was everything he hoped she'd be and more. There was nothing to tell him otherwise.

More as a concession to the people they mixed with, after a few months, they decided to get married. They'd tested the boundaries of their relationship together, and they understood that they worked. Even the slight aberrations in Caroline's behavior were not enough to make him think there was any reason to doubt his decision. He couldn't, for the life of him, even imagine being with anyone else, ever. Life continued—their marriage made little difference to the joy of what they had together. Jorge went to work, Caroline too, and

eventually they accumulated enough, scrimping and saving, to buy a small house in the suburbs, a house with a yard and a fence and flowerbeds. They weren't too far from the beach, and that suited Jorge just fine; he loved the ocean. He loved listening to the distant sound of waves in the darkness as he drifted off to sleep, Caroline's regular breathing beside him. The beach was just an added bonus to spending his time with her. On occasion, he would simply stand in the doorway of the living room, watching her. He could barely imagine what life would be like without this woman. She was perfect.

Her decline was so gradual that he didn't really notice it for a full year. Sometimes, even in mid conversation, Caroline would fade off into someplace removed. She would get a vaguely wistful expression on her face and stare fixedly off into the distance.

"Caroline, what is it?" Jorge would ask, but she didn't answer. When she finally returned, he would question her about it, but she seemed to have no recollection of where she'd been. She accused him of being silly, of playing games with her. Was he trying to make her think she was mad?

"No, of course not."

Jorge tucked his concern away and decided he'd watch and wait. If the situation worsened, he would seek advice, though he was reluctant to do so. Not for his Caroline. When she started talking about unicorns and goblins and elves, his concern grew, but he put it down to her overactive imagination. He had already reconciled himself that she had a slight problem with her attention span, but then, that wasn't so unusual.

It was a complete year before the first manifestation. The miniature dragon on the back steps had taken him completely by surprise. He stood watching it for a full half hour before it spread its wings and took flight. He tracked it till it disappeared into the cotton wool sky, and then he stepped inside and leaned heavily against the door, rubbing his forehead. When he'd walked into the living room to tell Caroline what he'd seen, she was unreachable. Though he squatted in

front of her, her eyes were unseeing. He had gripped her forearms, gently, trying to coax some sort of reaction out of her, but his efforts had been in vain. His own fear forgotten, it was then that he started to be afraid for her, but it was then that he started making the first connection. Though he didn't want to admit it, he knew there was something wrong.

* * *

Putting the plastic bag down on the kitchen bench, Jorge carefully opened it and pulled out the cake and the milk. He opened the fridge, put the milk in and closed it again. Reaching up to the cupboard, he pulled out two floral cups and saucers and arranged them carefully on a tray. Filling the kettle with water, he put it on to boil, then found the teapot, removed its lid, checking that it was clean before spooning in two heaped teaspoons of leaves and one extra for the pot. He unwrapped the cake and placed it on another plate, pulled out a knife from the drawer, making three cuts into the chocolate round so there were two good slices, placed the plate on the tray and two smaller plates and forks beside them. Just then, the kettle boiled and he poured the steaming water into the pot, stepping back away from the cloud that rose beneath the kitchen cabinets. Retrieving the milk from the fridge, he poured some into a small white jug, then replaced the carton in the fridge.

"Jorge, is that you?" called Caroline from the living room.

"Yes, dear," he said. "I'm just making us a nice cup of tea."

"Oh good," she said. "I could do with a nice cup of tea. I was having the strangest dream."

Jorge nodded to himself. He could imagine the sort of dream she'd been having. He had seen them, day after day.

He wished there was something he could do for her. He had wished for years that there was something he could do for her. At first he had sought advice, but they had suggested medication, and finally institutionalization. Jorge was having none of it. He took great pains

to assure them that the problem had simply gone away. He told no one about his own insights into the creatures that stalked her inner landscape. He reasoned that putting himself under scrutiny would do nothing to help her, nothing to help them both. So, as Caroline withdrew further and further, Jorge maintained the illusion of their normal life and marriage. Dutifully he went to work, brought in an income, and made sure they had enough to sustain themselves. Caroline, of course, was less able to function in the outside world as her time in her other world grew more frequent. People started to notice. Finally, in one of her more lucid periods, he had convinced her to give up work. She had been perfectly content with the idea, and Jorge had breathed an inner sigh of relief. It was funny, for though she seemed to accept her condition, she appeared happy that it was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing she should worry about. The world she lived in was better than the day to day they had to put up with.

The only real regret Jorge had was that there was less time he had to really be with her. He missed her attention, but he resolved that he would be there for her. He loved her after all.

"Here we are," he said, walking into the living room carrying the tray before him.

Caroline clapped her hands together. "Oh lovely! You've bought some cake."

Placing the tray down on the table between their two chairs, Jorge carefully poured the tea and passed her a cup. He then slipped a knife under one slice of cake, placed it on one of the small plates, and passed that over to her too. He placed a piece of cake on a plate for himself and then sat back, leaving the plate on the tray. He left his cup sitting where it was.

"How are you feeling, my love?" he asked.

She glanced up at him, popped a small piece of cake into her mouth, and licking a stray crumb from her lips, smiled at him. "I'm fine, Jorge. How are you?" Her thin white hair made a corona around her

face, touched by light from the window behind. Her hair had been white for years now.

“I think I’m tired, Caroline. I think I’m tired. Sometimes I just wish we had a normal life together. I wish we could do things that other people do.”

She gave a brief frown. “But we’re so perfect together,” she said. The frown quickly disappeared as she sliced another piece of cake and popped it between her lips.

Jorge watched her. She was right; they were perfect together. “I just wish there was something else I could do for you,” he said.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said with a slight shake of her head. “There’s nothing you could possibly do. You’ve already done everything you could.” Slowly, she placed her plate back down on the tray. “And you know, Jorge, I love you. I love you for everything you have been and done.” She fixed him with a look, gazing intently into his face.

“I saw an angel today,” he said.

She nodded. “So, it’s come to that.” She sighed. “I wish it hadn’t come so soon. So ... at last, it’s time,” she said.

Jorge frowned. “Time, for what? I don’t under—“

A tall, familiar figure stepped out from the light behind Caroline’s chair. Sweetly, Caroline smiled, her look full of gentle affection.

* * *

Jorge sat back out on the sea wall. His mind wasn’t fixed on anything in particular; his attention simply meandered across the landscape

like the seemingly random swirls of foam gracing the water’s surface by the rocks. His legs hung over the edge and he swung them gently back and forth. Despite the noise of waves and water, the slight breeze coming off the surface, he heard, or rather sensed the motion behind him. And despite the breeze, he caught the scent of rich leather swelling the air around him.

The angel walked up soundlessly and took up a place beside him, tucking its robes around its legs and easing itself down to the cold hard wall. For a while there was silence between them. Jorge could sense the stirring of those massive wings, though he couldn’t see them. He gave a quick sidelong glance at the angel’s face, but apart from that, he refused to look. He’d been acknowledging these damned things for too long. It was time he put a stop to it.

“Hello, Jorge,” said the angel.

Jorge grunted in response despite himself.

The angel reached around behind itself and felt along the wall, finally locating what it was seeking. Jorge glanced again to see what it was doing. The angel held something small and hard in its hand, rubbing its thumb over the smooth surface. Gently, it nodded, then with an easy motion tossed the pebble out in front of them. It plopped into the water and quickly sank to the depths.

“This is the way your world ends,” it said.

Jorge watched the place where the pebble had disappeared to the bottom for some seconds, saying nothing. Then without looking up into the angel’s face, he finally spoke.

“Hmmm. You’re probably right,” he said. “You’re probably right.”

Melancholy Echo

by Robert Alexander Wray

*For Marty Moore,
a rare muse of both beauty and grace*

“Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”

--William Shakespeare

Sacred Radiance

I

A clergyman reads a tattered leather-bound notebook.

He scribbles something in the margins, turns a few pages.

He looks up, smiles.

He returns to the book, continues reading.

In the margins, he writes: “Wow, comma, my God.”

He looks up again.

In the distance, at the edges of shadow,
a tree transforms itself into a fabulous bird,
ascending from the cinders of its own destruction.

Eternal Truth and Beauty made visible.

Cool.

II

I’ve been a pastor for most of my life,
always going where the church sent me,
wherever God called me.

Not so different, I suppose, from being an actor;
insofar as acting is self-surrender, not self-expression.

“He’ll shape his old course in a country new.”

These words from Shakespeare have
echoed in my head since this morning,
since I decided, at quite a brutal cost,
to resign from my job as pastor

at the church.

“He’ll shape his old course in a country new.”

III

It was a dark time, a cynical time, a time of plague,
a time when life seemed to continually confound itself,
and Phoenix and Dove were as one and inseparable.

In Dove’s eyes, Phoenix was definitely hip and cool,
knew a lot of things, and could rock a crude joke.
She’d ignite urges as she passed by, and say things like,
“I’m too young to live my life without romance and glitter.”

In short, he was madly in love with her.

In Phoenix's eyes, Dove was one of the last cowboys, a true real rebel, and she'd often touch herself while imagining him driving a motorcycle through a war zone, shooting at enemy targets while he yelled repeatedly, "You'll never take me alive!" And then he'd get shot.

And die in a blaze of glory.

One day, Phoenix decided that Dove needed a haircut. So she draped a blanket over him, snipped and combed his silvery gray hair.

I love your ears, she says.
Snip and comb, snip and comb.
They're beautiful. I think ears are erotic.
Snip and comb, snip and comb.
I'm going to cut the hair around the ears
so we can see them in their full majesty.

Make sure you get the back, he says. Those curls.

She thinks about the night they first met,
at a friend's place. Snip and comb, snip and comb.
She bummed a cigarette from him, and he said,
"I came here to get high, eat, and get laid.
No one has any pot, I don't eat seafood,
mussels, clam stew, smoked fish, none of that shit,
and you just want to bum cigarettes off me.
There's no fucking point in being here!"

Phoenix laughed. “Well,” she said, “we could fuck, I guess.”

Snip and comb, snip and comb.

There, she says, holding up a mirror.
What do you think?

That's a great fucking haircut.

A light emanating from the mirror flashes on them both.

IV

After unpacking the contents of my church office at home, I went for a long walk, still wearing my cassock and collar.

My resignation as pastor wasn't a decision I had planned, and it certainly wasn't an easy one. But after much grieving, (How on earth am I ever going to rise from the ashes of this?), I felt a kind of freedom for a brief while.

Day turned into night as I continued walking, wanting to avoid as many people as possible.

I stop in front of a twenty-four-hour gas station and stare at a tall tree across the way which is faintly lit by the nearby neon.

The trunk thrusts upwards, (light golden blond wood), stopping midway for a series of arterial branches, then continues upwards, getting thinner, splitting in two directions at the top. It looks like the last tree on earth.

A collection of blackbirds noisily gathers after flying from who-knows-where, alighting on its dead limbs.

Looking at it from a distance, it seems like the proper foliage has been brushed black, or sketched quickly in charcoal by God, as if He decided that the only true things growing on a tree of apocalypse would be dark and swift and deafening.

Some of the birds take off into the gray marbled sky, flying together with the force of doomsayers. So eerie.

Thinking back on Shakespeare, which I do ad nauseam,

Been done to death, he responds.

Well, let's write a Jewish Western. "I'm the new sheriff in town and I'm eating all the gefilte fish."

Dove smiles.

"Does a Jew not have spurs? Do we not hurt when we get lassoed?"

An air of warmth and soft-connectedness encircles them.

Nah, he says, let's make it about an outlaw priest. An aging outlaw priest cowboy who's given up religion.

Why's he given up religion, she asks.

It's irrelevant. He just knows he needs to leave the church.

Maybe he got kicked out of the church 'cause he's one of those—

No no no, he's not a kiddie-fiddler. Not every priest is a fucking kiddie-fiddler.

So, no kiddie-fiddler, he.

No, he just wakes up one morning, thinks to himself, Is that all there is? And walks away.

But why? Why does he walk away?

Because he's searching for something.
Something the church couldn't provide.
He's on a search for

A story?

Yeah. But the search for a story IS the story.

And so, when the story finally ends, he finds

Salvation.

A large yellow flower petal,
fragile like a layer of delicate skin,
drifts down from above.

They both stare at it: That's weird.

VIII

I pause in sad remembrance of the church I left behind,
of the people there, of my congregants, that needed me.

At the risk of a few coughs, Shakespeare again:
"So out went the candle, and we were left darkling."

Night's turned back into day, the days have turned into
weeks, and still I walk and wander on.

At some point, I peer into a small brick church which
feels more like a large toolshed or storage facility. An
altar with flowers and a large thick cross dominate the
space. A modest gathering of parishioners, together yet
far apart, are there. The preacher doesn't see me enter.

He's talking about how everyone's on something: sex,
booze, drugs, pot in particular. He asks his audience,
Do you consider your spirituality low, middle, or high?
After his pot reference, I wonder if he's being funny.

Then he notices me, and his tone shifts. He walks up
and down the aisle, a long red scarf in his hand, wipes
the sweat off his brow with it as he takes and analyzes
four words which, in their singular double meaning of
both comfort and caution, are enduring and unequalled:
"This too shall pass."

I ask him later what inspired him so much. He said, "I saw

a brother of the cloth looking hopeless and sad, and I knew then I needed to do something special and get off my butt.”

I thank him, walk out of the church, and into a lovely vision:
A field of blinking fireflies, like silent firecrackers going off.

IX

Dove picks up and sniffs the yellow flower petal.
It smells sweet, almost perfumed, he says.

Phoenix suddenly remembers something:
Oh, she exclaims, you’ll never believe it!

What.

I was talking to my drag queen friend, CrayCray,
and Did I tell you this story?

Yeah.

Sorry. I forget what I tell you.

The flower petal’s already browning in my hand.

X

Damn. Walking still, a month after I began this journey.
I’m traveling through a city, thinking the world’s asleep.

As I pass by an antique shop, I see a girl perched on a bench,
drinking a large bottle of water. She looks out into the night,
and then at me as I go by, with an air of some sexual longing.

She whispers in my direction, I want to see you naked, Father.

I stop, aware of her arousal by something doubly forbidden.

Actually, she adds, I’d like to see ANYONE naked. Anyone.

Normally, I avoid these situations like a deranged magnet in reverse. But instead I nod with a quiet, “Okay,” and move on.

As I walk away, I turn back and see her suck down the bottle,
looking out as if she expected someone else to pass by for a
moment of erotic heat. I feel so bad for her. Unbridled desire
exposes its downsides when locked up. It can drive one mad.

XI

Okay, says Dove, let’s get back to the fucking story.

And so, says Phoenix, what happens next is

Well, the event.

The event is: Our outlaw priest, having divided himself
from the church, visits a beautiful filthy lovable whore.

Yes, he’s pent-up with lust and visits a filthy dirty whore.

In a bordello. A cutecutecute bordello with a pink façade
and ornate white latticework, as romantic as one can find.

Nah, then

Oh wait, says Phoenix, interrupting their growing tale, I
didn’t tell you the ending of my drag queen friend story.

You mean CrayCray? You did.

I didn’t. After she got arrested for prostitution, the officer
made her do community service. Like, you know, picking
up garbage. He wouldn’t let her just pay the bail. She told
him, “You’re going to make a whore work? Make a whore
do community service? I make my living by sucking people

off in a park nightly. The community, is being SERVED.”

Phoenix roars with laughter.

Dove smirks. They don’t call her CrayCray for nothing.

Nope, she says, laughing through tears, not for nothing.

SPEAKING of nothing: So our priest visits a bordello.

Wait, hush. What does that have to do with nothing?

Nothing.

Then why’d you go speaking of nothing?

I’m just making use of nothing to get back to our
FUCKING STORY!

Okay, okay, let’s not quarrel over nothing.

Sweet heaven, you’re driving me crazy.

Back to our story then, Phoenix asserts.

Thank you. The priest enters the bordello, and looks
for the girl who’ll break his lifelong spell of chastity.

Chastity: No sex, no nookie, no nada.

Yes. And alas

Hold on, we should give the priest a name.

Tom.

Tom? How ’bout Thomas? Sounds more holy-like.

And alas, Thomas spies a wondrous girl who’s

in an atomic orange dress and has a perfect smile
and eyes that can entrance and clearly allure.

Yes. So he walks up to her, still in his clerical
clothes, and she says, in a quiet seductive tone,

“This is SO not right.”

They quickly turn to sexual subject matter:
“It’ll cost you a thousand.”

Wait, she needs a name too.

Snowball Sandy.

What? No. Call her Raven.

Raven sounds ominous, too resonant with doom.

Aspen then.

Aspen and Thomas soon head upstairs, into her
room. Thomas, beside himself with nervousness,
keeps complimenting her and asking questions.
“You’re so pretty. Do you work here often?”

Aspen cuts him off: “I don’t do interviews, just
blowjobs.”

She plays with his crotch a bit, getting warmed-up.

“Do you mind if I unbutton you,” she asks, while
she’s unbuttoning him. “Take it out and sit back.”

At his age, after so many years of zero sex, Thomas
wonders if he can survive such a tumult. “What am
I doing?”

She pulls out his cock and smiles: “You’re ready.”

“Stop,” he says. “I can’t do this act of darkness with you.”

Feeling pity, she offers to fuck him at no extra charge. He feels, for some reason, comforted by this. They have sex.

Sweating, sweating, their clothes on throughout, him inside her with her black panties scrunched aside, wanting to feel a maximum joy of release. Which he does. After two seconds.

He comes quickly. But the spell of a loveless life has been broken and broken with full on magical star-blasting bliss.

Dove and Phoenix look at each other with love-filled eyes. And horniness.

You’re a bad boy, she says. I don’t deny that, he replies.

XII

I have walked and traveled hard, sleeping in parks, barely eating. My cassock’s looser now.

It’s a hellishly humid night, almost too hot to sleep out. It feels as if the sun’s still ablaze.

Odd thoughts strike when you’re isolated in your own brain on a long solitary adventure.

Take, for instance, the letter O, that circular letter meaning eternity, perfection. A tragic scream of realization of Greek proportions, a sound of recognition, the shape of choice for so much that is holy, artistic, utilitarian. The most powerful words feature it: God, world, love, gone, soul, home, orgasm, Oreo.

It’s the shape of the world, of the eye. They all have this “O” in common. The fool’s O,

when he lays it all out to King Lear, saying, “Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning, now thou art an O without a figure...thou art nothing.”

I might be losing my mind.

Really.

I’m just a weary little pastor. I think I’ll just lay here by this tree, and look at that stunning moon, shimmering like it’s engulfed in flame.

“Fortune, good night; smile once more, turn thy wheel.”

XIII

A spider slowly lets itself down from a ceiling on an unseen thread while unseen birds sing and whistle, and an unseen sun illuminates.

Dove and Phoenix, in the upstairs room right above the spider, are making love. The ceiling from which the spider descends slightly shakes, creaking continually from their squeaking bed.

The squeaks start off normal (clichéd rhythms of lovemaking), then slow to a halt. Then boom, forceful as loud thunder, a moan and a sigh, then silence, then a slow build back to normal tempo, then a crazy patterned series of squeaks, almost surreal, then a far different sounding squeak, as if they were no longer on the bed but on the floor. Then the sound of a loud drop, silence, humping squeaks resumed, then the sound of footsteps.

All of this registers on and is felt by the spider, making for quite the jerky ride down.

XIV

I dreamed of walking into an abandoned theatre for some reason. Saw plaster everywhere, broken railings, dust, a lot of things in shambles. And out of nowhere, I hear a voice, this ethereal voice that just stops me in my tracks. And I wonder, who is that? Where's that coming from? So pure, and so sorrowful. And mysterious 'cause I can't figure it out. It's just this voice that makes me want to weep. I look around, and lo and behold, standing far off with her back to me, is a girl dressed up in a dishy glittery cloak. I ask her who she is, and she says, Hush, and flies away into the misty-mooned night.

What does that young glitter girl dream mean?

What's that about?

A tattered leather-bound notebook appears, seemingly lit up from within.

Oh.

XV

Dove is slightly annoyed at Phoenix, who keeps asking him, while he's in the bathroom, for tissue or paper towels or anything. He tells her, Wait.

He finally comes out, gives her some toilet paper. She's grateful, profusely so.

Later on, he sees the same tissues of toilet paper, lined up like a row of white lilies, wet with tears.

XVI

I'm grateful. I'm still grieving, and still wandering, but thankful for the varied blessings I've received.

Like this strange but miraculous notebook which I found, or should I say, found me.

Half of it's filled with writing: miscellaneous sketches for a story about, of all things, an older renegade priest who's on a quest of some sort. What are the odds? And the other half of the notebook's filled with nothing.

See? Just blank pages.

I'm curious why the writer didn't finish the story. As stories go, it's rather crude in places, but it does have an innocent exuberance that's heartbreaking.

Three fiery red lipstick kisses are smudged on the last entry. I guess someone loved the passage. I'll read it:

"The Federales surrounded him, yelling, 'Surrender! Surrender!' But Tommy Boy Bedlam stayed true to his word, and said, 'You'll never take me alive!' He shot six of them dead, and fought it out with the rest. Our hero could've run and saved his life, but instead he chose to go down in glory, and of course Aspen..."

And that's how it ends. Does Tommy Boy Bedlam get killed or not? And what was he on a quest for? And if Aspen's alone, well How now, Aspen?

One of the powerful observations in Shakespeare is: People are places. (To visit, to trash, to leave.) I'd like to keep visiting these people: Tommy Boy Bedlam and his true of heart whore Aspen.

So many questions dwell in this all-or-nothing tale.

I will continue writing it myself.

XVII

Dove looks over at Phoenix, who's crying hard. A tear trails her cheek like a snail's track in moonlight.

What's wrong, he asks.

She turns her face, wet and splotchy, towards him, and says, They arrested the Tiger King.

Dove, at a loss, wants to alleviate her saddened state, but all he can come up with is, That's all?

She nods.

You're crying over a locked-up lunatic on TV? I thought you were leveled by something truly sad.

Well, she says, I've had this, as a child, since childhood. I've always hated it when people I start caring about get taken away or leave. I guess I get so attached so quickly that it's hard for me. I cry.

He puts his hand on her knee, thinking thoughts of: It's okay, I love you.

She rubs her eyes behind her thick but cool glasses.

Dove watches the tiny teardrops still on the lenses.

You do know that he's a bad guy, right? I mean, he abused animals, did wretched things to people. You can tell by looking at him that he's a sick bastard.

She responds, I think the healthier one looks, after doing something wretched, the sicker one really is.

I think the crying's crazed your wits. Don't frown.

He hugs her, trying to transmit a feeling of lightness forever.

The moon itself silhouettes them, glowing with a god's brilliance upon it.

As Pearls from Diamonds Dropp'd

I

So, after several months of traveling and enduring the elements, and wanting to focus on writing this story, I stop to rent a cheap room: Smudge-specked walls, an appalling bed, and a textured glass window which alters the outside world (a noiseless land of empty storefronts), into a desolate cubistic vision.

I'm reminded of a line of Shakespeare's that rings clear for my sorry and lonely self: "the worst is not so long as we can say, 'This is the worst.'"

Dear God, please keep me from going under and insane. Please help me to see clearly, truthfully.

A mist forms on the textured glass window, then fades, revealing a previously invisible handprint.

II

Phoenix and Dove play poker using bottle caps for chips. He grabs his winnings, shuffles cards.

Wait, she says, what'd you have, a full house?

No, a flush. Two, three, ten, queen, ace of diamonds.

No you didn't. You had two pairs. Two pairs! Two deuces, two queens. I had three of a kind. I beat you.

I had five diamonds in a row. I showed you my hand.

You're sure?

No. Maybe I'm losing it.

Are you really?

Please, stop.

I saw CrayCray lose it once. She was talking to the air. A whole conversation, or argument rather. "Hey, so, what are you doing?" "What's that?" "I told you before, don't do that!" "Don't do what?" "Lurk, lurk!" Afterwards, I thought, I need someone similar. I need someone to lash out at. I want an imaginary friend too.

We all have imaginary friends, says Dove as he puts the cards away. We just forget to acknowledge them.

So, wonders Phoenix, what should we do now? Nothing, followed by more nothing? Or we can do nothing?

Let's continue working on our story, he says.

What's the point? We never write any of it down.

I do.

You do?

Yes. After you go to sleep, I get a notebook and write down everything I remember from what we created.

Really? Why'd you keep it secret?

I wanted it to be a surprise. Give it to you as a gift after.

Oh, well let's work on our story!

Okay then. By the way, I changed his name to Tommy Boy Bedlam. Thought he needed something cooler, hip.

I like that. Maybe Tommy's actually Jesus. You don't know he's Jesus though 'cause he wears a cowboy hat, black shirt with pearl snap buttons, and skintight chaps. And riding boots. But he can drop a parable like a gun spinning back into its holster.

Can I be honest, Dove asks. It's a beautiful and lovely notion, but, yeah, no.

III

Envision this: A young man, just out of seminary school, has his first official day preaching. He walks in the church, sees half the pews already filled. Families mostly. Contrary to his grand lofty intentions, when he makes it to the pulpit, he looks around and simply says, "Hi." He then cracks a few jokes for no discernible reason except that he's nervous and finds himself at a loss as to what to say or do. Wondering if everyone thinks it odd, he starts getting through his sermon.

It's a lecture about Jesus being led out into the wilderness, and his dealings with temptation. He clarifies the lesson by tying it into that double-headed question of Shakespeare's which permeates all his work: What is true?/What is false?

After he ends his message with a prayer, the young preacher silently thanks God for the mix of kind polite smiling people in the church. They seemed to like him. What a feeling when it was over, stumblings and all. He felt high, like perhaps he

accomplished something. Like maybe he could really do this.

In case you're wondering, I'm trying to use this slice of my life passage as a backstory for Tommy Boy Bedlam. I can't decide though where to place it. I also can't seem to match the rhythm of my words to that of the writer's. It's difficult to collapse the distance between us so that no space is seen.

Writing is fucking hard.

IV

Dove recaps their burgeoning story: Tommy Boy Bedlam, having burned his old religious clothes and now sporting a black cowboy outfit, roams through the ghostly halls of a seemingly abandoned building, looking for his girl Aspen.

She's been taken there by the Federales and held in one of the rooms and is probably being tortured, interjects Phoenix with a surprising amount of gleeful pleasure.

Yes, probably, Dove responds. As Tommy rushes up the musty dark stairwell, he periodically catches the sound of her screams which help lead him to where he needs to go.

Finding the floor where her quavering voice seems to be the loudest, he exits the stairwell and his heart quickens as he hears the unmistakable notes of her unearthly cries.

He missions down the hall, hearing his way to the Aspen savvy door. Listening and listening, he kicks it wide open.

Once inside, he spots a large rogue-faced man with kingly eyebrows, and eyes that radiate a been-there-done-that kind of quality. He's standing next to Aspen, who's also standing. But her head hangs down, as if she's staring at her shoes.

"Let her go," says Tommy, in a voice painfully held in and

scratched, like someone tiptoeing on gravel.

The man laughs. "Mr. Bedlam, I've been expecting you. I saw you pull up on your motorcycle. A great bike, by the way. I have one just like it. I'm sure, however, you're not here for a pissing contest over the size of our camshafts."

"Let her go or else" Tommy retorts.

"Or else what, you foolish but fond old man."

"Or else I'll do such things--what they are I know not yet, but they'll be quick, potent, and classic."

Aspen looks up at Tommy briefly, her expression reading as "I'm sorry," but with an aching tenderness that drives a nail through his heart, causing him to want to comfort her.

Tommy Boy Bedlam's hand grips his trusty revolver.

"If you try to shoot me, Mr. Bedlam, I'll take Aspen here and break her neck. Just snap her neck. Don't think I won't do it. I'd love the struggle before I hear it crack. And as the Tiger King says, 'It makes the meat taste better.'"

Dove gives Phoenix a quizzical look. Just go with it, she declares, I'm on storytelling fire.

Dove goes with it: And right then and there, Aspen begins to cry. Her small cherubic face and bright eyes, usually glowingly clear, now redden with tears. Tommy, in a mutual state of sadness, tells her as he wells up, "I love you."

The toughness of the rogue-faced man, trying to stay mean, gets a whopping smack of the poignant when he observes the two lovers crying. The sounds of their weeping are like sharp, spiritual blades coming at his soul. He suddenly has tears himself, and yells, "Oh, darkness and devils! Okay, get the fuck out! Both of you! Go, go!"

Tommy grabs her by the hand and leads her towards the door.

“But hurry,” the man calls out after them. “The other Federales are already on their way, now in the night, and in great haste!”

They dash off and race down the hallway. “Stop,” Tommy says. “I hear them coming.”

Reversing course, they head into the stairwell, and look down the many flights of stairs. “Shit, they’re coming this way too,” mutters Aspen, almost out of breath. “Go up, go up.”

Both of them fly upwards, all the way to the highest level. Once there, they open the door to the rooftop, climb out, jam the door shut behind them, and dart their way to the edge of the building.

Tommy and Aspen look out over the city lights, gleaming from lit skyscrapers. Beyond that, a blackboard sky, smeared with electric chalk clouds.

“Well, there’s nothing else we can do except leap,” he says. “I won’t let them take me alive.”

“That’s a long drop down, Tommy. I say we shoot our way out.”

He looks at her, his throat catching. “I say you’re right as rain.”

Sparkling drops of water coming from above put them in a hypnotic state of sorts. And then it all comes pouring down.

Her hair comes down, over her mouth,

their lips barely touching,

their tongues barely touching,

and the crashing rain sounds like the eruption in them both

that’s about to take place.

V

Wow, my God. Such a thunderstorm! The sounds and sights of a Day of Judgement rehearsal. I got stranded outside, and silently invoked the Lord’s help, then the Holy Spirit’s, then Christ’s, then all three together in order to keep the lightning off me. Constant rain, steady thunder, flashes of firebolts that briefly scarred the sky. So scary, terrifying even. But thrilling.

Speaking of thrilling, the storm enkindled a spark of inspiration and I wrote and finished the story. Well, almost. I still can’t find the proper ending for Aspen and Tommy Boy Bedlam. Maybe I should leave it without an end, like how I found it to begin with.

“Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well.”

Nevertheless, I’ll strive to come up with some possible scenarios.

VI

Sergei Trofanov’s version of Deux Guitares plays as Dove and Phoenix dance a passionate tango--sometimes fast, sometimes slow and deliberate--under a canopy of sky bursting with stars.

The tattered leather-bound notebook materializes, billowing smoke.

VII

Well, it’s now been a whole week since that apocalyptic storm, and the notebook, left on my bed I believe, is gone. I checked everywhere, asked around, and so forth. Nothing. But seeing it gone, disappeared as it were, missing: it’s like someone ripped a piece of me off and discarded it. Hope it’s got a good owner.

Still, this feeling of something precious lost, of a dearly loved object being torn from its rightful place (with me), won’t ease.

I know it doesn't compare to others who've lost so much more, in a war, in the streets, in a pandemic. But I feel that horror. My poor notebook. And my poor hope that I'll see it again somehow.

Thinking there might be a lesson to all this, I take it as a message: Let yourself jump back into the craziness of everyday life--of joy, of passion, and grief--and resume the shape you had once cast off.

So I'm resuming the journey, my emotional quest calling me. I head north, with the weight of this unfinished story still bearing down. This story of two lovers, hearts separate, breaking as one.

VIII

Dove helps Phoenix alphabetize her books. They sort them out in stacks, by author's last name, and shelve them accordingly.

You and your books, he says.

She smiles shyly. I know. I eat books for breakfast.

You take them in like a six-year-old eats candy: ravenously and with abandon. "Krapp's Last Tape" by Samuel Beckett. Odd title.

That's a beautiful play, beautiful writing. Always makes me cry.

EVERYTHING makes you cry.

Yeah, but that one in particular REALLY does. There's a passage in it where this old man plays a tape of his younger self describing a girl he once loved and how he shielded her from the blazing sun.

What about it is so cry-inducing?

I don't know. I guess the aching sadness of what might have been that hangs over it hangs over me too. The loss of delight and laughs over events, discoveries, moments that never were or will be. Brief looks at someone you love, no longer yours to enjoy in an intimate

way. Someone who supported, admired you even. A precious thing to have in one's life, someone who believes in you. All of that let go. But it's only when you've lost it that you realize it's its true value. The only thing you can do is just bathe yourself in its crazy vapors. Some losses are so extreme that giving in to surrender is the only option.

I WILL NOT BE SURRENDERED, jokes Dove.

She points at a nearby bookstack. Can you pass the Bukowski?

He slides the stack in her direction, looks at one of the titles: "Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame." Yay, more light reading.

You'd like Charles Bukowski, she says. He's a dirty old man like you.

So of all the people you could have been with, why'd you settle for a dirty decrepit old man like myself?

You're not decrepit. Dirty, yes, decrepit, no.

Feeling an unexpected tug of emotion, he asks her, You don't find my dirty old man ways annoying?

No. You make it work. It's one of the best things about you. I think it was your gratefulness and wonder that I even agreed to go out with a dirty old man such as yourself that truly charmed me.

Charmed you with my own brand of wonder, eh?

Yeah, your sense of being, as you called it, "beyond blessed." It got me.

And much to my surprise, you stayed.

She kisses him. Yes, I stayed. Can I ask you something, Dove?

He looks at her with a bit of uncertainty, and says, Will it break my heart?

Her attention suddenly shifts to the window. Oh, it's snowing!

Oh wow, he responds as they both cross the room to look at the falling snow.

It's coming down in big flakes. So magical. And at this time of year!

I know, it's already piling up on the ground. How'd we miss this?

We should go have a big snowball fight and make snow monsters.

He offers his arm for her to hold: Do thy worst, Miss Phoenix.

IX

I cannot say how long I've travelled. Time means nothing now. But I'm walking along a snowy day's path, sides of the freshly cut banks of snow making the land look frosted by an expert baker. Blue, light blue hues outlining, shadowing over the luscious layers of white.

As I walk further, I see a bird, silent and majestic, limply lying on the frozen ground. I move towards it, and can see its small heart pounding quickly through its chest. Its epic wings, folded up at quiet angles, are helpless. I wonder about its former power and grace. Now though, it's weak, and needs love. I send it waves and waves of healing light and energy, and then continue on in the cold, so cold, blue-outlined world.

The bird flies swiftly off, with full forward momentum and strength.

X

Phoenix, in a glittery cloak, sings a melodic song:

"I wish we were free, my love, I wish we were free
I wish the sounds of makeshift choirs would sing of
what used to be, and the world we once knew would
again return, and the birds and the angels will laugh,
while market noises and café tunes will greet us with

'At last.'"

XI

I'm now passing through another city, sparkling with the sheer magnitude of a magical wintry evening. I see the remnants of two snow angels, alone together in a voluminous mass of snow. They both seem to have the same quiet intensity, the deep made shadowy contours defining the invisible swirling arms and legs. For some reason, I feel a tinge of nostalgia, of a sweet moment being played out in which I wasn't a part. Simple, slightly sad. Almost seeing life from the vantage point of death, of a ghost.

I make a turn at the next city block, and screaming voices make me aware of something potentially horrible and tragic occurring. A cascading sense of catastrophe grows as I see the multitudinous lights of fire engines and an ambulance. There's a group of people looking up at the top floor of a three-story brownstone, destroyed by flame and smoke. I talk to a man, who's crying and in women's clothes, to see if he needs help. But he just keeps pointing at the third floor, and saying, "My friends. Great great people. So kind." I ask him what their names are, which I always do when I want to pray for those who've died, and after he tells me, I'm struck with an immediate desire to fall to my knees, and ask God to exchange my life, as worthless as it is, for theirs. A proper prayer is in order.

XII

Dove and Phoenix are sitting up in bed. Dove, with the notebook open on his lap, is holding a pen, trying to finish their story about Tommy Boy Bedlam and Aspen. Phoenix is writing a long letter.

She stops, looks up, and asks, What would you want to be if you could shapeshift?

He thinks and finally answers, I'd be a burning hot sun. That way, people would back off and leave me alone. What would YOU be?

Without hesitating a second, she says, I'd be a sun too. But I'd be in the shape of a pretty honey-colored heart, with pink at the edges, and I'd melt into your soft hot center and we'd both shine golden.

He grins, and she resumes writing her letter while he looks on.

What are you writing there?

Oh, I'm writing a letter to CrayCray to tell her what a neat person she is.

Why?

I just think sometimes people need to be told that. Especially if it's true. And she's really a neat person and I want her to know it.

He nods, goes back to his notebook, and writes something down. She leans over, reads what he wrote. She then applies lipstick, and says, Give it here.

Dove passes the notebook to her, whereupon she plants three kisses on the half-filled page.

Way to leave your mark, he states.

She smiles. I try.

He takes the notebook back, lights up a cigarette, and tries to remember what they worked out earlier vis-à-vis the ending. A few minutes go by. He reads: "Our hero could've run and saved his life, but instead he chose to go down in glory, and of course Aspen..." Hey, what was that speech you gave Aspen at the end? She's holding Tommy's body and she says a prayer of some sort. I think it goes, "Lord God of all lovely sound?"

He looks over at Phoenix, who's collapsed in sweet tiredness and asleep. He covers her with a blanket, and brushes a few wisps of hair from her face. He kisses her, and wonders to himself if it's even possible to love someone more than he does Phoenix, who he loves, and always will, to utter bits and pieces.

He keeps wondering this as he too falls asleep, the lit cigarette still in his hand.

Co-Supremes and Stars of Love

(The pastor, wearing a velvety light blue cassock, is kneeling in prayer)

Lord God of all lovely sound, who makes the universe hum,
Dealer of thunder that blasts the world, countries rumbling,
Blower of winds that sway trees to the tune of ocean waves,
Giver of music which fills all with the bliss of being alive.
Please hear me.

Great spirit, who truly is everywhere, in children playing,
In the hugging of old friends, in outspread arms of loved
Ones while hero workers applaud. Pattern of all Patience,
Spitting karmic justice in the faces of scurvy politicians.
Please hear me.

Eternal Being, who sees where the holy moon sits in a
Darkening blue sky, who blooms the yellow sunflower
In a field of fireflies, aglow and sparkling like airy stars.
Please hear me and grant mercy to the souls of those two
People who lived in that brownstone on Carlton Avenue.

I ache for Phoenix and Dove. Please watch over them and
Receive them with Your mercy and everlasting holy light.

Please grant mercy to all the Phoenixes and Doves of this
World. Please have mercy on all the souls of those creatures,
Whether human, animal, or otherwise, living or dead, wherever
They are in Your creation, who are suffering or have suffered,
In any way, shape or form, and give them Your healing love.

I ask this in Your name,

(Somewhere, a tree transforms itself into Phoenix, who's in an atomic orange dress
and holding an open leather-bound notebook which casts a magic glow on her face)

(Another tree transforms itself into Dove, dressed in a black cowboy outfit, who also
is holding an open leather-bound notebook which casts a matching glow on his face)

(Both Phoenix and Dove transform and melt into a single beautiful majestic creature,
beating its wings and rising above smoldering rubble as beams of light shine golden)

Amen

Super Volcano

by Grace Wagner

One devastating natural disaster
is generally enough
for the country to deal with—remember FEMA?
Remember rescue workers driving
from out of state with truckloads of food
and bottled water?

No one drives these days.
The roads are blanketed in ash, now rain-mixed
cement. Buildings, cars, bridges all
collapsed under the weight
of fine rock, and the rain
falls sulphuric these days—remember crops?
Remember going to the grocery store
to buy flour for baking? There is no wheat

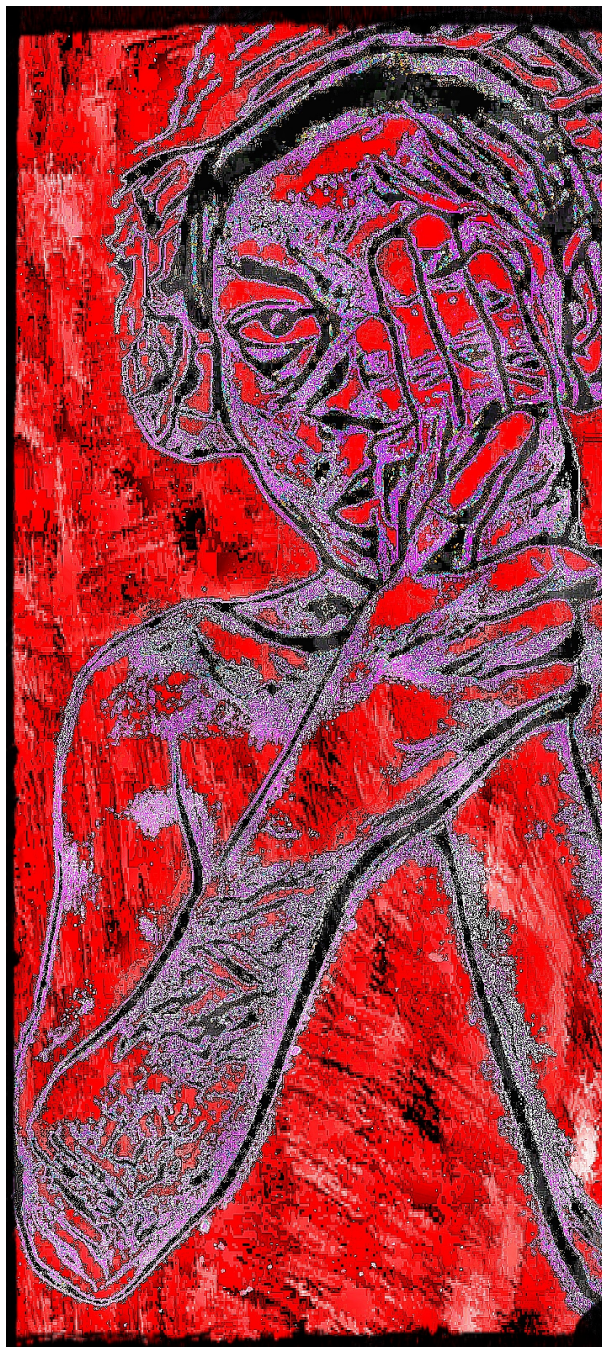
these days; there is no sunlight either.
The newly-wintered sky is a sickly color—not even gray, but
the color of old flesh fallen in, the pallor
of a fever-ravaged cheek—dark sometimes
and darker. There is no moon
hanging in our skies, but the tides
still feel her pull, so I suppose she still exists.

There was no warning
televised on national news. I'm sure
there were signs—perhaps the ground quaked
and grew in height. Perhaps Old Faithful
halted its clockwork exhalation, perhaps its breath stopped,
before all hell—to quote my father—broke loose.

All hell is violence, rocks shot
into the air, rocketing up thirty miles before falling
like molten rain on the West. All hell is an ash cloud
covering the continent. All hell is desert turned tundra, rainforest
turned wasteland. All hell is missing the last family
vacation to one of the last national parks.
All hell is surviving.

self-portrait as a broken boy

by Martins Deep



The Book of Father Dominic

by Peter Alterman

Brother Crispin knocked on the doorpost of Father Dominic's cell and waited to be acknowledged. In his hand was a thick package wrapped in a scrap of freshly-made leather still stinking of the tannery. The old man sat hunched over his desk with his back to the young monk, intent on the books before him. Three separate volumes lay open on his desk. Three more were stacked to one side. A half-rolled scroll covered in inky scribbles sprawled across his cot.

Deep in the problem of deciphering a line of symbols that his gnarled finger followed over and over, the sound of Brother Crispin's voice took some time to penetrate Father Dominic's awareness. Irritated, he twisted around on his stool and glared at the irritant. When he saw the leather package his frown turned to a smile.

"Brother Crispin," he said, waving the young monk in. "What have you got there?"

Brother Crispin hurried forward and handed the package to the old priest. "I found it in a silver box buried under a stone in the turnip field, Father. I know the rule against touching book pages but I just opened it to the main page to see. And yes," he said, "It has the god-signifier symbols you taught us: BY. A very large book, Father, one you can hardly hold in one hand."

"Yes, I see," said Father Dominic, frowning and taking the package. "And all the more fragile because of it." Never before had he seen a book so large.

He placed the leather package on his desk and slipped fine cotton gloves over his gnarled knuckles, then gently undid the rawhide string and peeled the leather away from the book. He forgot to

breathe as the package opened to reveal a pristine black pebbled leather cover, a marvel of tanning.

But now, thanks to the luck of the young monk, here was a new book by one of the old gods, left behind for men and women when they departed.

The revelation of a new god through Its book was always a vexed gift for Father Dominic. He grumbled under his breath as his mind fixed on his frustrations. He'd have very little time to study it, though each new book added another piece to the puzzle of what the symbols in the god books meant. And because of its size this one was plainly too long to copy out in the unreadable symbols of the gods.

The scrolls on his desk were duplicates of other god books, those he was allowed to touch and study. The originals were sealed in earthenware jars that resided in separate cubes in the walls of the sanctuary, removed only on the anniversaries of their discoveries. But the jars were never opened. The god books never again saw the light of day.

Brother Crispin would undergo the usual vision quest that revealed the name and attributes of the rediscovered god. The Cardinal would come all the way from her throne to sanctify it. Then young Crispin would be elevated to Priest, bound to the god and to the Temple of a Thousand Gods for life.

So the only time Father Dominic had to work on Brother Crispin's book was the time it took a messenger to travel to the Cardinal's seat and for a retinue to return. After all, it wasn't as though a vision

quest could read a book. Whereas he could almost read the god symbols. More and more his dreams danced with the symbols arranging themselves into words.

Early on in his time as Master of Books he'd figured out that the symbols stood for sounds. There were only so many of them. He believed that if he could just sound them, speak the god words into the waiting air, he could summon the gods back to the world. But neither the Cardinal nor this eager monk would spare him the time he needed to see if the new book could help him make that one last leap.

Brother Crispin hovered over Father Dominic's shoulder watching the old man's index finger frozen on the first page of the book. "What does it say, Father?"

Jolted out of his reverie, Father Dominic skimmed over the line of what he thought of as big symbols. These he would puzzle over later. The second, smaller line beneath it contained the god symbols BY. "Yes," he said, "Those are the symbols that precede god names all right."

"Look here, son," Father Dominic said. "Same big symbol twice."

"Yes, I see." Brother Crispin's voice was tentative. He peered closer over Father Dominic's shoulder. Brother Crispin's face lit up. "Oh. Oh, I see. Yes, Father. Same big symbol twice. I'm sure my vision quest will reveal its name."

Maybe vision quests did reveal the names and attributes of rediscovered gods. When Father Dominic was young he'd believed it. He'd gone on his own vision quest once and he'd believed what was revealed to him. But over time he'd turned away from believing in vision quests to believing in the words of the gods as written in their books. These days he hardly paid any attention to the god his younger self rediscovered and that his younger self's vision quest named, not even on the god's Finding Day.

"Father?"

Once again, Father Dominic found he'd slipped into reverie only to be jolted out by the impatience—or worse, concern—of Brother Crispin. He turned to face the young monk.

"Well, Brother," he said. "You can tell Prior Elegeus to send word to the Cardinal that you have found a new god book. And prepare for your vision quest." Father Dominic sighed. A week at most. That's all he would have to work on this new book.

"Thank you, Father. Thank you!" Father Dominic rummaged around his desk for a fresh scroll to start copying this new book as Brother Crispin rushed out of the cell to tell Prior Elegeus the good news.

* * *

The temple sanctuary was a huge square cube of a room. The floor was oak, dark with age and generations of waxing. The ceiling was crisscrossed with thick oak beams, the outer coffer painted with designs of the starry companions. The inner coffers bore the faces of the temple's founding monks. An iron chain hung from the center of each face supporting a candleholder. The room's corners remained in shadow. The two side walls, from floor to ceiling, were covered in cubbies filled with earthenware jars of various sizes that held the original god books rediscovered by generations of monks. The front wall housed tall double doors. A gaping stone fireplace took up most of the back wall. It was never lit since fire was the enemy of god books and because the fireplace was the route whereby prayers to the Thousand Gods, rediscovered and undiscovered, rose to the heavens and where visions from the gods descended to the monks and nuns, priests and priestesses who worshipped in the vast sanctuary.

It was also the place where the finders of god books, monks and nuns, went on their vision quests. So while Brother Crispin underwent his vision quest locked in the sanctuary, worship was held outside the monastery proper. The monks and nuns, priests and priestesses all crowded into the much smaller Lady Chapel that lay on the other side of the village.

After the monks trudged back to the Temple from first prayers, Prior Elegeus and Father Dominic unlocked the sanctuary doors to look in and confirm that Brother Crispin was still traveling along his vision quest. He was. He lay spread-eagled on his back on the finely-woven rug in front of the fireplace, eyes closed, breath slow and regular, either unaware of the two elders or heedless of their presence.

They nodded to each other and withdrew. Prior Elegeus resealed the doors behind them. Once out in the vestibule they separated and went their own ways.

As he hobbled back to his cell, Father Dominic remembered when they'd been young together. He'd known Elegeus almost all his life. Each performed his duties to the god he served. In addition the Prior's life became management of monks, nuns, priests, peasants, animals, crops, land, and to an extent the surrounding village of Wick. Father Dominic's life had become an ongoing struggle with the enigma of the god books. All things considered, Father Dominic preferred his fate. It fit him.

Back in his cell the old priest turned to the copy he'd been able to make of the first full page of Brother Crispin's book. Sounds. The symbols were sounds. The thought ran through his head. He worked on the symbols in the new book, making a list of them, counting them, noting which were printed beside which others, counting groups, comparing them to the symbols in the copies of other pages he kept on his desk along with the complete copy of his own god book, the *Book of Lulu-bene*.

Although "complete copy" was a misnomer. Father Dominic recovered the *Book of Lulu-bene* in fragments of what Father Washi, the old Master of Books, eventually decided were three separate copies. None of the pages were complete. All had been water damaged, many little more than scraps of sludge. The most rigorous reconstruction had been necessary to recover the pages, laid out and dried onto the finest linen the monks could manufacture.

The reconstruction was helped by the fact that the book, unlike any

other previously found, included drawings that could be strung together to form a pattern of sorts. A picture of the god with a boat-shaped body and a chimney-shaped hat appeared regularly. Wavy lines suggesting water appeared on every recovered page.

After two years of painstaking work, Father Washi finally agreed that a true copy of the *Book of Lulu-bene* had been recovered. The book was sealed in its jar and Father Dominic was directed to undertake his vision quest. So many years ago.

That night Father Dominic slept at his desk, cheek on a newly-copied page. As he dreamed, years of study and analysis came together and the symbols finally whispered to him the shapes of their sounds and the sounds arrayed themselves into words.

He woke as it was all flying away but he was able to snatch a trailing veil of god words and screamed them out: "Stöppuð Plump Buck Mulligan! Stöppuð Plump Buck Mulligan!" Then the rest were pulled back from forgetfulness and he had them all.

After a lifetime of study, Father Dominic's mind seized the sounds of the god symbols, spoke aloud the first words of the new god book, still not knowing what they meant. But hearing the words of this god in the clear thin air thrilled him beyond reason.

He struggled to his feet and danced around his cell crying "Stöppuð Plump Buck Mulligan, Stöppuð Plump Buck Mulligan!" Anyone watching him would have thought he'd gone mad. And in a way he had. His heart was racing, the veins in his neck throbbing.

Intense emotion was not in Father Dominic's nature. He recovered himself quickly and hurried back to his desk. After consulting his notes, head and hand moving back and forth between scroll and copied page, he slowly sounded out the first full line of words spoken into the book by Brother Crispin's god. Father Dominic's voice following his finger as it slid from word to word along his vellum copy: "kom oor stiginu, ber skal af lather sem spegill og raki leggja yfir." The words were like honey on his tongue and balm to his soul. He could feel the presence of the unknown god in his cell.

And then something even more miraculous happened. He recognized the sound of a word. A word he could read. “Plump.” He knew that word, knew what it meant. He could read a word in god symbols. His excitement turned to fear. This was heresy.

But fear was overtaken by curiosity. There were other words he thought he might recognize from their sounds, as though spoken in accents by people from far North. Perhaps if he twisted them around in his mouth—but he pulled back. One word was enough for now. There would be time for the rest. Time for these words to crack open all the jars of all the god books in the sanctuary. There was no telling what knowledge awaited him.

A knock on the door of his cell. A voice cried out, “Are you well, Father?”

He opened the door and smiled at the anxious face of Father Hurvi. “Just a dream, Father. Just a dream. All is well, very well.”

The bell for second prayers sounded, so Father Dominic and Father Hurvi walked together to meet the rest of the community and march through the monastery’s cabbage field to the Lady Chapel. All the while he followed the service, Father Dominic’s mind sparkled with new knowledge and plans for future research. The unfamiliar feeling of blood pounding in the veins of his throat and head distracted him.

* * *

Two days later Father Dominic’s excitement had ebbed. Mouthing out the sounds of the words had not summoned the god. Alone among his brethren, he gave no thought to Brother Crispin’s impending revelations. While the rest of the community prayed for Brother Crispin’s vision quest, Father Dominic spent his time studying Brother Crispin’s god book. He came out only for the mandatory daily prayers and to attend to his body’s needs, few as they had become.

After Vespers the fourth day after Brother Crispin had begun his

vision quest Father Dominic returned to his cell and stood in the middle of the room staring at his cluttered desk. For once he was reluctant to take up his studies. A servant had lit tallow candles. Flickering light illuminated the books and scrolls scattered on desk, bed, floor. He rubbed his face and his burning eyes with his palms.

A boy raced up and tugged on his surplice. “Father, Prior Elegeus says a messenger has arrived from the Cardinal and to please join them in the library with the newly-discovered god book.”

Only four days. Father Dominic sighed and nodded. His time for studying the new book had run out. He took it from his desk and shoved it into a leather bag. He slung the bag over his shoulder and hobbled on painful feet to meet the Prior and the Cardinal’s messenger.

Father Dominic knocked on the library doors and entered. The room was a smaller version of the temple sanctuary, a cube slightly larger than human scale with shelves lining the side walls rather than lattices. Codices and scrolls filled many of the shelves, though there was room for generations more scholarly writings. Two heavily leaded windows flanked a lit stone fireplace on the rear wall, a luxury. Pale winter light filtered into the room and illuminated the purples and blues of the rugs that covered the oak floor.

Prior Elegeus and the messenger sat at a low table on which a pitcher of ale stood. Each had a mug in his hand. They leaned towards each other, conversing quietly.

The messenger was an important cleric. His scarlet surplice was embroidered at hem and neck with rich blue and white thread. A stylized gilt god book hung on a heavy chain around his neck, sign of his office.

He was no simple messenger. He was Father Fedor, the Inquisitor. Father Dominic’s sworn enemy. And his twin. Identical in appearance, opposite in nature.

They turned when Father Dominic entered the room. “*Gli dei siano con te, Father Dominic*,” the Inquisitor said in ancient church talk.

“*Et cum tuoi dei, Father Fedor*,” Father Dominic replied, making the square sign of The Book in the air.

“Father Dominic,” the Prior said, “Come sit and take refreshment.”

Father Dominic sat and poured himself a mug of ale. “When shall we expect the Cardinal’s arrival?” he said.

“Alas, she is unavailable. Her sixth child, I believe. I was nearby on business and intercepted your messenger before sending him onward—” he nodded at Prior Elegeus, “—so I am able to represent her.” The Inquisitor’s mouth smiled. His eyes did not. “It’s been many a year since we last met, Father,” he said. “We’ve missed you.”

The Inquisitor’s role was to sniff out heresy among the clergy. Father Fedor had investigated Father Dominic three times in the past because the Church leaders were convinced that literacy was the breeding ground of heresy. Monks, nuns, priests, and priestesses were all literate, none more than the Master of Books. Thus all were by definition suspected of harboring heresies.

Father Dominic showed his teeth in a smile that was also no smile. “The gods have been generous to me, Father Fedor, but these days I struggle to walk even the halls here in the Temple,” he said.

The Inquisitor shook his head sadly. “As I see, Father. It comes to us all if the gods grant us the years.” He held out his hand. “But now let us see this new god book the young monk discovered. I know you covet it for your studies.”

And think them a waste of time, don’t you? With barely a hint of hesitation Father Dominic pulled the book from his bag and handed it over. “Who wouldn’t? Reclaiming a god is a cause for celebration,” Father Dominic said.

The Prior’s face relaxed. The Inquisitor took the book and turned it over in his hand. “Nice cover,” he said. “Binding intact, leather supple. And large. Look how large. Father Dominic, surely this is a book that embodies a powerful god.” He turned to the Prior. “The monk is on his vision quest, yes?”

“These four days,” Prior Elegeus said.

The Inquisitor said, “I’m anxious to learn more about the god he rediscovered.” He opened the book randomly, though with great care, and stared blankly at the symbols printed on the open pages. “Such small symbols,” he said. He looked at Father Dominic. “And you believe you can read these?”

Father Dominic shook his head. The obvious trap. “Only the finder’s vision quest reveals the god’s words. But perhaps we can learn what the gods’ words sound like. To aid the vision quest.” Lying to the Inquisitor was dangerous business.

The Inquisitor said, “Be careful you don’t go too far, Dominic. Man’s tongue is unfit to speak god words.”

Father Dominic bowed his head. “Of course, Father. Still, the gods left their books for us when they Departed so we could know them better.” Obedience was mandatory, yes, but authority with a little intellectual curiosity would be welcome. His twin was not a stupid man.

The Inquisitor frowned at Father Dominic. “Naturally, you believe such things to justify having wasted your life poring over book after book until your eyesight dimmed.” Boy and man, Fedor had never seen the point of sitting alone with a book.

The Prior headed off further trouble. “The young monk should be ready for his examination in the morning,” he said. “Brother Crispin has a powerful appetite. And a strong faith.”

“Yes, of course,” the Inquisitor said, turning his attention to the

Prior. He closed the book carefully and placed it on his lap. Father Dominic watched the Inquisitor take charge of the book with regret. In all likelihood its covers would never again be opened.

“The young do have such gusto for their meals, don’t they?” the Inquisitor said.

“Speaking of which,” the Prior said, “may I call for food?”

That was Father Dominic’s cue to escape. He pushed himself to his feet and bowed first to the Prior, then to his brother. “Shall I inform the refectory that you wish to eat here in the library?” he said.

The Prior nodded agreement. Father Dominic left the library, closing the doors behind him silently.

* * *

The next day there was great excitement among the community, for Brother Crispin’s vision quest was about to be over and he would reveal the name and nature of the new god. Then the Prior would ordain Brother Crispin as Priest of the new god and the book would be interred in its cubby on a wall of the sanctuary. After the ritual came the feast. Two goats were already roasting on spits out behind the kitchen. Organ meat stews bubbled in kitchen cauldrons.

The morning light was feeble, the air colder. The nuns hadn’t yet lit fires in the Lady Chapel. Perhaps for that reason or perhaps because the Prior and the Prioress were themselves anxious to discover the name and attributes of the new god, morning prayers took much less time to complete than normal.

With the hurried service over, the Prior, the Inquisitor, and Father Dominic, Master of Books, departed to retrieve Brother Crispin from the sanctuary. The Prioress led the community back to the temple’s refectory to await them. As impatient as Father Dominic was to get back to his desk and his studies, as painful as it was for him to walk, he knew his place and his duties. Father Dominic walked behind,

holding the earthenware jar with the new god book sealed inside. Over one arm he carried a newly woven priest’s surplice, its black cloth still shiny from the loom’s polish.

The Prior opened the sanctuary doors and the three senior priests entered. Brother Crispin lay on his back, his eyes gleaming with the last of his vision. When he saw the Inquisitor he was confused for a moment, thinking he was seeing Father Dominic. But the Inquisitor’s scarlet surplice and supple movement showed him it was another with the same face and he remembered that Father Dominic had an identical twin. Crispin was reassured by the smile on the Prior’s face. The Inquisitor and the Prior crossed the room and lifted the haggard Crispin to his feet.

The Inquisitor began the ritual. “Brother, has the god visited you?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Brother, has the god told you Its name?”

“Yes, Father.” A broad grin spread across Brother Crispin’s face. “The god’s name is Mogu Mekka.”

There was more, much more, but Father Dominic heard none of it. The new god couldn’t have names that began with the ‘M’ symbol. In the book the god’s two names began with the symbol ‘J.’ And the very first god word he’d deciphered, “plump,” had the symbol ‘M’ in the middle, and the sound of ‘M’ was the sound of humming. Which was the name of the new god according to Crispin’s vision quest. But the symbol on the first page was ‘J’ not ‘M,’ so the god’s names could not begin with the sound of humming.

Crispin’s vision quest must be false.

Still, Crispin was a pious man. Father Dominic was sure his vision quest was authentic. Still—could *his* reading be wrong? Could *he* have mistranslated or misunderstood the sound of the symbols for “plump”? It seemed the only answer. Father Dominic didn’t think

he'd gotten any of it wrong, though. The confidence he had in his ability to read the god books was the greatest source of his fear. It rocked the foundation of his faith. While his lifelong enemy, Father Fedor the Inquisitor, stood in the same room.

Father Dominic didn't notice that the ritual was over and Crispin was being ordained Priest of Mogu Mekka by the Inquisitor in the name of the Lady Cardinal. Prior Elegeus had to jam a shoulder into Father Dominic's side to get him to come forward and put the priest's black surplice over Crispin's brown robe.

"Well done, Father Crispin," said Prior Elegeus. Turning, he led the Inquisitor and Father Crispin to the refectory.

While the men and women of the Temple of a Thousand Gods feasted, Father Dominic instead made his way back to his cell, his heart in as much turmoil as his mind. He lit an extra taper at his desk for light and feverishly reviewed the symbols he'd copied from the first page of, of, he couldn't think of it as the *Book of Mogu Mekka*.

He pored over his copy of the few pages of Crispin's god book he'd been able to copy out, mouthing words softly, rolling sounds around, lengthening and shortening them, pushing vowel sounds forward and back in his mouth, pressing and releasing consonants against his tongue, his teeth, his palate, looking for word sounds that he could recognize from the language all around him. 'M' was right in the middle of "Plump." It was also in "kom" and "sem," other words from the first line of the book.

Not only did he miss the feast, he was absent from afternoon prayers as well. And during those hours he became convinced of the following, just from the first line of the new book: "Plump" was "plump"; "lather" was "lather"; "kom" was "come"; "ber" was likely "bear," maybe "beer," maybe "bar"; in any case a 'buh' sound and a final 'errr' sound.

He suspected more word meanings but he was still unsure of those since he'd had to twist sounds around a great deal to find fits in

dialects he knew. He would only commit to those four, but what illumination was in just those four.

Father Dominic stared at the list of things he was sure of and tears came to his eyes. No matter what Crispin's vision quest revealed, the name of the god of the new book couldn't be Mogu Mekka because the symbol for the humming sound that started both words of the so-called revealed god name was 'M' and the name symbols were not 'M.'

Crispin's vision quest couldn't be true. And if that vision quest couldn't be true, how could any of the vision quests of any of the priests be true, even his own, from the very founding of the Temple? The answer was, they couldn't. Every rediscovered god in every book in every jar in every cubby in the sanctuary of the Temple of the Thousand Gods was still unknown.

So his faith, his whole life, everything he'd believed since he could remember was lost. Doubt and confusion blanketed him. Racing past heresy, he had fallen into apostasy. And Fedor was there to seize him.

His heart pounded hard against his sternum. He panted. He grew dizzy. Spots appeared before his eyes, blue and white, turning to a fog of gray. Loud buzzing in his ears that shivered his skull from the inside. Father Dominic collapsed on the floor of his cell, vomit in his white beard.

* * *

After Father Dominic missed dinner prayers the Prior sent a novice to look for him. The boy found the old priest on the floor of his cell, eyes shut, breath shallow. The boy raced away for Brother Urizen the nurse on clacking clogs a size too big for him.

When Brother Urizen arrived the boy helped him move Father Dominic to his cot. They cleaned Father Dominic's face and covered his forehead and eyes with a cool towel.

"He had a seizure," Brother Urizen said as the Prior entered.

Father Dominic regained consciousness but lay still, barely aware of his surroundings, confused and exhausted. The left side of his face sagged. His left side felt numb. More than numb. Absent.

Father Fedor stood in the doorway. “Too much of that,” he said, pointing at the mess of books and notes on the desk. “You should burn the lot of them.”

“We’ll take that under advisement, Father Inquisitor,” the Prior said. To Brother Urizen he said, “Leave him to rest. Pray to the temple gods to heal his wounded body. Perhaps say a special prayer to Lulu-bene for him.”

“The boy can sit with him,” Brother Urizen said.

“No need,” Father Fedor said, “I will sit with him.”

“Of course,” Prior Elegeus said. He and Brother Urizen backed out of the cell.

The Inquisitor sat at Father Dominic’s desk. He began to go through the papers, paying special attention to the pages copied out of Father Crispin’s book and to Father Dominic’s notes. His fingers traced lines of symbols. From time to time small sounds of surprise escaped him. Soon he was poring through book after book, flipping pages with no regard for their brittle paper, muttering under his breath. Finally, he sat back and stretched.

“Well, you’ve done it, brother,” Father Fedor said. “And look what it’s brought you. You followed this pathway to the edge of chaos and jumped right in.”

“I followed the path the gods laid before me. It led me to truth,” Father Dominic said. There was something wrong with his mouth. It was as if half his mouth wouldn’t move, wouldn’t make sounds the way he wanted. But he continued speaking. “You followed your path to the Church.”

Surprised at his twin’s voice, Fedor said, “Dear brother. Half your

body seems to have died. Proof of the errors your studies have led you into. I believe in the Faith and what the Faith teaches.”

“And if the teachings are wrong?”

“You’re no fool. You know it’s more complicated than that. All people love stories. All people even dream stories in their sleep. People understand the Faith through stories. You could say that people live for stories.”

“So make-believe is more valuable than truth,” Father Dominic said.

The Inquisitor laughed. “Truth? What is truth? Until yesterday, even this morning all this,” he gestured to encompass the Temple with its monastery, the nearby Lady Chapel, the Faith, all the known and unknown gods. “All this was true. And still is. For everyone but you.”

“And you.”

Father Fedor shook his head. “No. Truth is conditional. Faith is permanent.”

He lit two of the tapers that stood on Father Dominic’s desk, then began tearing pages of paper out of the books on the desk, creating a pile of kindling. He arranged other books and note scrolls so they would catch fire.

“I am sorry, brother, that it has come to this. But you knew all along where it would lead,” the Inquisitor said. He stood and reached across the desk for one of the candles that lit the cell. He touched the kindling and the ancient paper burst into flames. In an instant, everything on Father Dominic’s desk caught fire.

Reflexively, Father Dominic lurched from his cot towards the fire. Useless, his half-paralyzed body flopped forward, knocking him into his twin. Fedor fell sideways to the floor, taking Father Dominic with him. Burning paper fell all around them. Burning books and scrolls were flung everywhere.

Fedor landed on top of Dominic. They banged hard against a leg of the desk, which collapsed. An edge of the desk fell on the back of Father Fedor's skull, smashing it. Sounding like an ax swung into a tree trunk. The Inquisitor's eyes opened wide. The muscles of his face went slack. Death stilled him.

Father Dominic rolled over and cradled his twin's head with his good arm. A trickle of blood seeped from Father Fedor's nostrils onto Father Dominic's hand.

"Fedor. No. Oh, no." Father Dominic whispered to the corpse with his own face.

He became aware of the flames licking the walls, the desk, the door. But the books. The scrolls. His notes.

Gently, Father Dominic laid his brother's head on the floor. He crawled across the cell grabbing books and scrolls that hadn't been completely consumed, beating flames out with his good hand, jamming whatever he could rescue into his leather bag. He inched across the floor to the doorway to his cell and used the jamb to help him climb to his feet. Without his left side to balance him it took too long. Flames licked at his robes.

By the time he was upright the whole cell was a mass of smoke and flame. Not knowing where he was going, driven by confusion and horror, using his right arm and right leg only, leaning against the walls, he staggered out into the hall coughing, his eyes streaming, and struggled to the door at the end of the corridor that led out to the farm yard. He grabbed a staff that was leaning against the door and used it to stand and walk: step, drag, step, drag, leaning forward with his good side, using the staff for balance.

He made his way to the far end of the cabbage field and stopped to rest, leaning against the stone fence. Behind him dense smoke and flames shot up from the broad thatch roof of the monastery and temple. As Father Dominic watched, transfixed by the sight, the temple bell began to clang desperately.

He turned his back on it all, an old man with singed hands and the face of his dead brother, struggling through the village, half his body dead, his bag of books dragging behind in the dirt, not knowing where he was going, or why. Not seeing the village or the people racing towards the burning buildings. Seeing only the unseeing eyes of his dead twin.

He got as far as the confluence of the river and a mountain brook a few miles above the village before he collapsed. Father Dominic lay on his back on the frost-crisp grass and watched the tower of black smoke rising in the distance.

Fed by winter snowpack the brook bubbled over its rocky bed through fields dotted with sheep. It tumbled into the River Wick, joining the broader, slower waters that ran past the burning Temple, past the village, south to the sea and the Departed gods.

Nearby, a little boy and his older sister played in the brook with a toy boat. The boy leaned over and placed the boat in the chuckling water. When he let go the current took the boat and launched it racing downstream towards his sister, who snatched it up and returned it to him. They did this over and over, him releasing the boat, she catching it and racing back to him with the toy boat dripping icy water on her bare legs.

And then, in a moment of overexcitement, the boy released the boat before his sister returned to her spot to retrieve it. Unimpeded, the boat careened downstream towards the confluence with the river. The little boy cried out in dismay. His sister turned to run after it but stopped, seeing the little boat already too far away to catch.

It tumbled along on the current. Just as the boat was about to enter the river Father Dominic pushed himself into the water, reached out and snatched up the toy boat. He crawled out of the water with it. The girl ran up and took the toy from his outstretched hand.

Father Dominic lay on the icy ground, soaked. He looked at his empty hand as if the toy boat still rested in his palm. He looked up at

the bright blue sky. He knew. Finally. After a lifetime of labor.

The *Book of Lulu-bene* was a child's story book about a toy boat. His god was an imaginary toy boat.

As it had done earlier, Father Dominic's brain seized. He crumpled to the ground by the side of the river and died, one hand in the water.

* * *

The monks recovered Father Dominic's body and took it reverently

to the Lady Chapel's sanctuary. It was lowered carefully into a plain pine coffin and placed before an altar to the Thousand Gods beside the body of Father Fedor the Inquisitor, the only fatalities of the fire. The jar containing the Temple's true copy of the *Book of Lulu-bene* was placed on Father Dominic's coffin and special prayers were said to the god on his behalf by Prior Elegeus, who had tears in his eyes.

Heedless of the prayers a little boy and his sister played in a brook with the toy boat their father had whittled for them during idle winter nights.

The City Within

by Nathan Batchelor

The left side of Corpse's body went numb after he landed on his neck, but what he remembered about the moment was not the numbness, but the intense memory of a periwinkle sky he witnessed as a boy of sixteen. For a power bomb, when the other guy picks you up, you're supposed to raise up from the waist so that you land on your back when you get slammed to the mat. But Philosopher hadn't given Corpse time to raise up. There was a pop of neck muscle or tendon when he'd landed. He'd looked up to see a skid mark of his face paint on the mat. The crowd knew something was wrong. Their gasps rattled the turnbuckles of the wrestling ring.

Corpse needed to get out of the match. He whispered to Philosopher. He mouthed words to the referee, Scott.

"I can't feel my fucking arm," he said.

A body slam came after Philosopher picked him up by his hair. His opponent must not have heard him. Then a kick came down on Corpse's neck. A real kick, what the boys in the business called a *shoot*, a real or unplanned event in a match. Philosopher had heard his plea for help, Corpse realized. But he hadn't cared. He was trying to hurt or kill him.

"Fuck you," Philosopher said.

He spat a big wad of tobacco and snot that hit Corpse's eye, slid behind the contact that colored Corpse's eyes white. Fire radiated across his eye and face. The smell of tooth decay tinged with artificial mint made Corpse retch. A kick parted his lips. A tooth caved inward like a nail hit on the side with a hammer.

There were no words to greet him backstage, just a pair of EMTs that

led him to the ambulance. While the ambulance rolled toward the hospital, the EMT put down a notepad in front of him.

"If you could give me an autograph it'd mean a lot," the EMT said.

"What's your boy's name?"

Corpse's whole body seemed to ache when he spoke.

It was rare for him to give an autograph. He was a villain, a *heel* in wrestling lingo. Fans usually wanted to spit on him, not get his autograph.

"My name's Leon," the EMT said. "I'm training down at the power station."

The power station was the best wrestling school in Georgia. The EMT lifted a sleeve and showed a large purple bruise that snaked around his elbow.

Corpse passed the signed notepad back to him. The signature was chicken scratch. His hand had felt full of sand. "This is for you?"

"Couldn't get the Philosopher's signature. I figured you were the next best thing," Leon said, shrugging. "What would you tell someone trying to get in the business?" he asked.

"Get out while you still can," Corpse said.

At the hospital, after an array of scans and nurses telling him over and over to "be still," and "don't worry," the doctor told him, "The good news is, your neck isn't broken. As far as I can tell, your spine

is fine. The numbness seems to be from hitting a spot on your neck that functions sort of like a funny bone.”

Yes, the numbness was gone now. But in its place there was a heaviness.

“But I’m afraid I have bad news,” the doctor said, taking off his glasses and rubbing them. “You have a city growing inside you.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I misspoke,” the doctor said. “It’s small now. Huts. People riding horses back and forth. Torches at night. No electricity. It’s a village. Not yet a city.”

“Horses? Not yet a city?” Corpse said. “I’m sorry. I think you’re mistaken.”

The man showed Corpse an image in washed-out black and white. There was a wagon trekking across a muddy road. A sun-blasted wooden sign hung crooked from a shop advertising cures for something called *The Birdie Sickness*.

“That’s inside of me? There are people inside me?” Corpse said.

“Of course. Every city has inhabitants. I mean village. Every village has inhabitants,” the doctor said.

“How did I get it?” Corpse said.

“Some people have a genetic predisposition. Others, just unlucky.” The doctor waved his hand. “The details aren’t important. Medical mumbo-jumbo.” He offered Corpse two pill bottles.

Corpse waved them off. “Never give a wrestler painkillers.”

Many of his friends had popped them by the fistful. More than one of those friends were now dead.

“Only one is a painkiller, and it’s mild. The other should rid you of your problem.”

Corpse looked again at the image. He was reminded of the sky from his childhood. He’d seen that sky only once, riding home with a friend and his girlfriend. He’d had a beer bottle between his legs. The window of the truck was down, and the cool evening air blasted the hand he held outside the window. There had been so much possibility then.

“I was almost a doctor,” Corpse said.

“Oh,” the doctor said. “Big step from there to here. You’d think they’d get you to wrestle in a lab coat and scrubs. Not this getup you wear now.”

He had tried out a doctor character but found the persona inauthentic. He’d hit the right chord with the Corpse character. Everything about the character felt right, the face makeup that took an hour every night, the jeering from the crowd. What did it mean that playing a dead man felt right?

“Am I okay to wrestle?” Corpse asked.

The doctor stared. “Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t you be?”

* * *

Atlanta. A group of homeless huddled like cows beneath an overpass, rain pelting the streets. The MARTA train blasting across the rails. The smell of rainwater seeping in the cracks of the cab’s window. The city is a patchwork of cities. Cities whose tarnish have just worn away, exposing the rot beneath. New, beautiful cities blooming between the cracks of the dead and dying ones.

Corpse knew the cities by their inhabitants. An old man without a bottom jaw playing a one-string guitar on a sidewalk. A woman with a humpback, naked except for her neon Nikes giving a blowjob to

perhaps the skinniest man he had ever seen. This was a dark city.

The cab left him in a construction lot. He walked toward the black sedan. He felt brand new, likely from the pain killers surging through him. He knew why so many of his friends abused them now.

Sewer steam swirled near sodium lights. The sedan window, black and electric-powered, slid down. The man inside wore black shades.

“Don’t tell me you have cold feet,” the man said.

“Nothing like that,” Corpse said. “I know what’s at stake.”

“Everything is at stake. The whole world,” the man said.

The man’s hands moved in the shadows of the car interior. There were long scars between the fingers, as if he’d taken a knife and carved the meat of his hand to make his fingers appear longer. Corpse could see himself in the sunglasses of the man. Traces of paint stained his face. He could never get it all off.

“Are you sick?” the man asked. “Is it cancer?”

“Do I look sick?”

He heard the MARTA train screaming down the tracks. He looked around but didn’t see the train. Somewhere a cat hissed in the darkness.

“No, it’s nothing like that. What do you want?” the man said.

“I need doctors, the best,” Corpse said.

“This is Atlanta. One of the most connected cities in the world. We can fly anyone in.”

There was a rattle inside of him. The train felt like it was as close as the sedan. “Do you hear the train?”

“I don’t watch for trains,” the man said. “I do the accounting.”

He seemed to be doing something in the darkness with his hands. Corpse caught sight of a blade.

“You don’t look like an accountant,” Corpse said.

This was his first meeting with the man. He had spoken to him on the phone after he’d found the note in his locker room that offered *a way to take care of your family*. Money was hard to come by in the profession. On the road three hundred days of the year. And he’d been in the business so long, there was nothing else for him. Whatever it was, it was framed as a way out. Then after he’d learned what they wanted him to do and after he agreed, he knew he was making the right choice.

“I’m not that kind of accountant.”

“Then what kind of accountant are you?” Corpse said.

The drugs in his system were making him brave.

“A different kind. Look, you’ve got us worrying making us come out here like this,” the accountant said. “It’ll be simple.”

“You still haven’t told Philosopher what’s happening, have you?” Corpse said.

“Of course not. That’s what makes it so good,” the accountant said. “That’s what makes it art.”

* * *

The doctor looked up and down the image. “Certainly. Yes, it’s a city now.”

“I thought it was a village,” Corpse said.

“It used to be a village, but the technology has advanced. There’s been a population explosion.” He showed Corpse the image. Kids in jeans were jumping rope. Hand-rolling a cigarette, a man seated on a stoop watched cars pass on a road.

“Your city has grown,” the doctor continued. “But I can’t tell you if it will flounder or flourish.”

“Is there any way to stop it?”

“There’s a lot we don’t understand.” The doctor took his glasses off and blew on them. “Just keep taking your medicine.”

* * *

“Can I talk to Danny?” Corpse pulled his own hair lump by lump out of the sink drain. It had fallen out when he combed it. When he’d weighed, he was up five pounds, though by his reflection in the locker room mirror, he should be down ten pounds. Were the people inside him using him for energy? He imagined stones being dragged out of a cave, being hauled by hundreds of slaves. It had taken the Egyptians hundreds of years to erect the pyramids. Did the place inside him have its own pyramids? How long had it taken them? And what came after a city? A nation? A world?

“Dad?” Danny’s voice was deeper than he remembered. It was perhaps deeper than his own. Corpse wasn’t even sure if it was his son’s voice.

“Do you need any money?” Corpse said.

“I’m good,” Danny said.

“How’s school? Eighth grade this year.”

“I’m a junior, Dad.” His words were flat and did not hold the warmth Corpse thought a son should have for a father. He wondered if Danny had kissed a girl or thrown a punch. Had he been drunk before? Was

he a laughing drunk like his dad, or a venomous snake like his grandfather?

“I need you to do me a favor. I need you to look something up for me. A friend of mine is sick. And I’m not good at computer things,” Corpse said.

“What kind of sick?”

“There’s something growing inside him.”

“Cancer?”

“No,” Corpse said. He told Daniel what the doctor had told him. He described the images.

“What was it before it was a village?” Danny asked. “One person?”

Corpse didn’t know the word for a place smaller than a village, if there was one. But that’s what it must have been, some sort of settlement.

“Something smaller,” Corpse said. “But I don’t know the word for it. What’s smaller than a village?”

“A hamlet,” Daniel said.

“A hamlet, I see,” Corpse said. “What’s bigger than a city?”

“A metropolis. But Google says that if it’s that big ...” His son trailed off.

There was the distinct smell of eggs cooking. There was the sound of a lion roaring. These were things from the city within him, he realized.

“What?” Corpse said.

“Hours,” Daniel said.

“What do you mean, *hours*?” Corpse said.

“That’s how much time he has left,” Daniel said. “He should be in a hospital.”

“You know I love you, Daniel?”

* * *

The stadium was packed. There were people standing in the aisles. Signs were raised that read, *Put the Corpse back in his grave*, and *Kill the Corpse*. Sparks of fire from Corpse’s entrance pyrotechnics danced across his chin. He tried to take in the boos, the insults hurled by teenage boys. This was the last time he’d see and hear the crowd. There was an energy here that he couldn’t get anywhere else. There was no high higher than the pop of a crowd.

Losing would be easy. Philosopher was shooting on Corpse from the moment he entered the ring. The punches were real. Corpse’s cracked lip and black eye were real. Art and drama were abandoned. Corpse staggered away momentarily, and grabbed at the ref’s shirt, before being pulled back.

He heard a train. He imagined it roaring out of the locker room into the ring, smashing into him. Part of him thought it would be a refuge from the punches. He tried to smile. He couldn’t ever be the dad Daniel needed, but the money would help. Yes, the money.

Philosopher clotheslined him over the top rope. Corpse smelled things that reminded him of childhood. Water from a hot rubber hose. Fresh cut grass. He couldn’t tell what was inside of him from what was outside of him. Philosopher raised a chair high above his head. Smoke rose in front of stars above a river. The fires of some industrial park glowed in the night. The chair came down on Corpse’s head.

He heard nothing. He saw nothing. He felt the referee raising his

hand, then passing him the belt. He had won. The belt was heavy. But holding it, he felt it didn’t belong to him. It belonged to *them*, to the train that he heard, to the fires that he saw, to the kids splashing in a dollar-store inflatable pool.

“God, what have I done?” he said.

He collapsed. On his back, he saw a woman floating in front of him, white veil over her head, saying, “I do.” She was radiant, happier than he’d ever seen someone.

* * *

The room was dark, and he could hear cars whistling by, the laughter of a construction crew behind the beating of a jackhammer. If those sounds were outside or inside, he couldn’t tell. Then, staring up at the ceiling, a child on a bicycle pedaled across the popcorn sheetrock. He smelled meat grilling and garbage in the streets. His limbs were heavy. He imagined hundreds of people out in the streets, shoulder to shoulder, looking up into the sky.

“We had a deal,” someone was saying. It was the accountant. Corpse raised his head off the table, saw the man sitting in a lacquered wooden chair, his hands covered in blood. Below him, there was a pool of blood.

“Where am I?” Corpse said.

“The city,” the accountant said.

“I don’t know what happened,” Corpse said. It was hard to think. The voices of a hundred people spoke in his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You did everything we wanted you to,” the man said.

A horn sounded somewhere. Corpse saw a barge moving beneath a bridge. It was inside the man’s mouth.

“The ratings were through the roof,” the accountant said. “The

downloads of the match broke records. We're trending everywhere. Major news outlets have picked up the story. There was a fire in you, in those last moments, something alive that we've never seen before."

"I was supposed to lose," Corpse said. "You said I would only get paid if I lost."

"That's right," the man said. "And you won. You pulled out the victory."

"This whole thing was a work," Corpse said. "He was in on it."

"Of course, we had to tell him. He was upset at first, as a philosopher would be concerning an issue of truth," the accountant said. "Everyone was in on it."

"I'm getting my goddamn money," Corpse said.

"There is no money."

Corpse was suddenly a boy easing a credit card out of a wallet while a man buckled his pants. Corpse could taste what the boy tasted, the salt and sex of the man.

"Here's what's going to happen." The accountant's words brought Corpse back to this reality.

He motioned to a TV above where another man sat. The man's hands were bandaged. *Perhaps another accountant*, Corpse thought. There was a counter with a box of disposable gloves. *I am in some kind of hospital*. A promo ran on the television. There was Daniel, crying. There was his ex-wife. There was a body bag being pulled out of a river. There was a picture of Corpse, without makeup, his real name listed below his picture, Ingolf Klump, dates of his birth and yesterday's date.

"You killed me off?" Corpse said.

"The angle is a mob deal turned sour."

The *angle* was the story presented to the fans.

"You don't work for the mob."

"And you're not a corpse." The accountant looked him over. "Not yet at least."

"What's that supposed to mean? I have a son for Christ's sake."

"Your run is over. You will be given food, drugs, even women if you want."

"You think I'm just gonna sit here?"

The man motioned downward. "You can't move." He took the knife from his hand and pressed the tip of the blade against Corpse's ankle. Blood welled from the cut. He felt nothing. "Part of your disease, your cancer or whatever is wrong with you."

"I want Daniel to get the money."

"I've already told you. There is no money," the accountant said.

"There is money, by God. There's always money," Corpse said.

There was the strength and rage of thousands or millions inside of him. He raised up, the city inside him shifting, nausea rolling over him. His hand caught the accountant's wrist. Wrist bone and tendon cracked. The movement caught the accountant by surprise. But the accountant was a veteran at this work. The butt of a gun cracked against Corpse's nose, warm blood flooding down his face. Then the barrel pressed into his chest. There were two piercing noises. The shockwaves rattled his whole body.

"What is going on?" the man who sat below the TV said. "You weren't supposed to shoot him."

“He broke my fucking wrist,” the accountant said. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

“Fucker’s crazy,” the other man said. “Philosopher knocked loose every last marble from his skull. Shoot him.”

“I’ve already shot him twice. You told me I wasn’t supposed to,” the accountant said. “Christ, I need a hospital.”

“We can’t go to a hospital, not with your hands.”

The sight of the accountant’s hands disgusted the other man. Who would do that to themselves?

“Anyway, things are different now,” the other man said. “Shoot him again.”

Another shot. Corpse’s blood scythed across the accountant’s shirt.

“Again,” the man said.

Corpse’s face burned. His vision was cloudy. It took him a moment to realize he’d been shot through the eye and that the white matter splattered across the bedsheet was part of his eye or brain.

He saw a woman raise her hands inside a wooden church. He smelled the peppermint that rattled in her mouth as she choked out a Hallelujah. He smelled the sweat and cologne of the preacher. He felt the stickiness of the lacquered pews on the preacher’s palm. One of the gunshots had knocked something loose, some fold of viscera that held the city inside him.

Corpse. A bad father who wanted to make it right with his son. A failed doctor named Ingolf Klump. A wrestler and villain. A man is a patchwork of men. There is something shared between a man and a city.

“I am my own city,” he said. “I always was.”

It hurt to speak. It hurt more to breathe. But he could leave something for Daniel, he thought, tasting the sand of a baseball diamond, smelling the oiled leather of a new glove. He would do that. He would die, and then do that.

“Usually they talk about light before they die,” the accountant said. “Their mothers or their children.” He brushed his hand down his shirt, shuddering when his fingertips felt viscera.

“He has a boy,” the other man said.

“Had,” the accountant said. “A dead man owns nothing.”

“A corpse you mean,” the other man said.

He took the gun from the accountant and wiped it down with a handkerchief. He checked Corpse’s pulse.

“And yes, he’s a corpse now,” the man said.

“Your jokes aren’t appreciated,” the accountant said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“What’s the client going to say about this?” the other man said. “We were supposed to let him die from his condition.”

“I’ll think of something,” the accountant said. “Open the door for me.”

The accountant froze in the hall.

“Something’s wrong. Something’s different,” he said.

“What do you mean different?” the other man said.

The fire alarm sat slightly higher on the wall. The light switches were a darker shade of gray. They had been partners for near a decade, but there was still the illusion of impressing the other man. You couldn’t

let your guard down in this profession.

“Nothing,” the accountant said.

The other man noticed differences too. In the stairwell, the exit signs glowed in a deeper shade of green. The doors were made of a heavy wood rather than a composite material. He was disappointed at his own lack of attention to detail.

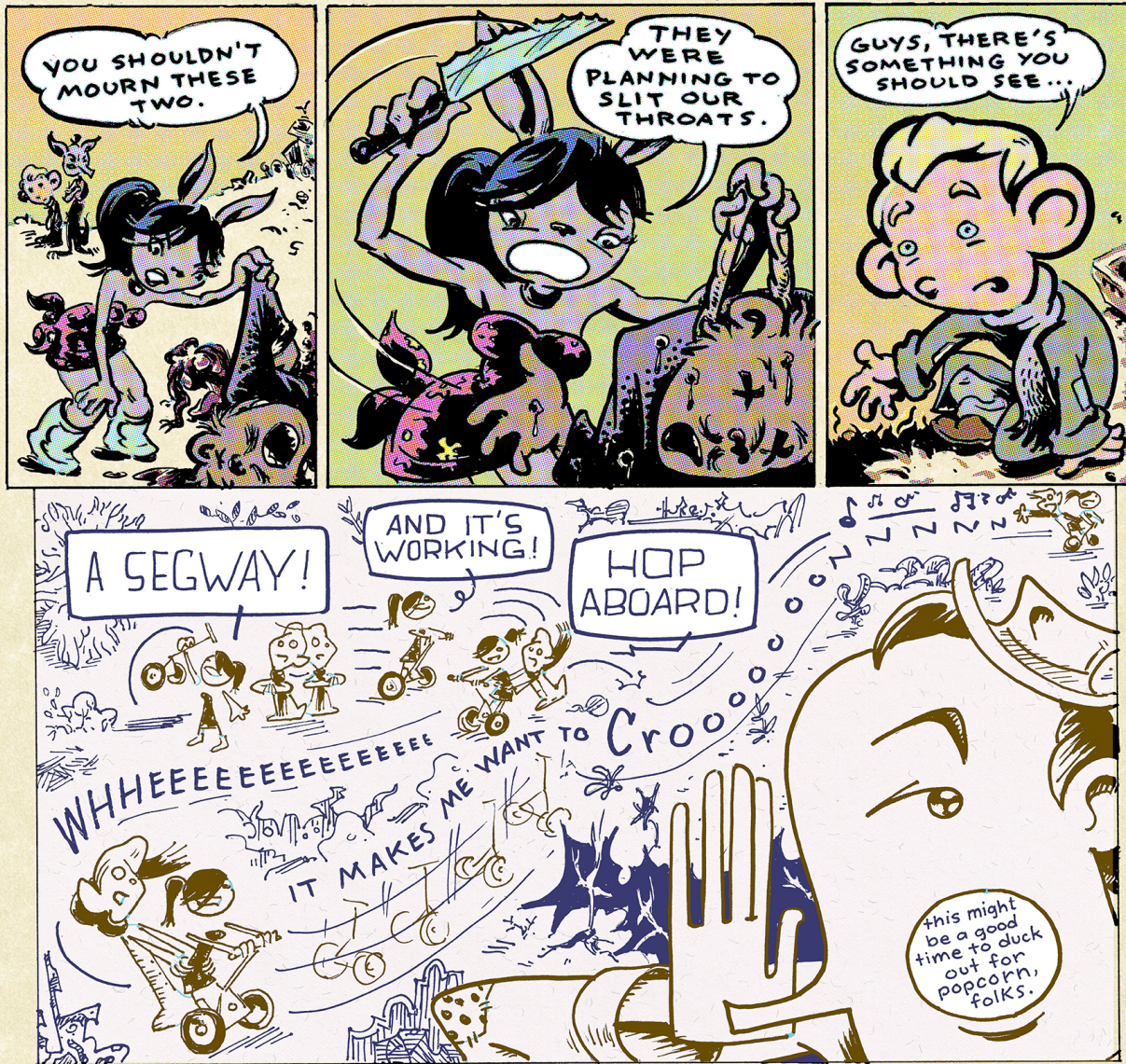
“I don’t remember a church being there,” he said after they had left the building and stood in the street. “I thought that was a Chinese place. What the fuck is wrong with me today?”

The sun had set, and the sky had turned a periwinkle that gave everything a tinge of incongruity. A pickup truck raced by. When the accountant saw the face of the boy sitting in the passenger seat, he emitted sounds that his partner had never heard. Deep guttural sobs.

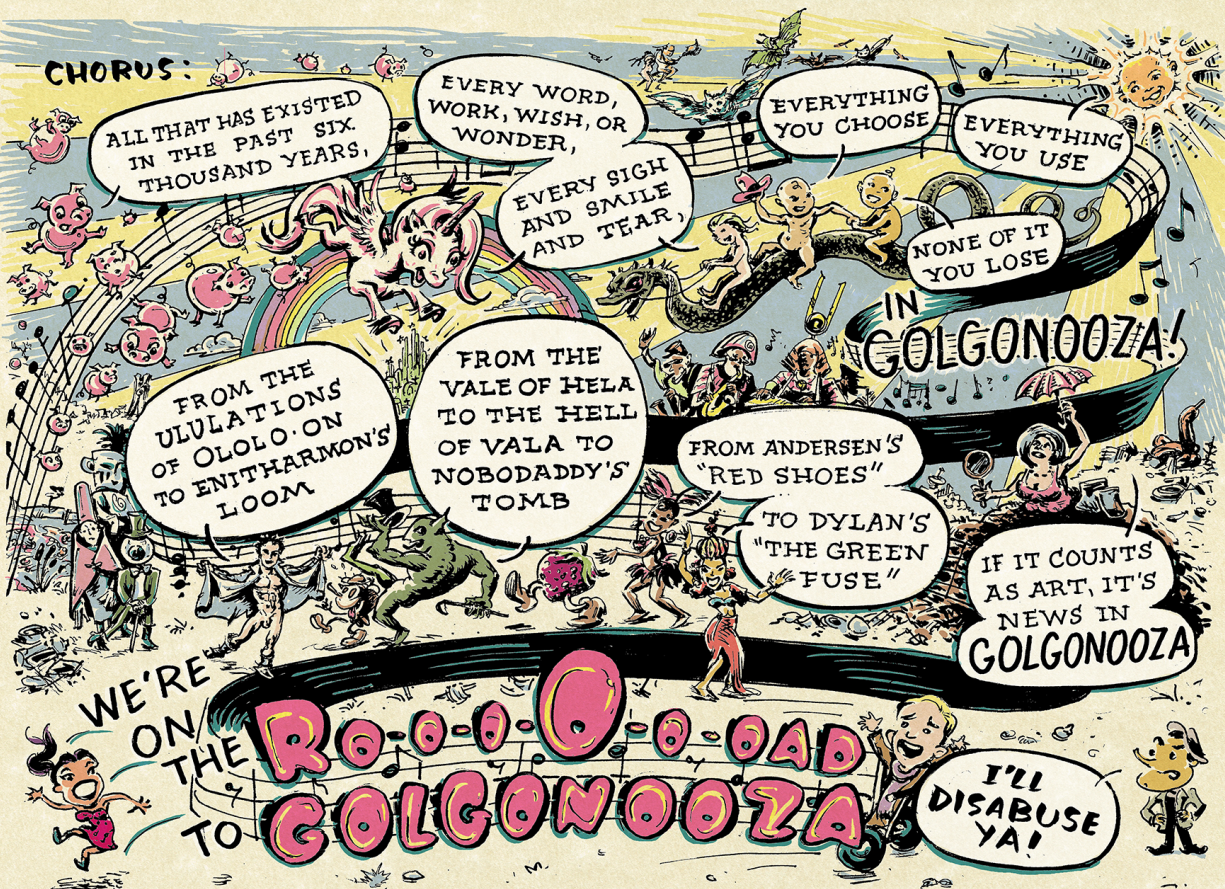
The other man was suddenly afraid. The sounds the accountant made were not those of a sad man. They were the cries of a scared one.

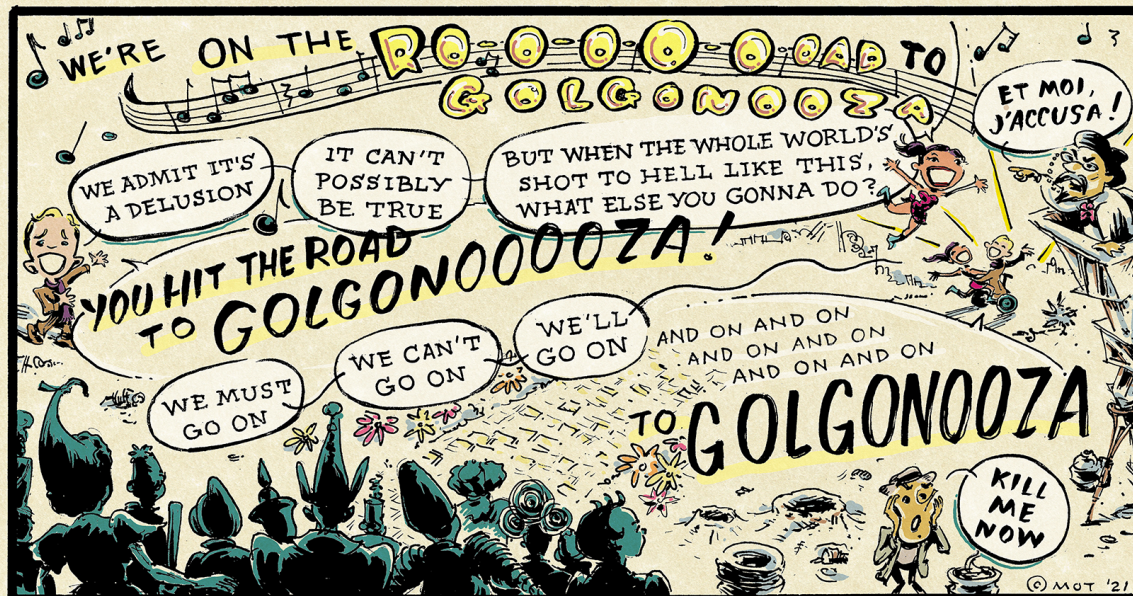
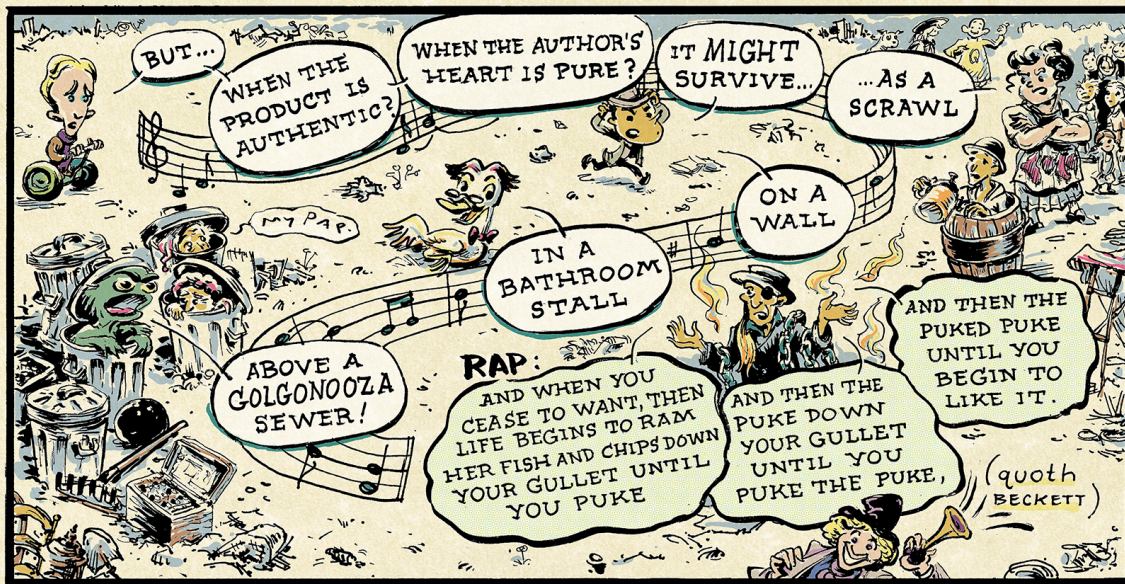
“Something’s wrong,” the other man said, looking up at the sky.
“Something’s very wrong.”

The Road to Golgonooza, chapter five. Our story: having recovered her sanity, the polymorphous goddess surveys her carnage.









Contributors :



page 1 top, Anime Wong produces the anthropomorphic adventures of *Uber Goober, the Power Peanut*.
yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com

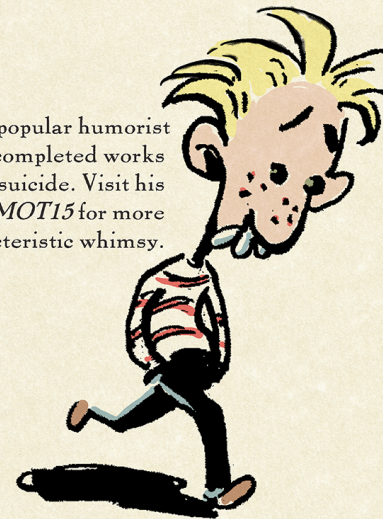


page 1 bottom, *Wiping My Butt*, the graphic memoir by Recipient, is available for preorder from Publishing.
cartooniologist.blogspot.com

pages 2 through 4 were popular humorist Claude M. Otis's last completed works before his untimely suicide. Visit his Instagram :@*CMOT15* for more of his characteristic whimsy.



T. Motley is the author of *The Road to Golgonooza*, a fake jam comic. tmotley.com



by Matthew Hooton

The Kid sits on his bike watching the Stuntman's ghost smoke.

Come on, Kid. Jump's not gonna get any smaller.

Kid lets go of the handlebars, scratches his nose. "It's not right. The board'll flip."

The ghost shakes his head, sighs, exhales another cloud.

They're perched at the top of a pile of dirt and rock in an abandoned lot a few blocks from home, a rectangle of plywood at the bottom propped into a ramp for the jump.

"The angle's wrong."

Broken fossils of piping and wire poke from the earth around the ramp.

Look, says the ghost, you've got a hill and a board. Back in my day that'd've been more than enough.

"Yeah, how'd that work out?"

Don't get smart. You gonna do this, or should we quit? Hell. I'm getting cold anyways.

The Kid doesn't laugh at the tired joke, knows the Stuntman's always cold, knows too that he broke damn near every bone in his body back in the day. Hundreds of breaks and fractures.

"I mean, how many bones are even in the human body?"

What? Hell, kid. This is gettin old. Helmet.

The Kid pulls the white helmet off a handlebar and fastens the strap under his chin, knocks on the moulded plastic shell twice with his knuckles and pushes off, the BMX quick down the steep drop, tires slipping on loose dirt and then he's on the ramp and the board buckles and flips forward, sends him heels over head like a rodeo man onto his back. He can't breathe and the sky goes from grey to fuzzy black.

He opens his eyes to Mrs. Choi standing over him, poking his leg with a broom.

"Ok. Good. Thought maybe you were dead. *Jugeunjul.*" She pokes him again for good measure and he flinches. "Thought maybe I'd have to tell your mother her one son died because he's so stupid I can't even believe my eyes. Even though sometimes my eyes see wrong. Still. So *babo.*"

The Kid sits up and groans. His back and ribs ache, but nothing's sharp. Mrs. Choi stands shaking her head. She's wearing her bright blue windbreaker and jogging pants tucked into gumboots. Has he ever seen her in a different outfit? Maybe not. Her brown hair is outracing its dye from the roots.

"Go slow, stupid. Sit for a minute. Maybe two. Meantime, you gonna introduce your friend?" The woman nods at the Stuntman's ghost sitting next to him in the dirt, the spectre's white jumpsuit soiled from the fall.

"You can see him?" A first. Maybe he's hit his head. Hearing things.

“Oh what? You think only stupid boys see dead people?”

“Uh. I’m not... My mom can’t see him, so I just—”

“Ok, ok. Enough sitting now. Come on.” Mrs. Choi beckons for him to follow her off the lot towards her bungalow.

He wheels his creaking bike across the street, pauses at the white flamingos guarding the manicured lawn out front. Mrs. Choi catches him staring at the plastic birds.

“Special discount cause of the colour. No problem, I think. White’s more beautiful anyhow. Not tacky like pink. Let’s go. *Bballiwa*.”

“Maybe I should head home, my mom’s—”

“*Eomeona!* You have a big problem maybe. First, I’ll help. Then you can go home.” She leads him around the house to the back patio, where she sits in an aluminum lawn chair and yanks off her gumboots. “You too.”

The Kid leans his bike against the all-weather siding and toe-to-heels off his Chucks, ignores Mrs. Choi’s clucking. The Stuntman is hanging back, oddly vague and transparent beneath clouds threatening rain.

“You coming?” asks the Kid, but the ghost doesn’t respond, lingers at the edge of the property.

“Sorry. No *yongson* allowed,” says Mrs. Choi, pointing to the twist of pine boughs and a small cotton bag hanging above the patio’s sliding glass doors. “Small magic. Maybe only Koreans know about it.”

The Kid follows her inside and sits at her kitchen table. Only two chairs. Nothing on the white walls. Everything clean and bright. The woman sets a plastic cup in front of him, fills it to the brim with pale green liquid from a clear container.

“*Nok cha*. Cold. It’s good for clearing the head. Drink.”

He tries it and scowls at the bitterness.

“Yeah, yeah. No sugar like Dr. Pepper. Some doctor. Makes your teeth rot. Drink!”

The kid downs the glass and Mrs. Choi smiles for the first time. She fetches a paper fan and stands next to him holding it over his head, mumbles a few words he doesn’t catch, then moves the open fan in circles around his ears and in front of his face.

“A *kut*. To cut the ghosts pulling you to sickness. Now breathe everything out.”

He exhales and the woman nods and sits in the other chair, folds the fan and balances it on the plastic tea container between them.

“Maybe you’re ok. Nothing serious. But you’ve still got a big problem.”

“I don’t feel—”

“Yeah, ok. I know. You’re a little slow, hey? Not a body problem. *Yongson*. A ghost problem.”

“The Stuntman?”

“Mm.”

“He’s not scary or anything. I mean, he’s kinda boring sometimes, but —”

“*Eomeona!* No. Not just a problem for you. You think a ghost wants to just hang around some stupid kid for no reason? He’s stuck for real.”

“Stuck?”

“Mm. You know this man’s story?”

“Yeah. Totally. Everybody does. He was only, like, the greatest stuntman of all time. He once jumped twelve buses on a Harley. I mean, he wiped out a lot too, but still.”

“Wiped out?”

“Yeah, like crashed. Like wicked bad into the hospital and stuff. He doesn’t talk about it, but I read he broke hundreds of bones jumping. Crazy, right?”

“Mmm. Broken bones aren’t good. They make the body restless after death. And *so* many. Maybe he needs a special *kut*. Some special help.”

“Help?”

“Yeah, you know, help getting to the Lotus Blossom Paradise.”

“I... I’m not sure he’d be super into that.”

“Ok, ok. Heaven for white people. A big happy city with trucks and loud yellow-haired girls. Dr. Pepper fountains. Ok?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t guess. Make sure. He’s lonely for real. We either help him, or maybe he’ll never leave. Just stay here sad and one day angry. How many broken bones?”

“Like, two-hundred and six, I think.”

She sucks air through her teeth, shakes her head. “He’s gonna need a big ceremony for real then.”

“How do you know about this stuff? Ghosts and everything?”

“Maybe all Koreans know about it.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, everyone thinks I’m from *Chunguk*, right? China?”

The Kid nods. “How come you live alone? Is your family in Korea?”

Mrs. Choi’s expression doesn’t change, but she hesitates. “We had a big war a long time ago. 1950. Maybe you know about it from school?”

“Yeah. My friend Davy’s grandpa fought there. Sometimes he tells us stories. Like, about Commies and machine guns. He gets really angry though and Davy’s mom makes us go outside. Is that how come you live alone? The war?”

“It’s why I know about ghosts. Too many to count in Korea. Can’t spit in my hometown without hitting a grave.”

Silence for a breath. “You really think he’s lonely?”

“Mm.”

“But we can help him?”

“Mm. But we need the right song and fan, and some dancing. Maybe bells. And a big action from you.”

“Action?”

“On your bike maybe. A jump. A big one. You have to show this ghost how to fly to white people heaven.”

“Cool. Yeah. Except you saw what happened last time.”

“So stupid.”

“At least I tried. A for effort, right?”

“Eh for? What?” She stands up and sighs. “No. You find a place for

the jump. Very high. I'll prepare a *kut*. Deal?"

The Kid rides three blocks home and finds the Stuntman waiting for him outside. The ghost flicks a smoke onto the lawn.

Hell was that all about? One weird lady, if you ask me.

"She says she's from Korea."

The Stuntman looks off into the distance, as if searching the horizon for aircraft.

"So, um, are you, like, lonely or whatever?"

Another cigarette. *What am I, some kinda Nancy? Lonely. That's rich.*

"Yeah. Cool. That's what I thought, but—"

I mean, ok, you know, I'm not exactly like you, right? I mean. You know. And it's cold as hell all the time.

"So...?"

So I'm just saying, Kid. There's that.

"Hon?" The Kid's mom leans out the kitchen window. "Is that Davy you're talking to? I haven't even thought about food."

After dinner the Kid rides over to Davy's two streets down and his friend lets him in.

"Wanna play Atari?" Even Davy's voice is skinny, and he never seems to notice the Stuntman. Not like the Kid can just ask.

"Sure. But I was kinda hoping to talk to your grandpa too."

A bird-boned shrug. "I guess. But only if you beat me at Pong. I've been practicing."

The Stuntman snorts and says he'll wait outside. *Colder in here anyways.*

In the basement rec-room the Kid destroys his friend without even trying, then gives him a few points to make it respectable. It's why no one else hangs out with Davy—he's just too frail, and it seems to bleed into everything he does.

"Thought I was on the comeback track there for a minute," says Davy. "Next time you're mine."

"We'll see."

They laugh and Davy flicks his pointed chin towards the stairs, up to the living room, where his grandpa sits staring out the bay windows.

"Just don't get him too worked up, ok?"

"Getting dark," says the old man to their reflections in the glass.

The Kid opts not to stand on ceremony, launches into questions about Korea and the war, and Davy's grandpa doesn't disappoint, tells them about marines bayoneted to death in sleeping bags with frozen zippers, MacArthur's amphibious landing at Incheon, the time he watched a white crane descend into a mine field.

"Poof! Feathers everywhere. Heh." He coughs. "Hear that boys? I brought that home with me. Frozen lungs. Cold as Siberia in winter. Stuffed comic book pages into our jackets to keep warm."

The Kid tells the old man about Mrs. Choi, says she came here because of the war.

"Yep. Lots did. Suffered horribly, the Koreans. You can't imagine. Whole damn country firebombed to rubble. Napalm. Chemicals in the water."

“But you got rid of the bad guys, right?” Davy sounds like he’s asking for another serving of ice cream, and the Kid grinds his teeth.

The old man goes quiet. Bluster gone AWOL. “Bad guys,” he mumbles to their reflections. “Yep. Lots of those.”

The Kid asks another question, but Davy’s grandpa’s done for the night and his friend drags him outside. “Mom’ll kill me if we get him all stirred up. She says his heart can’t take it.”

“Yeah. Ok. Cool. See you Monday at school?”

Davy waves from the front porch as the Kid races the Stuntman home beneath moth-speckled streetlights, his bike’s shadow tiny on the sodium-yellow asphalt.

Before they go in for the night, the Kid corners the ghost in the garage between his bike and his mom’s green Pacer. “When were you born?”

1932, little man. Why?

“So in 1950 you were ...”

Eighteen and strong as a Spartan.

“Right. But you never went to ... like, Korea, or whatever?”

Long time ago Kid. Whatcha diggin for? Ain’t you fast approaching bedtime?

Sunday afternoon in the community library, hefting books the size of bike tires from the history section and paging them like he can taste the words. The Stuntman makes faces at him through the window, chain-smokes, hunches his shoulders against a cold the Kid can’t feel.

The library’s nearly empty, and one of the staff offers help, so the

Kid tells her what he’s looking for, and she nods, pulls a lock of blond hair over her cheek and chews it. “Hang on a sec,” she says, disappearing into the stacks and returning with another tome. She skims the table of contents and finds it in one, leaves the Kid alone with the open page.

Something terrible under a railroad bridge near a village called Nogeun-ri. The Stuntman and the 7th Calvary. The ink on the page blurs.

The Kid leaves the library and rides partway home before stopping to confront the ghost.

“What’s Nogeun-ri?”

Aw hell. Nasty business that. Nasty. Long over. Best just leave it lie.

“What did you do? Did you hurt those people?”

You know, the past is called that for a reason. Come on, Kid. I was just drivin trucks. Think I wanted to be there?

The Kid pedals hard, skips past his own house and dumps his bike next to the rows of white flamingos, knocks on the glass.

Mrs. Choi shuffles across the kitchen and opens the door, clucks her tongue. “You’re all sweaty. Pale too—even more than usual. What’s the matter? See a ghost?” She laughs at her own joke, but pauses when she clocks the look on the Kid’s face. “*Ah*. Problem?”

“Uh. No. Just um—”

“Find a place for the jump?”

“Sure. Well, maybe. I was thinking the sandpit could work, right? It’s got levels dug out. Down the edge for speed. Huge airtime.”

“You can do it without crashing?”

The Kid shrugs.

“You know,” she squints at the Stuntman lurking at the edge of the property. “I sometimes feel like I know him. He’s famous, right?”

“Totally. But—”

“A big TV star?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Movies?”

“A couple, but, the thing is—”

“I used to dream about Hollywood. What? You think I was always this old? I was beautiful once. Teeth like abalone.”

“He was in Korea.”

“Hair like *miyeok*. Sea plant.”

“Sea plant?”

“You can eat it.”

“Seaweed?”

“Hair like seaweed.”

“He was at Nogeun-ri.”

The old woman cocks her head and blinks, as if pausing to check that she’s heard correctly, then slides shut the door and shuffles away.

Shouldn’t’a opened your trap to begin with, says the Stuntman on the way home.

The Kid pushes his bike, kicks rocks along the gutter. “How bad was it?”

The Stuntman drops a smoke and lights another. *You think you wanna know but you don’t.*

“Do too.”

I’m telling you. Leave it be.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?”

Like hell, Kid.

“Scared that if I figure out what really happened I’ll just pretend you don’t exist—”

We gunned em down. Refugees. Women. Kids. All of em. Couldn’t tell who was friendly and who was a Commie anymore, and the guy on the Browning panicked and opened up on the crowd. Once it started. ... All those bodies. I still count em. Happy now?

The Kid spends the week at school thinking on this, sleeping less than he should, ignoring homework, Davy, the ghost. His mom says the bags under his eyes make him look like a zombie and wonders aloud if he should see a doctor. He shrugs off her worry, says he’s just tired, that it’s no big deal.

Mrs. Choi was right about his ghost. Little things at first: Eddie Belfour’s rookie card out of its case and bent on his bedroom floor, lights snapping on in the middle of the night, flat bike tires. But then worms in his lunch apples, a snapped brake cable on his BMX, broken glass on the bathroom floor.

Friday afternoon at lunch he asks his teacher if he can use the projector to rewatch the Stuntman’s jumps, and Mr. James sighs, makes a point of saying *again*, before digging up the reel for him.

Alone in the dim classroom, blinds down, projector flicking through footage of the jump at Tokyo Stadium. The Stuntman on his Triumph, down the ramp slowly to the end, braking on the lip to look out over the baseball diamond and 35,000 fans. Striped white jumpsuit, white helmet. No cape. The Kid's hands sweat as the bike rips down the ramp a second time, airborne for a heartbeat, graceful even, before bouncing off the safety ramp on the landing, the man flipping over the bike and sliding on his head, somersaulting and tumbling as the camera zooms-in on the riderless bike, still upright, the front tire wobbling side to side in slow motion.

Broke his pelvis, a collar bone, his hip, a wrist, and both ankles that time. Left him in a coma for four days. So the ghost says.

A messy cut in the film, yellow and white light on the blank screen, lines flicking and wiggling like microbes beneath a scope. And then footage of the jump at the Tacoma Dome in Washington State, that custom-made Harley, steel, aluminum, and fiberglass—under three hundred pounds. Thirteen buses in a line, the Stuntman whipping around the stadium popping wheelies, 25,000 fans on their feet screaming. Another insane jump, the bike clearing the buses before the daredevil loses control on the landing again. A nauseous tumble and slide as the bike flips and comes apart, leaves the man on the pavement, a medic kneeling over him, that white jumpsuit prone. And then the man asking to be lifted up, standing, taking a microphone, his voice loud but halting, echoing throughout the stadium.

Well. This is it. Reckon I'm done.

The camera pans the audience, women holding hands to mouths, everyone unsure whether to clap or weep.

Thank you. Let me walk out. Ok. Let me walk.

The Kid sits in the dark, the film tail flapping, white light on the pull-down screen over the chalkboard. He flicks off the projector and lets up the screen, lifts the window blinds, the high grey light of noon filling the room.

Outside on the playground, the ghost sits on an empty swing watching kids running and laughing, surfing teeter-totters. A girl and a boy peg-leg past him, counting hopscotch. Another three build tiny tracks for cars in the sandbox, motor-mouthing engines and screeching tires.

The Kid makes up his mind for good when his mom blames him for breaking a piece of his grandma's China—a gravy boat, of all things—that they find crushed nearly to dust on the kitchen floor.

He calls Davy and tells him to meet him at the sand pit. "Doesn't matter why I'm doin it. I just need you there in case something goes wrong." He hangs up on his friend's chirping and pedals up the old Haul road to the site. The Stuntman follows at a distance, the figure's face impossible to make out. Ghost hasn't said a word in days.

The Kid wheels his bike to the edge of the pit, finds the embankment he sussed earlier. He and Davy came here with Davy's dad once to collect sand for a box in his friend's backyard. Years ago. When they were little and wanted to set up plastic army figures. The bottom of the pit is carved-up by machinery, but left empty on weekends, and from above it looks like a BMX track. The incline he's chosen drops maybe twenty-five feet like a ramp to another drop five or six feet off the bottom of the pit, the sand packed tight by rain and wind. The Kid tries to focus on the line he'll ride down. Sand'll be softer to land on than old boards and pipes at least. But still. He's pretty high. And maybe it's stupid anyhow without Mrs. Choi. Not much of a ritual if it's just him on a bike.

"Eomeona! You're babo for real."

The Kid jumps halfway out of his skin, catches himself before he slips down the track.

"How were you gonna make this work alone?" Mrs. Choi shakes her head. "I got everything for the *kut*. But we need to hurry, ok?" The old woman clutches her fan in one hand and a string of copper bells in the other. She's wrapped in a thick yellow dress of some kind he's

never seen before, no windbreaker, but her gumboots still poke out from beneath. She catches him looking. “Oh what? I should get sandy feet? Never get the house clean.”

“I thought you were, like, mad or whatever. Or upset.”

“Mm. For real. But then your mother came by the house when I was outside sweeping, asked if I’d seen you. Said you were planning to break your neck with some big stunt.”

Davy must have called back—*little chicken shit*.

“So I thought, ok. The stupid boy’s ready. And a deal’s a deal. And ok, so, maybe this ceremony’s not just for the ghost, you know?”

A squeal of tires on the Haul Road as the green Pacer swerves around a corner and parks at the edge of the pit below them. The Kid’s mom gets out and spots him, stops cold at the sight of Mrs. Choi, then starts shouting. Davy slinks out of the passenger side and waves.

The Kid’s frozen for a sec before he remembers the Stuntman waving to the crowd in Tacoma. And there’s his ghost now, leaning against his mom’s car smoking, shaking his head, maybe laughing, though it’s hard to tell from so high up. Mrs. Choi starts ringing her bells and chanting in Korean, eyes closed, swaying, slicing the air around them with her fan. And all at once the sand pit is filled with ghosts—men, women and children, hundreds maybe, he thinks, and then realises he knows the exact number.

The Kid waves back at Davy, raps knuckles on his helmet for luck,

only vaguely aware that his mother’s voice has risen in pitch. He leans back on the bike and pops a wheelie, pushes off and lets gravity do its thing, faster and faster down the track and airborne off the mound, his stomach up, a second of weightlessness, of height he didn’t expect, and then down, tires first, so hard he bites his tongue. But he holds on, lands it, the bike racing across sand, pulse loud in his ears. Hard on the bike’s back-pedal brake, fish-tailing, spraying dirt and sand and stopping a few yards from his mother and Davy, who stand open-mouthed, staring.

The Kid grins and spits blood.

Davy jumps up and down shouting, though his mom hasn’t moved yet. He looks to the Stuntman, finds the ghost grinning back at him, the man’s features smooth and young. The spectre nods to the Kid, straps on a helmet, raps it twice.

The Kid looks back at Mrs. Choi, still dancing at the edge of the drop, then back at the sandpit. No crowd of ghosts now. No Stuntman.

“For the love of Saint Peter, young man.” His mother’s voice in his ear. “Our neighbours *are* right. You are stupid.” But she wraps her arms around him and holds him close, her sweater soft, smelling of rosewater and Noxema.

Above them, the old woman’s voice wavers over the bells, a rhythmic chant that fills their ears, the sandpit, the whole damn world.

Roses

by Claire Smith

Disease made leaf-holes,
turned them ochre, odours
spread of sun-soured milk.

Planes, armed with a cure,
soared over manors, suburban
gardens, terraced courtyards.

Leaves emerged viridian,
stems broadened,
prickles sharpened.

Petals bloomed crimson
from burnt umber buds,
honey, and silken.

Ogres, our limbs stretched, stirred:
blossoms yawned, leaf-fingers
curled, thorns flew.

Our roots pulled
free from the ground;
we groped, plodded, strode.



Marked and Owned

by Novyl the Mysterious

Ice

by Jennifer Lee Rossman

I was born in a storm.

Rain crashing down on the windshield, gale force wind rocking the car on the edge of a highway while lightning strikes all around, lighting the scene like strobes. Thunder rolled over us, drowning out my first cries.

No, I was born from a storm; the thunder *was* my first cries.

* * *

I stood in a rain so heavy that the individual drops merged into a single beast pressing down on my body. My clothing clung to me, sticking and peeling with every heaving breath.

I don't remember how far I'd run, or for how long. I just know I couldn't go back.

I looked over my shoulder but the rain was static. Were they coming? Was that the sound of their dogs hidden by the lullaby of thunder?

Electricity arced between my fingers, the anger and desperation buzzing and begging for a release. Everything they had done, all the experiments, flashed before my eyes, and the sparks grew brighter.

My soul was too exhausted to fight it. With a scream that rumbled from deep in my chest, the rage burst.

Blinding, furious light staircased up to meet the clouds.

* * *

I was seven the first time I exploded.

A girl on the playground was teasing me, saying I was adopted and my streaked white hair made me look like a freak. She called me names and my hands tingled.

I hid them behind my back. Angry sparks were okay at home, but at school I had to hide my feelings, stuff them deep, deep down.

She said I was a baby for crying, but the tears were from the pain. The skin on my hands was burning.

The heat crept up my face. When she made fun of my clothes—heat resistant and handmade by my Ma—it was too much to handle.

I remember a flash, a pop as the air burst around me.

Then I was floating.

* * *

The storm clouds receded, leaving streaks of red sunset in their wake. The lake, my body, reflected it like a jewel.

My molecules spread out through the water, cold and dark but home. I was aware of every one of the billions of particles that made me, all the ripples and darting fish that swam through me.

That is how I wanted to be, always. My natural state, floating through the rain cycle and traveling the world. Spending time in a lazy pond, then up, up, up, back to the clouds before joining a river as it crashed over a waterfall. Bring life to a desert, then go up north

and freeze.

Ice. I would become ice, unchanging ice that couldn't explode.

But I could already feel it, the magnetic pull of my water. It always found itself, bonding together at the surface until my body reformed.

I floated though my bones felt heavy. When I drifted to shore, I hauled myself out. The evening was warm on my bare skin. With any luck, I'd traveled far enough and they wouldn't find me.

Water slicked off my humanity with disgust, abandoning me like everyone else.

I must be oil. Looks like water, runs through your fingers like water, but not water. No matter how much you mix, the water always rejects the oil.

* * *

The first time I exploded, I traveled the clouds as vapor and came to in a puddle in North Carolina.

No one believed my story.

Police, social workers. When did you last see your daughter? How did she end up across the country? Who would want to kidnap her?

Ma lied. I don't know what stories she told them, but they believed her. All except the bad men.

They found gaps in the story. The time I was last seen at the playground, the time I showed up thousands of miles away... No way to drive that fast, and flights to North Carolina had been rerouted due to storms.

They didn't make that connection yet. They only knew I was special.

* * *

I knew now, looking over my shoulder with every step, how scared Ma must have been. Always running, never settling down.

A girl who explodes can't have friends, or even go out in public. One rude person and—boom—I'm a river in Mexico.

The darkness hid me, but they'd find me soon enough. They always found me, no matter how far I ran or where my rain fell.

Ma stopped trying to find me first a long time ago.

I ran until the sun came up and my legs gave out. The dew on the grass held me as the helicopters thrummed in. I tried to become vapor, just burn off and fly away as morning humidity, but the anger at being captured again could only simmer as exhaustion took over.

* * *

The first time they caught me, I was ten.

They tracked the weather patterns, drained the pool I'd rained in. I woke in a dark room, my molecules separated into different tubs.

Pain, like nothing I'd felt. Exploding, with all its heat and energy and tearing apart of my atoms, didn't compare to an extended separation of my own body. I kept almost forming—an eyeball, a limb—only to have my surface tension fail and my body fall back into the water.

I tried evaporating, but they kept it so humid.

Time stood still, an eternity of that quivering moment waiting for a drop to fall from a leaf as they siphoned me and put me under microscopes.

They froze part of me once. That was the only time I felt peace, knowing I couldn't explode. But then I melted, and the hot anguish I couldn't release returned.

I thought the experiments would never end, and if they'd had their

way, I don't think they would have.

* * *

They wanted me to explode, to be water they could collect and study.
I was no use to them as a girl, so I stayed a girl through all their
psychological torture.

Your mother doesn't love you.

Deep breath in. One, two, three. And out, one, two three. Let it take
the heat away.

She left you. Abandoned you.

Feel the anger fizzle away, the electricity go back into your skin.
Like Ma taught me, because she wanted to protect me. Just like why
she left, because they could track her.

And that was love. Brutal love, like life-giving water that floods and
washes away the crops. Like lightning, beautiful and deadly in equal
parts.

The fury grew in me, my fires stoked by their words. I worried they
had her here, imprisoned like me, but she was too smart for that.

I let the anger build, but I didn't explode yet.

* * *

The first time I escaped them, I was cold water.

In the sweltering heat, the tanks they kept me in started to sweat. The

misty condensation built up, the heavy drops quivering in
anticipation before slicing down the glass.

I rode the drops, met myself in a puddle. They weren't expecting to
find a girl when they opened the door.

I ran.

* * *

I had never felt so hot. Boiling sweat left burn marks down my neck,
my fingers arced like loose wiring.

Their words melted away. They couldn't hurt me.

But I could hurt them.

* * *

The last time I exploded, you could see the blast from miles away.

The thunder was my war cry.

I left the rubble of their lab behind and sailed the atmosphere. I
became rain, a lake, a rushing river of rapids.

And then I was hail, pinging down on the frozen tundra. I melted just
enough for my molecules to find myself.

And then, finally and forever, I was ice.

Godly Business

by Tylor James

The body of God fell out of an azure sky on a humid June morning. One hundred and thirty acres of golden Nebraskan wheat contained just enough space for the body. God's head was as big as the nearby two-story farmhouse. A cotton-white beard, now matted with blood, led from the Almighty's chin to the front porch.

Eddie Rednick, fifty-eight-year-old businessman and professional penny-pincher, was jarred awake by the after-tremors. He ambled out of bed and onto the porch. His frown lines deepened. Like a royal carpet, the flowing white beard led him down the steps, around the house and into the field. He wiped sleep from his eyes with the back of his hands and looked again.

A giant occupied his acreage. A shimmery white tunic, now stained Moscato red, clung to the body. Rednick approached the head, around which an ankle-high pool of gore had collected. He could not see the face. It was smashed into the field. Crimson-splattered wheat stirred in the breeze. A tangy odor of copper wafted under Rednick's pockmarked nose. In one direction, long white arms snaked through the wheat. In the other, long, hairy legs and a thick torso claimed the land.

Rednick scratched his balding head and stood before the body of God, pondering what the hell he was looking at.

And what the hell to do about it.

* * *

There was something in the blood. A magical, life-giving property of some kind. Eddie discovered this by inadvertently slipping in the

blood-pool around God's enormous head. He'd landed hard on his shoulder, half of his face submerging into the pool. He'd lifted up his head, mouth full of blood. The initial revulsion fizzled away, replaced by a pleasant tingling upon his tongue and the roof of his mouth. The blood tasted sweetly delicious. Not salty as he'd expected.

Cupping his palms, he scooped the blood and drank with reverence, as if he were sipping the waters of the Rubicon. Power and vitality coursed through his veins. The decades-old ache in his back was gone. Eddie Rednick, a relatively old man, leapt to his feet. Blood dripped down his face and body. He licked his lips, eyes wide, dilated with inspiration.

He understood everything. He understood who the dead giant was. He understood the power of His Blood and Flesh. Most of all, he understood he was damned fortunate. A goldmine had landed on his property. *Now*, he thought, *good ol' Rednick is going to reap the riches! God, after all, is a rare commodity.*

Eddie spent all morning and afternoon cleaning old mason jars and filling them with Holy Blood. He made a run into town, buying out Alma's Antiques' stock of jars, then filled those too.

Around six that evening, he wiped sweat from his forehead and propped his feet upon the kitchen table. Hundreds of blood-filled mason jars occupied the counters and linoleum floor. He made a phone call to town councilman Simon Kohl, securing his selling booth for Jessup Township's Annual Farmer's Market.

Rednick celebrated with a jar he'd stuck in his refrigerator. Sipping

cold, refreshing blood, he smacked his stained lips in delight. Then his eyes enlarged and his mouth fell open. A small globe, coated with shimmering oceans and green continents, formed upon the palms of his hands. The planet rotated slowly. If he peered closely, he could see tiny people walking about, driving cars, flying airplanes, setting off bombs, fucking, and fighting each other at a furious clip.

Rednick closed his eyes. When he opened them, the planet was gone from his hands, its presence no more than a vague sensation in the back of his mind, like a hazy dream upon awakening.

He grinned. The blood contained more magical properties than he'd realized. Once people understood what it could do, it was only a matter of time before the money rolled in. He licked the blood from his lips.

* * *

Eddie Rednick's Special, Life-Giving Concentrate circled each tin lid in a black, inky scrawl. *The Blood of God* written at the center. On the back of each jar was a *Not FDA approved, but Holy Ordained!* sticker.

Operating out of the back of his Chevrolet pick-up, Eddie managed to sell two hundred and thirteen jars, each at the ultra-moderate price of \$15.99. Residents of Jessup, thinking the “blood of God” label a gimmick and the stuff was probably a juice of some kind, drank from the sample-sized serving cups . . . then grinned ecstatic, insisting they purchase a jar. Rednick happily obliged. By day's end, he'd earned enough cash to drive into the nearby city and buy himself a top-of-the-line storage freezer.

As a businessman, he recognized opportunity when he saw it. Blood alone would not be the only commodity he capitalized. *As ol' Pastor Dan says during Sunday Communion*, Rednick thought, watching two delivery men haul his recent purchase into his house, *drink of my Blood, and eat of my Flesh*.

* * *

A moonlit prairie night. God's carcass was pale as the underbelly of a fish. Bats fluttered across the stars. Crickets chirruped. The chainsaw's harsh roar soon drowned them out. Wearing a butcher's apron, Eddie positioned the saw over the Almighty's right side. The chain spun, ripping and tearing away flesh to reveal the rare, precious meat beneath.

"Dee-vine rib!" Eddie chuckled as the saw sputtered into silence. He hauled two buckets of bloody meat into the house to clean, package, and freeze. Yet he'd hardly made a dent in God's enormous body. He'd need some assistance slicing up the rest. An extra storage freezer, too. Dunking his hand into a bucket, he fished out a chunk of raw flesh and shoved it into his mouth.

He chewed vigorously, swallowed, then gasped at the beautiful colors suddenly gleaming upon his palms. The planet formed once again; a gorgeous world brimming with life. The Blood had made him aware of the planet's presence. But the Flesh now gave him the power to control the fate of every person, every creature, every aspect about the planet. Eddie didn't know how he knew this to be so, only that he did.

Centering his attention upon one of the oceans, Eddie willed into existence a tremendous tsunami. The cyclone of wind and water moved West, decimating dozens of cities upon one of the larger continents, murdering hundreds of thousands of people.

Eddie spent the rest of the night messing around with the planet. He felt like a child again, sitting atop his favorite anthill to scorch, stomp, and drown the ants. Cocking his ear close to the living sphere, he smiled so big his dentures threatened to pop out. Way down on what remained of the planet's land mass, he heard thousands of people . . . screaming.

"Now this," he told the empty room. "This is *money!*"

* * *

Eddie Rednick wasn't just a man anymore, but a brand.

Hiring ads in Jessup's bi-weekly newspaper were answered within a week. Ten young men, most of them fresh out of high school, came down to Eddie's for a job. Eddie obliged them, begrudgingly paying minimum wage. Nine dollars an hour was far too high in Eddie's estimate.

"But it's the law," the kids insisted.

"Damn unions," Eddie muttered, supervising his employees as they stripped God's flesh with an assortment of chainsaws, butcher's knives, and axes.

It was nearly July. Weather was hot. The body was beginning to smell. A rancid stench of decay cloyed to the humid air. Occasionally, one of the young workers would step away from the body, bend at the waist and puke. Eddie shaded his eyes from the sun, frowning as they worked at the body, grunting and cursing like a bunch of ungrateful slaves.

Over the next few days, buckets, wagons, and wheelbarrows of God's flesh were taken away, cleaned, packaged, and shipped to local supermarkets. As were thousands of jars of blood.

Eddie watched his slavish crew of Gen Z's closely. If he didn't, they'd slack off. The first day they were hired, several took pictures with their smartphones. Instagram selfies; posing with bloody knives in their hands, the giant body in the background.

But it was their second week now. Instagram was a thing of the past. They'd all had a complimentary taste of the Blood and Flesh. Which meant each had their own, precious planet. One they could manifest into their hands with a little will and imagination.

Jared or Jeremy --- whatever was the kid's name --- stopped work to do just that. Butcher's knife resting atop the back of God's knee, the blonde-haired boy laughed, spinning his planet five hundred times faster than its orbit speed. Eddie could hear the tiny screams from fifty yards away, where he stood in the shade.

"Hey YOU," Eddie shouted.

The kid looked up. Frowned.

"Yeah, you! Put that away. I ain't payin' ya to play God, son. I'm payin' ya to work."

The young man rolled his eyes, then closed them, willing the planet back into his imagination. He picked up his axe and got back to hacking.

"That's better, twerp," Eddie muttered, then went into the house to catch up on Fox News. Several anchors were singing his praises.

* * *

Bernard Rednick, Eddie's father, had been a businessman. All Eddie's life, Bernard had encouraged him to embrace the ultra-American values of entrepreneurship and unfettered capitalism. Bernard had made his life in the petroleum business. He was able to retire early. Yet the retirement was short-lived. Plagued by life-long obesity and diabetes, Bernard died of a heart attack. Aged forty-six.

Eddie had expected to inherit his father's millions. Alas, he did not. In Bernard's will, it was stipulated his son would embrace hard work and do it all on his own. Just as his father had.

Eddie attempted to operate several businesses throughout the years. Each failed miserably. A two-year degree in business management hadn't helped in the least. Money was never made, and if by some stroke of luck it was, it was lost just as quickly.

But now, he thought, now it's different. I'm finally getting my lucky break. I'm a successful businessman now, by God! A holy man too. God's Blood and Flesh are mine. And at modest prices, I'm sharing Him with the world.

Tears welled in his eyes. He only wished his old man could be here to see him now. He longed to hear his father's gruff voice telling him how proud he was. Something Eddie never got to hear.

Blinking away tears, he set his glass of blood upon the living room coffee table. He closed his eyes, willing the planet into his hands. He focused on the continent replicated after America, then centered in on Boston, Massachusetts, then 122nd Street where his childhood home had been. Peering into his father's bedroom window, he discovered Bernard sitting at the end of his bed, tying his red power tie.

Eddie whispered his father's name.

Bernard frowned, looked all about the bedroom. "Martha honey? That you?"

"No! It's me, Dad."

Bernard stood, loose tie hanging from his collar. "Edward?" He looked in the closet, then under the bed. "Where are you, kiddo? What the hell you doing in here?"

Eddie laughed boomingly. His father jumped, knocking over the bedside lamp. Eddie ceased laughing. He'd forgotten how large and, consequently, how loud he was.

"Sorry, Father. Didn't mean to startle you. Just wanted to let you know I'm running a business now. A very successful one at that. I'm not as successful as you yet, but soon enough, I will be."

"H-how are you doing this?" Bernard asked, back flat against the wall, sweaty hands pressing upon the floral-print wallpaper. "Where are you? Give up the joke."

"I'm above you, Father," Eddie replied in a whisper. "In heaven, I'd guess you'd say. You see, I'm selling the Flesh and Blood of God up here. I've made myself in his Divine Image. Better yet, I've made myself a businessman! Aren't you proud of me, Father?"

Sweat beaded Bernard's face. He shook his head, mumbled he was going crazy. Looney. Buggy. Hearing voices.

"Daddy?" Eddie's voice suddenly broke, choking back tears.

"Just . . . tell me you're proud of me. Won't you? You've never said it, you know. No matter how hard I've tried to please you, both as a child, and as a man. So, tell me. I need to hear it, Daddy. Please."

Eddie waited for a reply.

At last, Bernard scowled. "Whoever you are, you're not my son. You're a monster. A demon. Now get the hell out of my room! Get out of my head! I hate you! Hate, hate, hate!"

Bernard picked up the bedside lamp and threw it across the room. The bulb shattered upon the wall. The shade cracked. Eddie's heart palpitated. Tears dripped from his eyes, fell into the planet's atmosphere, and struck the roof of Bernard's house. In that instant, Bernard was crushed beneath fallen timber. Nails. Chimney bricks.

Eddie's tears dripped from his chin in a literal flood. They splashed down, drowning Boston and obliterating the remains of his father's house. Then Eddie willed the planet back into his head. Even with all his power, will and control, he could not change his old man's heart.

Eddie snatched a bottle of Jack Daniels from the mini bar across the room, drinking until unconscious.

* * *

ONE YEAR LATER

Behind the three-story Rednick Mansion, Eddie led a guided tour of a hundred people around his field. First, he showed them God's enormous, hollowed out skull. Parents snapped pictures of their young children hunkered within the eye sockets. Horseflies buzzed thick around the carcass. Few seemed to mind.

Eddie guided them from the cranium to the neck vertebrae, down to the shoulders, arms, hands, torso, legs, feet. Bringing them back 'round to the skull, the tour was complete. The children clamored for a second tour. Their parents informed them it was too expensive, encouraging them to play with their planets instead.

People marveled over the remains, much like they did over the fossils of extinct dinosaurs at the Museum of Natural History. Eddie laughed at their foolishness and pocketed the cash. What was a pile of bones to him?

Money, of course. Nothing more.

He was a businessman, and blood and flesh alone would not satiate his holy, entrepreneurial spirit. Eddie figured the word God was merely a euphemism for Capital. He fumbled with the golden crucifix around his neck, trying his best not to pick his nose with it in front of the crowd.

No more Blood. No more Flesh. But there were bones.

Bones and endless money.

God's skeleton, one might aptly say, was Eddie Rednick's church.

And by the Will of the Almighty Dollar, the congregations flocked.

Eddie was happy to evangelize. All the better without the Bible. Hundred-dollar bills were scripture enough. After all, *In God We Trust* was printed on each and every one of them.

With God's shimmer, blood stained tunic sold to a European theological museum for billions of dollars, and His cotton-white beard snipped and sold by the baggie, there seemed to be no end to this holy profitable exploitation.

Yessir, Eddie Rednick smiled, from now on, life is going to be nothing but sweet, sweet money.

* * *

FIVE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER

The years had been anything but sweet. When Eddie Rednick turned seventy, yet still appeared fifty-seven in the mirror, he'd been

elated. The Blood and Flesh of God had preserved his soul for eternity. He was immortal. No death for Rednick. Nor for the millions who'd consumed even a parcel of God's bounty. What could be better?

Alas. Immortality was not all it was cracked up to be. Eddie sat upon the scorched Earth, over five hundred years old, yet still fifty-seven. Black clouds of smoke covered the sky. The sun rarely peeked through them. For the last seventy years, he'd not seen another living soul . . . except those tiny man-ants upon his planet, of course. They hardly counted.

He spent his time creating people, animals, cities, beautiful utopias. Then destroying them. He did it for the same reason children used to construct elaborate sandcastles, then destroy them. Because it was entertaining. At the very least, it was something to do.

World War Four had destroyed the world completely. Everything was charcoal. Ash. Noxious smoke. Scattered remains. Worse yet, there was nothing to do. Eddie ached for death. His soul was parched. He now knew with dreadful certainty why God had fallen out of the sky that warm June morning in the first place. For God had grown bored and loathsome with His own immortality. He'd therefore killed Himself in the only way feasible for an immortal being—sacrifice himself to the world He had created.

The nuclear bombs had not affected the immortals—the men, women and children who'd long ago consumed the Flesh and Blood. The radiation had not mutilated their flesh, ravaged their internal organs, nor suffocated them like all the others—the mortals. The fortunates.

The only way out was to will the planets out of their minds and into their hands, then will themselves into *that* world. They'd fall through a smoke-free blue sky before crashing to their death into the land or the sea.

Eddie held back from doing this. He didn't know why. Despite his hatred of immortality, perhaps he was too cowardly a man, too significant an ego, to embrace death.

Yet as the blackness swarmed upon the Earth, as green, radioactive winds flurried from place to place in hot, violent airstreams, Eddie found himself willing his mind and body into the tranquil blue-green planet, the miniature Earth within his hands. He squeezed his eyes shut, focusing, until . . . cool, soothing wind rippled his tattered clothes.

He managed to open his eyes against the pressure, squinting at the beautiful planet beneath. Eddie smiled. It was not as scary as he'd thought it'd be. The roar of the wind sounded in his ears. The green continent below grew very close, then . . .

* * *

Tremors ran through the city. Buildings, houses, and streets became rubble. Upon the splintered asphalt, toppled electric poles, and decimated structures lay the body of a giant.

Police, firefighters, and citizens surrounded it. Blood flowed out of

the body, pouring ankle-deep through the streets, flooding the gutters, drowning the people still trapped beneath the rubble.

Covered with debris and gore, the people exchanged flabbergasted expressions. They approached the body of Eddie Rednick, of God. In one unanimous moment of realization, everyone smiled.

After endless generations of bloodshed, of worldwide floods, fires, volcanic eruptions, cataclysmic earthquakes, and the ancient, perpetual voice of a deranged Man in the Sky bombarding their ears about money, money, money . . . They understood, at long last, they were free.

Free of the Thing Called Eddie Rednick, Businessman.

Free of the Great Terror in the Sky.

Free!



My Son Is Nothing but a Pez Dispenser by Elby Rogers

Death Everlasting

by Nyamweya Maxwell

Oh, he has their attention now.

The congregation is leaning forward as one, eyes are clear and every single person in the room is looking at Joseph, Joseph “Joe” Mwongera; the former death addict.

The gathered people are challenging him with their eyes, exciting him with their expectation, and like the orator he has over the years become, he rises to exceed their wildest dreams.

“What else didn’t they tell you?” he demands of them, “What else have they been keeping from you? This world is full of lies. Everyone is out to keep you under their thumb because they want you to believe that we, as a society will benefit from it. What they do not tell us, is that it only them who benefit. They lie so that they can keep us under their control, they lie to us so that they can harvest our hard work, harvest our sweat and our tears.”

Someone in the congregation shouts “Amen!” and the rest nod in accord.

“Do you want to know what they don’t want you to know? Do you know what they pretend not to know?” He pauses for effect. “Death, is not the enemy.

“From the very moment of our birth, we are trained to fear death, we are taught to avoid it and we are taught to believe that death is not absolute. All the religions I’ve found in my travels teach of a life beyond death. The great Asian religions teach of reincarnation, assuring their followers that they will be reborn after they die. The

Abrahamic religions teach of a great judgment that will come at the end of time, a judgment that will see people raised from the dead to have their lives evaluated. The Christians say that the resurrection of Jesus is evidence that death is not absolute.

“But none of this is true. It is all just the fear of death manifesting itself in the stories and traditions that we cling to. The very same stories and traditions that we pass to our children, ensuring that they grow up to fear death and to worship ideas that promise that they can escape death.

“But death really is absolute. It is the only thing in our lives that we can be sure of, the only thing that we know we cannot avoid. Animals die, plants die, stars die, and some day even the universe itself will die.

“Death is the only god there is. Death is the only god we can quantify, the only god we can touch and feel, death is the only god we truly fear.

“Religions didn’t begin because this or that other god came down from the heavens to give men and women instructions on how to live their lives. They didn’t begin when some mad prophet proclaimed some divine truth. Religions only truly begun with the fear of death.

“It doesn’t matter where you look. All religions have death at their centre, whether it is the death of a prominent prophet or the promise of life after death, death is at the core of every theology.

“Religion only exists to rationalise the unknown and death is the greatest unknown, but they don’t want you to know that. They want

you to believe that you live a good life now because you will be judged once you are dead, they want you to believe that you live a good life now because it will determine the life you will be born into once you are dead, but it is all just a lie. Nothing comes after you are dead. Death is the end. The promise of a life after death cheapens the pain and suffering we go through in this life. It takes the meaning out of the choices we make in this life because we believe that there will be a chance to live again no matter what we do, no matter our circumstances and no matter the condition of the world.

“But if men and women like you and me populate the life that will come after, then pain and suffering are inevitable because pain and suffering are a consequence of the choices people like you and me make. People will always choose to exploit other people. People will always look to manipulate the systems of the world so that they get ahead at the expense of others.

“There is no land of milk and honey awaiting us after death, no equalization of fates. Poor men will not be born equal to the rich, nor the weak born equal to the strong. We only believe this because we do not take death seriously, and it has cost us our society.

“When it comes down to it, there’s only two kinds of people in this world; those that know that this is the only life they will live and those that believe that they will get better lives after they die. The first group exploits the second. The first group pretends at religion and morals while stepping on the backs of the second group to gain wealth and prestige. And that’s all religion is; a means of controlling the population, a means of controlling you so that you remain calm and pliable while the elites of the world exploit you.

“That’s why you are here, isn’t it? To know where you stand so that you can break free of the chains society has imposed upon you.”

Joe is moving amongst them now. He is touching the shoulders of the people in his congregation and looking into their eyes. He sees doubt, he sees uncertainty, but every single one of them paid to be here. They will see this through to the end. He just has to make sure

that when they leave, they will spread the word and swell their numbers. What he tells them only has to be convincing, it only has to stand a cursory examination; it does not need to be foolproof. He only has to get them believing, and if there’s anything Joe has learned, is that no one ever bothers to investigate their beliefs.

“I was like you once, worshiping in church every weekend, desperate to be saved from a death I believed I could escape. It came for me sooner than I had hoped it would. I left my house one day headed for work and the cab I took got involved in an accident. The people that pulled me out of the wreckage emptied my pockets and stole my phone while I lay there bleeding, and before the paramedics could get to me, I died.

“When they revived me, they told me that I had been dead for a few minutes, but in those minutes, my life changed.

“They say that you see a light at the end of a tunnel. They say that you hear the voices of loved ones or the voice of God calling you into the light. They say that you feel acceptance and love as you move into the light. But it is so, so much more than that.

“You don’t just feel accepted, you feel free. All the burdens of life, all the hunger, all the pain, all the greed and all the desire, they fall away and your mind becomes clear, clearer than it can ever be while you are alive. In that clarity your whole life becomes a single instant behind you and you can turn back and see it all.

“On that day, I was ashamed of what I saw. It mortified me to think that this was what I was leaving behind. I could see that there was more to life, that what we live is a tiny fragment of what is possible and we let it all go to waste.

“We must embrace death. We must face it and accept it rather than running from it, only then can we see what we can become. Only then can we embrace our true destinies.”

He must explain how he does it now. He must tell them that he will

kill them all and bring them back.

He lies.

He says that the process is not painful, says that it's like sinking into a vat of ice water. The truth, of course, is far more terrifying. He keeps it from them because he knows that none of them would ever return if they knew, none of them would bring their friends, none of them would grow his congregation.

Even with his toned-down version of what they will endure, they still look terrified. They avert their eyes and murmur with uncertainty. Will they proceed? Of course they do. The price of admission was high, and besides, what they have heard about the transformational power of Joe's procedure has them intrigued. So none of them refuse as they are led into the other room, the Miracle room, where they will be undergoing the experience, where their lives will be changed.

There are beds here, all arranged in rows and columns like in a hospital ward. There are two doctors and ten nurses waiting for the converts. They welcome them and guide them to the various beds. They settle the converts into the beds, take off their shoes, lay their heads on the white pillows and cover them with white sheets. Were the converts not so terrified, or excited, perhaps they would see how stiffly the nurses move, how awkward the doctors are around the medical equipment, perhaps they would realise that the medical staff is all just pantomime.

Only one of the doctors is real, and not a single one of the nurses has medical training. All this is just a show, rehearsed to assure the converts that they are in good hands. One of the nurses slips up. She forgets her lines and instead of keeping talking like they practiced, she freezes and Joe sees her eyes flash towards him. She is terrified of what will happen to her once all this is done, but her "patient" doesn't seem to notice. He eases into position and she goes with the flow.

Joe walks among the beds. The doctors are moving drip bags and machines with gauges, syringes, buttons and dials into position. The

nurses are sticking needles into arms, but all the people in the beds are watching him. He is the focus of their attention, just like he wants to be.

"This is your revelation," he tells them all, "this is your awakening. Your baptism, will not be a baptism of water or fire, it will be a baptism of death. When you wake up, you will wake up to new life, not figuratively, but literally. Your sins are your responsibility and I cannot wash them away. Only you can make retribution for what you have done. The only death of significance is yours. You do not get to pin your sins on someone else's death.

"What I can do for you show you your actions in the context of your life, and your life in the context of the universe. It will feel insignificant, but that is the point. You will feel small, but that is the point. Do not let the sensation consume you. Face it, embrace it, and be born anew."

All it takes is the push of a button. The machines on the sides of the beds are repurposed lethal injection machines. Electric actuators push syringes and a custom mixed cardioplegic flows through tubes and into the converts' blood. It causes a sensation like icy pain when it first reaches the circulatory system. Joe sees everyone shudder and grit their teeth. This pain only lasts a moment, but worse is yet to come.

When their hearts stop and the oxygen supply to their organs get cut off, their bodies will fight hard to stay alive. The signal they send to the brain that something is wrong once got described to Joe as a scream of desperation. What it feels like, is actually more like being burned from the inside out. It is an agony worse than immolation, worse than excruciation. Lucky for Joe, it coincides with a hypoxia that cripples the brain's memory function so that no one who undergoes this temporary death actually remembers the torment. But while it lasts, they all writhe and they all scream.

Timing is important. The faux nurses keep a wary eye on their patients. As soon as one stops writing, they rush to him or her and start the revival process. Oftentimes, this is as simple as a few

seconds of CPR. Defibrillators are attached to the lethal injection machines, but these are just for show. They don't actually work. Once the heart starts beating, the needles in the converts' hands are switched with those leading to the drip bags and their recovery begins.

The drip bag contains a custom blend of stimulants. Joe cannot afford to let any one of the converts close their eyes. Chances that they will fall asleep and never wake up are very high in these first few minutes after their revival. This is also the period during which the convert will remember and appreciate his experience. What causes it isn't fully understood. The general consensus is that it has something to do with the brain's neurochemical response to trauma, but Joe cannot control this. So he has laced the cardioplegic with some PCP and a smidge of ketamine, and the stimulants in the drip bags with some LSD.

One by one, Joe welcomes the converts back to life. He repeats a version of the line "Welcome to your new life" to every single one of them as they doctors and nurses check their heart rates and adjust their drips. Their eyes are unfocused, minds still revelling in their near death experiences or wallowing in LSD induced hallucinations. Every single one of them looks exactly how Joe expects them to; stunned, and overwhelmed. They have touched death, and have returned. They have partaken of the great panacea, cure to all problems and end to all existence, and no one, no one comes out of such an experience unchanged.

Joe knows this. Joe has experienced this. He has been to the brink and back more times than anyone would believe. The cocktail he uses to revive his followers was one of his very first inventions. He tested it on himself over and over again in the months following the accident. He wanted desperately to feel the incredible, unfathomable rush of his first death, but it wasn't until he was broke and begging on the streets that he realised that he had become an addict.

When he started selling death, peddling it to anyone daring enough, his motivation had been survival. But he had soon realised that people would pay anything for an experience that added meaning to

their lives. Inspired to exploit this desire, he had become a preacher, and had founded a church. He had been shut down more than once, the authorities calling what he had started a cult and threatening him and his followers with prison. But greed can inspire unstoppable genius, couple that with the possibility of wealth and you can turn anyone into a psychopath.

Joe makes his way down the room. He sees the spaced out faces, sees the revelation in their eyes and he struggles to keep a straight face. *Could it really be this easy? Could people really be this gullible?* He cannot help but be optimistic. It does occur to him that he is taking advantage of desperate people, manipulating them with a very dangerous tool, but the voice of greed is louder than the caution in his mind, and he knows that he will not stop what he is doing. Then he gets to the end of the room, turns, and freezes. Something is wrong.

In his absorption, he had missed the commotion that was breaking out behind him. Converts are sitting up in their beds, nurses beside them looking panicked and terrified. One of the doctors, the real one, pushes past the nurse blocking his way and runs towards the other end of the room where the fake doctor is performing chest compressions in a very inexperienced and embarrassing attempt at CPR.

The convert on the bed is not moving. He looks limp, his head lolling to the side as the real doctor takes over the CPR. Joe rushes over, nurses crowding around him as he reaches the bed. The convert lying there looks old, but that's probably because of his grey hair. His face is that of a younger man, one closer to that of the forty something years he had indicated in his admission documents, though from Joe's experience, people tend to look younger while they sleep, or die. This face looks wrong now, however. Joe had never imagined a dark-skinned man could look pale, but there is definitely no blood flowing through that face at the moment.

What the hell happened?

The doctor looks up at Joe, defeat written all over his face. They

have had this discussion before. The doctor has warned Joe that something like this can happen, but Joe's argument has always been simple and persuasive; "It has never happened before, we just have to be careful and we don't have to worry about it happening." Seems he had been wrong.

The doctor orders a nurse to continue the chest compressions. He rushes into another room and returns with a working defibrillator tucked under his armpit, and a drip bag and small red bag held in each hand.

"He still has a pulse," the doctor explains, "we just need to get his heart rate up to normal."

He places the contact pads on the convert's chest, connects the defibrillator to the wall socket. He charges it up and shocks the convert. He takes a few seconds to get the convert's pulse, then curses. He shocks the convert again, takes his pulse and shakes his head. From the red bag, he pulls out what Joe recognises as a sternal intraosseous infusion device. He presses it to the convert's chest and connects it to the drip bag he has now hung from the pole that held the blend of stimulants. He continues with the chest compressions, but it is becoming clear that it isn't going well.

The converts are whispering behind Joe. He turns to find that they are grouped at one end of the room, eyes still glazed and hands still shaky, but there is terror in their faces. They are working themselves up to leave, convincing themselves that Joe was a fraud all along. If they leave now, they will spread doubt and undermine Joe's outreach efforts. He cannot have that. He has to keep them here.

"Everything is alright," he assures the converts, his face a mask of practised calm, "a delayed re-entry to life only means that the subject has a very long past to work through. His journey will soon be complete and he will re-join us." Then walking quickly to the doctor, who's still struggling to revive the convert, he whispers, "Do not let him die."

"I have nothing to work with here," the doctor hisses back, "we need

an EKG, an automated defibrillator, a bag valve mask. We have to get this man to hospital."

Joe motions for the other doctor, the false one, to take over the CPR and pulls the real doctor out of the room, the chapel.

"We've had this discussion before," Joe whispers once they are in the empty chapel.

"And my recommendations stand," the doctor whispers back, "we have always needed equipment, this situation is the perfect example of why. I don't have what I need to resuscitate the man. We need to get him to hospital."

"That is out of the question, we cannot afford that."

"You have plenty of money," the doctor snarls, "it's your ego, your...your organisation that cannot afford this."

"If he dies, we go out of business," Joe reminds him, "if we take him to hospital, we go out of business."

"What are you talking about?! If he dies, we go to jail. We should save him while we still have the chance. It may already be too late."

"We cannot have him in hospital. If he talks and the authorities get wind of it, we'll be shut down."

"You cannot be thinking about that right now."

"Calm down, calm down. You can figure this out. This has never happened before. Why would it be happening now?"

"The man may have had a heart condition."

"Wouldn't he have indicated that in his admission forms?"

"People lie about these things. He probably knew he would be let in if he told the truth."

“Okay, okay. So what can you do with what you have to keep him alive?”

“Get the man to-”

The door swings open and the fake doctor sticks his head into the chapel. “We have a problem,” he tells them and they rush back into the room.

The two doctors go fussing about the convert, arguing over his pulse and checking his breath. The real doctor tries the CPR again, pressing on the convert’s chest and breathing into him, but he soon abandons the effort and throws up his hands. “It’s too late,” he says, “he’s gone.”

Joe, however, is focused on a much more serious problem. The other converts are gone. They left while he was in the other room with the real doctor. He rushes to the door, pulls it open and runs into the parking lot. There are cars flowing in streets beyond the boundary wall, there are crickets chirping in the flower bushes around the building, and there is doom looming in the unassuming night.

“Why’d you let them go?” he shouts at the doctors and the nurses back in the Miracle room, all of whom are still arguing over the dead body of the convert. They can’t seem to agree who is to blame and are all pointing at themselves and shaking their heads, proclaiming at each other how flawless their work always is.

“Why’d you let them go?” he shouts again.

“We’ve got bigger problems here,” the doctor says, “we have a dead body that we are going to have to explain to the police.”

“And how do you think the police are going to find out about it?” Joe screams into the room, “The people you allowed to leave are going to tell them, you IDIOTS!”

“Is that all you are thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about survival, I’m thinking about controlling this situation. What are you thinking about?”

“A man just died,” the doctor said, “and it’s our fault.”

“You’re not thinking,” Joe shouts, “This is only our fault if they find evidence proving that it’s our fault. If everyone was still here, we could have convinced them not to talk. We could be in control of this situation. But you idiots allowed them to leave.”

“There is no way out of this!” the doctor shouts back, “Get that into that stubborn head of yours!”

Joe pauses. His eyes pass over each and every one of them. He is waiting for them to realise that they have no choice but to do as he desires, waiting for them to remember that he is in charge. He is waiting for them to accept the same conclusion he reached the very moment he saw the fake doctor struggling to revive the convert, and gradually, they all do. Joe can tell by the look of resignation that comes upon their eyes.

“But there is a way,” he finally says, and this time the only objection he receives are slumped shoulders and shaken heads. The real doctor turns away, hands on his head, and one of the nurses drops onto the floor, the strings of resolve that were holding her up suddenly cut.

* * *

This is Joe’s plan.

There isn’t much time before the police show up. In what little time there is, they have to get rid of the body. They could just carry the body in the trunk of a car, but it is likely that they will run into a road block at this time of night. It will be much easier to get past an inspection at one of these if they have smaller body parts that can be hidden in the nooks and the cabbies of the various vehicles they will be using. The convert, therefore, has to be chopped up.

A fight breaks out over who is to perform this gruesome task. Joe

recuses himself, of course. No one challenges him on this. They might end up on the chopping block themselves if they do. They will just have to decide amongst themselves who will wield the blade.

Joe cannot understand their hesitancy. If the man is already dead, then they are all to blame in the eyes of the law. No one will be exempt because they were squeamish at the end. Joe estimates that they have an hour before the police show up. Counting from the time the converts left, it comes down to forty minutes. Forty minutes to dismember the corpse, clean the house and dispose of the disparate pieces. It isn't much time, they need to get started.

The doctors and the nurses carry the body out of the miracle room and up the stairs. They are taking it into the bathroom, where a bathtub waits to collect all the gore they are about to engender.

Joe remains behind. He wanders around the miracle room, picking up this and that other piece of abandoned possessions the converts left behind in their rush to get away. There is a wallet, empty, and a watch, expensive. He finds ear rings and bangles, another watch and yet another wallet. He gathers them all into a plastic bag, checking as he goes to make sure that he has missed nothing. At the bed that held the dead convert, something catches his eye and he pauses.

He picks the drip bag the doctor cast aside and examines it. Something is missing. He carries it to a nearby bed and holds it up to a bag still hanging from its pole. He sees it, and curses. He drops the plastic bag and rushes up the stairs. He is screaming as he goes. "He is still alive! He is still alive!" But he is too late. Of course he is too late. The convert is gurgling from a cut in his neck. The doctor is sitting by the tub looking completely crushed, and everyone else is standing around the room, as far as they can get from the calamity that is playing out before their eyes.

"Fuck!" Joe curses. "He was still alive."

The doctor just shakes his bowed head.

"He was still alive," Joe says, "how could you not see that?"

"There was no pulse," the doctor mumbles, "there was no pulse for nearly ten minutes."

"You quack! How did you miss that?!" he lifts the drip bag and holds it up for the doctor to see. "How did you miss this?!" The doctor glances at the bag but does not say a word. He looks away, eyes unfocused and distant.

Joe goes around the room, shaking the bag in everyone's face. "Who did this?" he screams as he goes. "Who switched the bags?"

One of the nurses motions timidly with a half raised hand. "There were more people than we expected," she mumbles. "We took extra bags."

"You couldn't read?" he screams. "I didn't mix this. This bag is full of ketamine. You put the man in a cataleptic state. How could none of you see that?" He stalks about the room, fuming and trembling. He mumbles something about being surrounded by incompetents over and over again, then finally stops, looks around and says, "What are you waiting for, get on with it."

Slowly, unwillingly, everyone inches back towards the bathtub.

* * *

It is messy. People have died at Joe's hands, many people, but he has never had to do this before. The limbs and head were manageable, falling right off and fitting into the designated bags as expected, but the torso would simply not comply. Joe never imagined that the organs, the lungs and livers and the intestines, would be so unwieldy. Just how many of the things are there?

It takes forever to wrap it all up. Joe has an hour and a half by his watch, and he is livid. Any minute now, he is sure, the police will show up. They have to get moving. They have to get all the body parts into the various cars and get going, but Jesus, have they caused a mess. There is blood on the floor, blood on the walls, and the tub is clogged and bubbling with congealing gore. It would take hours, if

not days, to clean this up. They will have to leave the nurses scrubbing the bathroom down. He can only hope that they will quick about it.

The various body parts are rolled into newspapers and dropped into garbage bags, one bag for each part, which Joe distributes amongst nine people. Each of them stands a bag in a corner of the boot of their own cars and Joe gives them directions. Two will go to Ngong' forest, one accessing it through Jamuhuri, and the other accessing it through the Southern Bypass. Two will dump their cargo at two different points in the Nairobi River. Two will drive down past Kibiko, into the sparsely populated regions of Saikeri, and dispose of their cargo down two separate ravines. The remaining three, including Joe, will drive towards Mai Mahiu and dump their cargo along the road that winds down the escarpment.

They are turning to enter their vehicles when the real doctor freezes and shushes everyone. They all stand still, looking at him questioningly, then to their horror, they all become aware of sirens wailing in the distance.

* * *

It is a scramble to get out of the compound. Joe is expecting the police to show up just as they are passing the gate, to capture them and put a sudden and calamitous end to the night, but no such thing happens. Joe is confident that it is over and done with. As long the nurses they left behind finish cleaning up before the police arrive, there will be nothing to tie them to the now vanished convert. Whatever claims the converts presented to the police will be indemonstrable, and therefore irrelevant. All he and his fellow driver have to do now is dispose of the body.

As he turns onto Mombasa Road, he leans back into his chair and relaxes. He reaches for his radio but cannot tune it to any station. He switches it off, turns it on again. Still nothing. Well, you can't always expect resurrection to work. He switches to the stored content, but cannot find any music, it's all just old sermons. He used to listen to these while he drove from door to door, looking for new converts.

One starts playing automatically.

"Sooner or later," he hears himself say, "we all have to face death. When that moment finally comes, it will not matter how much money you have, will not matter what you accumulated or what your legacy was. Death is the final judgment."

Joe doesn't want to listen to this. He turns the radio off, turns it on again. There is a hiss in the speakers now that wasn't there before. He turns the volume all the way down, but the hiss persists. Then a different sermon starts up.

"There have been billions upon billions of people on this earth. Billions upon billions who lived and died and left nothing of significance behind. Like with all of them, your life will come and will go and it will leave nothing by which you will be remembered. You will be a statistic on the back pages of history, just another person to have contributed to the population graphs."

He switches the radio off again, leans away from it. He hits a bump in the road and it starts crackling again, hissing and whispering and whistling with the half-heard voices of out-of-tune stations.

"Your life only has significance to the extent that you will die. This may not make sense to you, but that is only because you're focused on living, focused on avoiding death at all cost. But it is only when you are dead that you will truly be missed, it is only when you are dead that people will stop and look back at your life and find meaning in your having been here. Your death will have no significance to you. You cannot appreciate it once you are gone. It will only be meaningful to the people we leave behind. If you were a terrible person, then your life shall be a cautionary tale; if you were a good person, then your life shall be an example."

He reaches down to switch the radio off again, but just as his finger touches the knob, something flashes in his eye. He looks up into the rearview mirror and is so shocked at what he sees that he loses control of the car for a moment. As he swerves back onto his lane amidst angry hoots from the traffic around him, he looks up into the

mirror again. There's red and blue lights on the horizon. Those are definitely the police. They cannot be after him, can they?

He speeds up, his speedometer creeping past 140 km/h. The road is rough, however, and after a jarring bump over a pothole, he decides to slow down. It might not be him they are pursuing, and driving as if he is being trailed might only draw attention to him. He eases down on the accelerator pedal, and with an eye on the mirrors, he coasts the vehicle down Waiyaki Way.

When the phone rings, the sound is sudden and jarring. He is turning onto the Road to Mai Mahiu, so the phone rings for a bit while he focuses on the traffic on the junction. The phone stops ringing before he can pick it up, and with the distraction of the mirrors still prominent in his mind, he soon forgets about it.

He is driving through Ngubi Forest when it rings again. He picks it up, turns it to speakers and the real doctor's voice comes through.

"It's over Joe," he says, "I called the police."

"What are you talking about? Why would you do that?"

"We can't keep doing this. You are lying to all these people. You aren't selling them enlightenment, you are selling drugs and putting them in enormous danger while doing it."

"You're having a change of heart now? You'll just go the prison with the rest of us."

"I've made my peace with that. I should have gone to prison a long time ago. I was just able to afford a good lawyer."

"I paid for that lawyer, remember?"

"I should not have taken that deal. I should have known that this was where it would take me."

"And I should have known that you would continue killing your

patients even after I kept you in business."

"There was no business involved in this," the doctor says, "the only one to ever profit was you."

"What are you talking about?" Joe asks. "Didn't I keep you fed, didn't I keep a roof over your head?"

"You kept slaves," the doctor shouts. "We stayed because we were afraid of the repercussions. No one believed in your insane doctrines, even you didn't believe. It was all just about the money."

"So that's what this is all about. You wanted more money."

"No! This is about reparation. This is about repentance."

"Don't spout that Christian nonsense at me. You can't repent to a god you do not believe in. Besides, what you have done is unforgiveable."

"That's because of you! You did this to us—," the phone crackles and hisses, "Can't live with myself—"

The doctor's voice vanishes in an outburst of crackles. Joe hears the roar of an accelerating vehicle, then lights flash in his rearview mirror just before he is jolted in his seat and his car swerves out of control. He fights the steering wheel, trying, and then failing to keep the car on the road. Rubber squeals on the tarmac, then the car spins onto gravel, and comes to a sudden and jarring stop in the embrace of a thicket of thorny bushes.

Joe tries the door, but a net of branches holds it fast. He climbs to the passenger side and exits the car through the far door. Back on the road, a car he recognises coasts to a stop. Its bonnet is crumpled up and one headlamp is smashed and blind. The doctor emerges from it.

"What are you doing?" Joe shouts. "If you lost your faith then just leave."

“You never gave me a choice!” the doctor shouts as he approaches. “I did what you told me to do.”

“I showed you death,” Joe shouts back. “I showed you the truth.”

“You showed me nothing! I’m a doctor, remember. I know what NDE’s are. Besides, you only did to me what you believed would put me under your control. You did this to me, Joe!”

“Stop calling me that. That’s not my name! Never has been!”

The doctor swings at Joe. Joe ducks and tries to step out of the doctor’s reach but he runs into his car. Joe strikes at the doctor’s face but the doctor, who had stepped after Joe, is too close and it is his forearm that connects with the doctor’s ear. The doctor stumbles, then launches himself at Joe, and in an instant, they are rolling on the ground, throwing ineffectual punches and each trying to pull free of the other’s hold.

Joe manages to pin the doctor beneath him. He pushes himself up and with one hand pressing the doctor’s head into the gravel, he aims for the eye and punches him again and again and again, while he shouts, “You owe me!”

Blue and red lights interrupt this intimate moment. The police are still some ways off, but Joe knows that he only has minutes. He scrambles to his feet and, through the open passenger door, he pulls the glove compartment open and rummages through its contents. He can’t find it! But he is sure it is here. He never goes anywhere without it. Ah! There! His hand closes about a sachet and he stumbles back from the car, still certain of his victory.

The doctor is still on the ground when Joe kneels beside him. He has covered his face with his hands and is weeping softly. Joe pulls a syringe from the sachet, exposes the needle and raises it high above his head. Then he slams it down into the doctor’s chest and injects the cardioplegic right into his heart. As the doctor gasps in surprise, Joe whispers, “Welcome to your new life.”

The police are almost upon him. The sirens are loud and the flashing blue and red on each car casts dancing shadows around Joe. They reach the scene of the car crash as Joe struggles with his boot. He has tried the key already, but the metal is all bent up and refuses to open. He finally manages to pry a corner of the lid open and from the darkness inside, he pulls out a round package that contains the dead convert’s head. Ignoring the shouts to “Freeze!” and “Get on the ground!” he turns and runs into the forest. Gunshots escort his retreat, but he makes it into the shelter of the shrub unscathed.

He doesn’t get far. The vegetation is dense here, with branches that grab onto his clothes growing low to the ground and trees grouped so closely together there is barely an inch of space between them. He pushes through, branches tearing his clothes and skin. Where is he going? He doesn’t know, but he cannot stop. He must not stop. Thoughts gather in his mind. They are clearer now that they have been in a long time. He thinks of arguments he made in the past. It occurs to him that he is trying to convince himself that he was right all along. But he isn’t fooled, this is not guilt.

“The very simple truth is, we do not choose to live. We are born without a choice and then we get convinced that our continued lives are our choice. But they are not. Life has a hold on us the moment we are born and every struggle, every disappointment that we go through is merely because we have no choice but to live. We struggle to make a name for ourselves, fight for recognition amongst so many voices. But it does not matter. Everybody is doing the same, and there are so many of us that your single voice, your desperate cry for significance cannot be heard. Life can only be meaningless, and yet we are so afraid to die.”

There are voices close behind him. People hacking at the thicket and shouting, “He went this way!”

“In death we will all be nameless. What identity we had in life is merely a possession that we take upon ourselves and try to make our own. But it does not belong to us. It belongs to the people around us, the people we will leave behind when we die. It is our responsibility

therefore to use it wisely, to make it so that when we are gone we will be remembered for the right reasons. What we get wrong, what we always get wrong, is the weight we put on our identity. If it doesn't belong to us, why should we be so loath to give it up?"

He comes upon a ravine. The ground falls away, seemingly bottomless in the darkness. Should he risk the plunge? No. He can go no further. With a swing, he sets the head sailing into the night. He then pulls a second syringe from the sachet and jams the needle into his own chest.

Death comes swiftly. His heart stops the very moment the cardioplegic hits his blood, and he feels the familiar pain begin to gather beneath his skin. It spreads inwards, a fire that targets his nerves, forcing him to move so that he may get the blood flowing again. He thrashes on the ground, screams and gasps, then darkness, blacker than the night, takes him.

The light gathers before him. It brings with it feelings of acceptance, feelings of forgiveness and he reaches after them, eager to fall into their embrace. For the first time since his first death, he actually wants to die. Not because he is afraid of what is certain to befall him while he lives, but because of the promise of absolution, the promise made to him all those years ago following his first death. Could he

have done all the terrible things he had in the years since if he had not known that it would not matter once he was gone? Could he have had the courage to do all he had done?

It doesn't matter now. Nothing does.

It's over.

"Death is the only god there is. Give, now, your lives in sacrifice."

The light suddenly fades away. Something jolts him and he feels blood flow through veins.

No! he thinks, *It can't* – but another jolt interrupts the thought. He becomes aware of hands on his chest. They press down again and again, then he feels air forced through his mouth and into his lungs.

Joe fights to hang on to death. Despite his determination, he feels his body stir, he heart begins to beat, then he takes a breath, and he knows that it's over.

His eyes open. Beams from a car's headlights burn into his brain. In their glare, he sees a shadow lean over him. "Life has you," he hears it whisper in his own voice. "Welcome to your new life."

Dream Pillow 1

by Lorraine Schein

Her dream pillow was inducing too many dreams. Some of them were lucid enough to escape and got caught by the dream catcher over her bed, which scooped them up and netted them back into the pillow like basketballs through a hoop, where their scents mingled with its lavender, mugwort, and hops.

Several of them gave off the powerful stench of nightmares, burning flesh and sulphur; others had the mild, pleasant lemony laundry-like odor of everyday dreams. The lucid ones smelled like the smoke of lit molten glass; the sexual ones of musk, sweat, and smegma. But the precognitive dreams were the worst. They smelled of decayed, screaming black hole roses.

She ripped her pillow open and all her trapped dreams spilled out, in a profusion of smell, image, and noise. She opened the window wider to let them out and air the room.

One of them got caught in her hair though and became reality.

One in Nature

model Rebecca Tirwa
(from Bhutan)

by Carl Scharwath



The Everglades

by Lizz Shepherd

When the rain began hitting the top of the swamp, Mabel knew the rain must be thick. She came out of the dense, dark water and walked slowly to the water's edge. Algae clung to both of her legs as she stood and looked toward the nearest human settlement. She made a loud clicking sound with her mouth, and a second figure rose from the water.

Reggie was stooped as he strode out of the swamp, looking up when he stood at its edge. "Perfect night," he said.

"It is," Mabel said. She could smell the algae in her hair and feel it along her hands and arms. She flicked her wrists to remove it, not wanting her hands to be slippery should they slide when she grasped a human neck. Reggie watched her and did the same.

They both walked slowly toward a tiny light no human could have seen. The dim light was made even dimmer by the thick rain that had penetrated the canopy of trees and awoken everyone who called the Everglades home.

Getting closer to the bar at the edge of the settlement, Mabel held up a finger toward Reggie. She stood still, listening; her head was cocked, long, wet hair hanging limply and full of plant life. She was hiding behind a tree at the edge of a clearing that held the run-down bar.

"I can hear them," she said in a whisper. "We'll wait."

Reggie nodded.

They stood still for a long while, hearing the rain pick up as a storm

blew in. Mabel relaxed her tense stance.

"All is well. They won't be able to see or hear us from here," she said, slumping a little, never taking her eyes off the door.

"I love these rainstorms. I love that you taught me this. I never would have thought to go out in storms. I used to avoid them, actually," Reggie said.

She nodded. "That's a human holdover. It just takes time to let go of all that. It's perfect cover, these sounds."

They watched and waited, barely talking. A human male opened the door, and they instantly stood ready to pounce. He threw some liquid from a bucket out into the rain and went back inside. Reggie winced.

"I can't stand this. It's been days. Weeks, maybe. I'm getting weak. This is the first great night we've had. One of them had better come out," he said.

"They will, they will. We'll have our pick, don't worry. Have I ever been wrong in all these years?"

Reggie shook his head. Mabel kept watching the door. As the storm picked up, lightning started its lights and sounds in the distance. Mabel perked up, trying to see over the bar and into the settlement.

"Lightning, lots of it! I love this. With all of that noise and flashing, they won't know what's going on around them. We'll eat tonight, don't worry. It's coming closer, too. Humans will want to go to their homes in this storm. When we see the right one, I'll signal, and we'll

get it before it gets to its car.”

“Pick a big one,” he said, licking his lips. A few minutes passed, and the storm came ever closer. The thunder was startling to their sensitive hearing, and Reggie began covering his ears after seeing each flash. Two scrawny men had left during that time, but they were together and quite bony. The door opened again.

A single, large human male had thrown the door open and walked directly out into the storm. He didn’t even look up as the lightning flashed. Mabel looked at Reggie and nodded. She turned back to the human and crouched down, putting her finger upright. When the male was almost to the parking lot, she threw her hand down and began running toward him.

Reggie got in a crouch behind her, staying low as he ran. They were halfway to him now, getting closer and closer. A bright flash seemed all around them at once, and Reggie paused as he threw his hands over his ears. A scream came from him as he seemed to throw off sparks for a moment and hit the ground. Mabel turned and ran back to him, getting down beside Reggie and letting the human reach his car.

“Reggie! Reggie! What happened? What’s going on?”

He was silent. She looked him over and found a large burn that went from his left shoulder down to the middle of his torso. He began to gasp, taking in air and making shrieking sounds.

She picked him up over her shoulders and held him there firmly with both hands and ran back into the trees. She took him back to the area around the water they’d been living in lately and laid him beside the water’s edge. He was still taking in air.

“You have to stop taking in air, Reggie. You have to stop. Just relax. You’ll be fine,” she said again and again. She looked into the water. If he was taking in air, she couldn’t take him down into the depths. And neither of them had fed.

“Relax Reggie, we need to feed. Get a little stronger and we’ll go

feed. The storm is still going on. We can still feed.”

He nodded weakly. When the sun began to rise, he was still taking in air, and she was out of time. She covered him in a thick layer of moss and walked into the dark water alone.

The next night, no rain woke her, but her eyes opened quickly as soon as she remembered Reggie in the pile of moss on the surface. She rose from the water, shaking her wrists and looking for the pile. It had been parted.

She dug through it with her hands, trying to find him or any remnant of him. There was nothing. She began to walk toward the settlement, looking for the dim light of the rusty bar. Before she had reached the edge of the trees, she heard a clicking sound. Spinning toward the sound, she saw Reggie standing next to a tree.

“Reggie! Where have you been? Did you feed already? I just woke.”

He shook his head, his head down.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, trying to see his facial expression.

“Everything. Everything’s wrong.”

“Are you still taking in air?”

He nodded, raising his head.

“What’s wrong with your face? It’s kind of, I don’t know, red. It looks glowing. Did you bathe? Were you trying to catch someone?”

He shook his head again. “Things are much worse than taking in air. I’m breathing. Really breathing. But that’s not all,” he said, and lifted up his thick, torn shirt that had burns across the center.

She looked through the darkness, trying to make out what he was showing her. She moved closer, but still saw nothing. His face had not changed. She reached out a hand and placed it on his chest and

pulled it back quickly.

“Oh dear God, this isn’t possible,” she said.

“I know.”

“This isn’t possible!”

“I know. I don’t understand it either. I heard it beating this morning, and I’ve been up all day. I’ve been up walking around, in the sunlight. I even went in the bar and drank some water.”

“This can’t happen! Are you sure? Maybe a frog got stuck in your stomach. That’s probably it.”

“No, it’s happened. I have a pulse and everything. You want to feel it?” he said, holding out his wrist to her.

“No,” she said, recoiling, her face twisted. She was silent for a minute. He waited.

“You know you can’t stay with me,” Mabel said.

“I know. I’m sorry, Mabel. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I’ll do or where I’ll go. I don’t ...”

“Stop it,” she said, holding her hand up. “I can’t help you, I have to feed. I’m even weaker than I was last night,” she said, noticing how free from algae her hands were. Reggie nodded.

“Come and say goodbye,” she said, and put her arms out toward him.

He came toward her slowly, his eyes moist and red. She embraced him, slipping her arms around his body and holding him tightly. Her left hand strayed to his neck, and she moved her teeth there before he could react. She drained him quickly, allowing for a full meal without any protest from the human. When he was drained she picked him up and carried him to a far-off part of the swamp. As his body sank below the water, she sat on the bank and watched it slip under the surface. She’d need a new companion. She could find one at the bar.

The Queen of the Fucking Butterflies, Drunk and Expounding on Existence to Her Subjects

by Anton Cancre

We want to start
with the chrysalis,
when we give
the grand tour of
our remaking. Wrapped
tight in the still, cool
darkness while flesh
dissolves into genetic
slurry, then reforms,
solidifies into a new
construct. The struggle
to break free, to unfurl
wings that will find
their bright, flamboyant
patterns in fragile dust,
is the stuff of legends.
It's a good place
to begin, when
every narrative ends
in emergence
as the queen
of the fucking butterflies.

What we don't like
to talk about is the time
before that. Inching
along on our stomachs,
a soft, undulating tube
of protein just waiting
to fill something's belly.
We aren't fond
of bringing up the fear
still nestled quietly
in our DNA. The knowledge
that each shadow we see
passing overhead, each
shifting leaf or swaying
branch carries sharpened
beaks set to tear and swallow
and every breeze

by Jesper Nordqvist

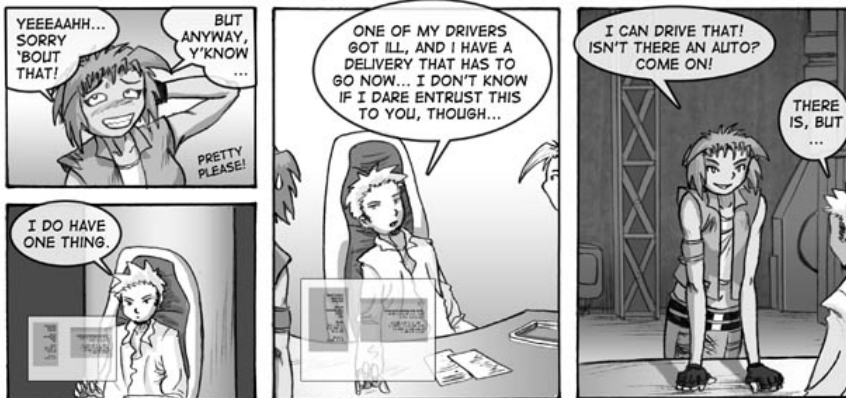
NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

"Poseidon" is another anachronism I've borrowed from another universe to build on... In the world of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Appleseed*, Japan is no longer a real country, but a corporate conglomerate nation, and Poseidon is an artificial Technological Research island in the ocean. Gehenna figured that if Kirika comes from Poseidon (and not the Japanese main island), her parents are probably scientists or doctors.





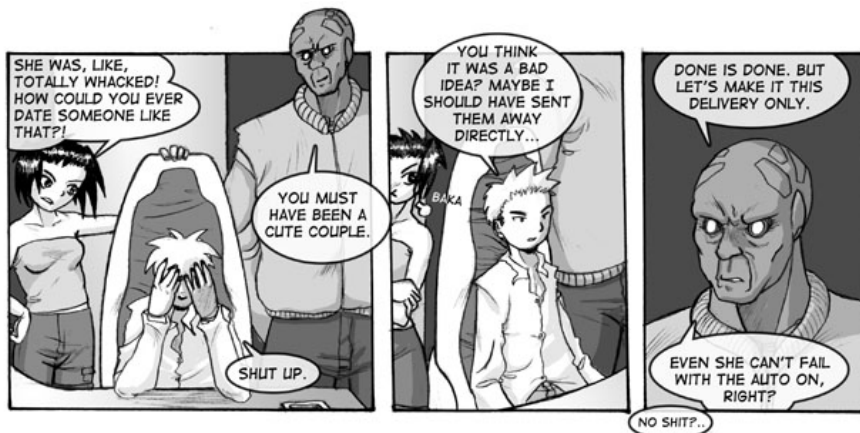
BY "AUTO" SHE MEANS AUTOPILOT, NOT AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION...



NOTES

It is probably wise not to trust Jemma fully...





NOTES

In the last frame, Jemma thinks: "Is he really that thick? Or is he just trying to be polite? Or ironic?"

Obviously, Jemma and Adrian's relationship wasn't based much on trust...

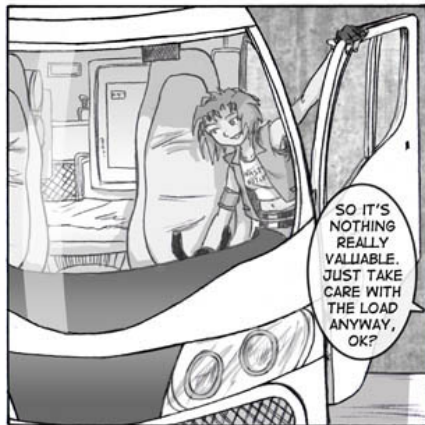
On the next page, they will get into the truck. Hooray! Progress! ^o^



NOTES

(None for this page)





MONDO MECO PAGE 41 20040118 © JESPER NORDQVIST
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

Yes, I believe things will actually talk in the future... But Jemma has to say the password herself, of course, as it uses a voice recognition system.



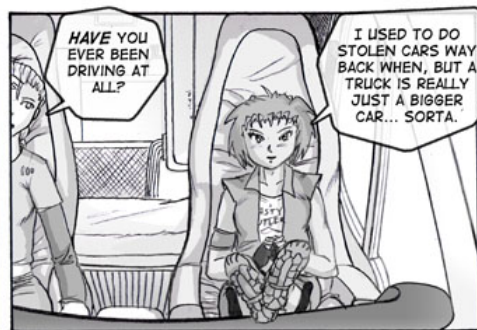
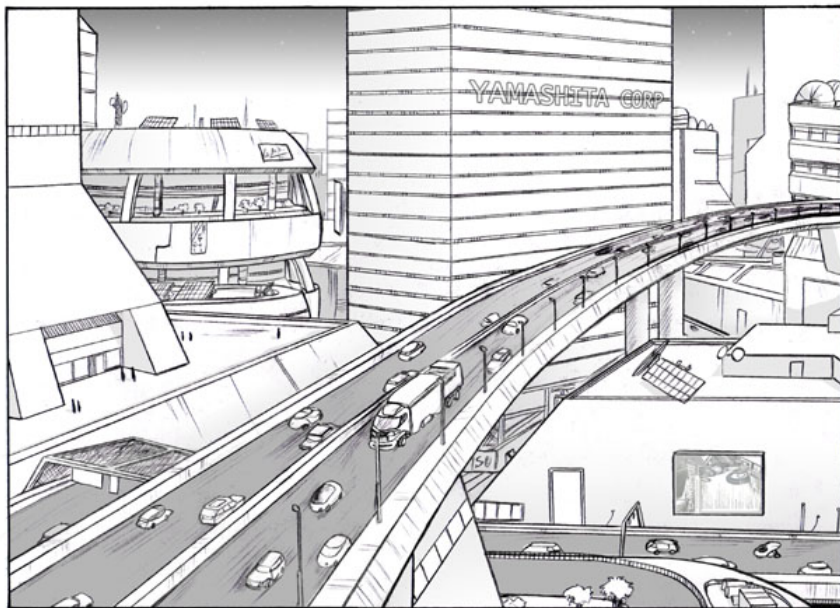


NOTES

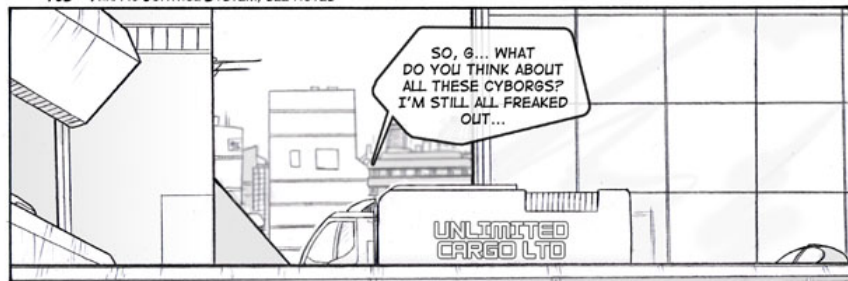
That truck makes a lot of noise when it starts, but then it runs very quietly with its electrical fuel cell engine.

Never mind the anatomy on the other borg... it's not meant to look human at all... >_>





TCS = TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM, SEE NOTES



NOTES

The TCS is a navigation system built in in all vehicles qualified for urban driving. It includes a Speed Regulation System based on the distance to all surrounding vehicles, Active Breaking Systems, Satellite Navigation and Camera and Infrared rearview mirrors. So, if you activate the TCS, you don't really have to drive at all... On highways like this, you are forced by law to use the TCS. On smaller streets downlevel, you can drive yourself. The city consists of many levels, and this is one of the upper levels, several hundred meters over the ground...





MONDO MECO PAGE 44 20040127 © JESPER NORDQVIST
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

There are no wars on Mars...





NOTES

(No notes for this page)



Contributor's Bios



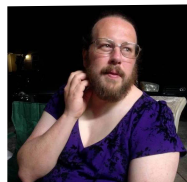
PETER ALTERMAN has published science fiction, literary fiction, popular fiction and literary criticism. Recent fiction publications include “The Faber House” in *The Bombay Review*, “They’re Playing Our Song” and “Perfect Time for Morning Coffee” in *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. Other fiction publications include: “Binding Energy” in *New Dimensions Science Fiction* 9 (a 1974 Nebula first round nominee), “Scenicruiser and the Silver Lady” in *Twilight Zone Magazine*, “The General’s Picnic” in *Gallery*, “Transcendental Functions” in *Green Mountains Review*, and “Detroit Iron” in *Antietam Review*.

* * *



NATHAN BATCHELOR's work appears in the cyberpunk horror anthology *Crash Code* and in the debut issue of *Speculative North Magazine*. He has sold more than half a dozen stories to small presses and anthologies. He is an MFA candidate at Ashland University. You can find him on twitter: @NateBatchelor.

* * *



ANTON CANCRE's mother wasn't really pregnant with them when she went to see *The Exorcist*, but they tell people that anyways because it sounds cool. Their debut collection of poetry, *Meaningless Cycles in a Vicious Glass Prison: Songs of Death and Love*, is available through Dragon's Roost Press. They're also a luddite who still has a blogspot website (antoncancr.blogspot.com) and runs the Spec Griot Garage podcast (specgriotgarage.podbean.com) where they get to gush over other people's poems with cool folks.



* * *

JAY CASELBERG is an author and poet whose work has appeared around the world and been translated into several languages. From time to time, it gets shortlisted for awards. He can be found at www.caselberg.net.

* * *



MARTINS DEEP (he/him) is a Nigerian poet, artist, & and currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His works deeply explore the African experience of the boy/girl child. His creative works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *FIYAH*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Barren Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *Surburban Review*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *FERAL*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, *Whaleroad Review*, *Kalahari Review*, & elsewhere. He loves jazz, adores Bethel Music and fantasizes reincarnating as an owl. He tweets @martinsdeep1

* * *



MATTHEW HOOTON is the author of the novels *Deloume Road* (Jonathan Cape, Knopf) and *Typhoon Kingdom* (UWAP), and has written fiction and non-fiction for a number of venues internationally. He is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, where his research and writing range topically from Korean history through Jim Henson's Muppets and the stunts of Evel Knievel.

* * *



TYLOR JAMES lives in the American Midwest. He's a proud member of the Horror Writers Association and has stories published in such magazines such as *WEIRDSMITH: Volume One*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Hypnos Magazine*

and several horror anthology books. One of his best stories, "A Skeleton Reads Shakespeare," has been adapted into a chilling dramatic narration by The Other Stories Podcast.

Most importantly, his second book of short stories, *MATTERS MOST MACABRE*, will be available in paperback/kindle May 2021.

* * *



NYAMWEYA MAXWELL is an engineer living and working in Nairobi. His writing is guided by dreams and daydreams, so he does sleep more than he willing to admit, and is zoned out for most of his working day. When morning finally comes, he will wake up and remember that he needs to go to work. But the night is still young, and the nightmare still fresh in his mind. So he'll keep working on his stories.

* * *

More of **T. MOTLEY's** comics are at tmotley.com

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

* * *

NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username [@lyv0n](https://twitter.com/lyv0n).



ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *



JENNIFER LEE ROSSMAN (she/they) is a person who exploded and became water droplets currently swirling around Binghamton, New York, in a gay tornado made of sharks. Sometimes she accidentally writes metaphors she doesn't understand. Follow her on Twitter [@JenLRossman](https://twitter.com/JenLRossman) and find more of her ownvoices queer, autistic, and disabled fiction on her blog <http://jenniferleerossman.blogspot.com>

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

* * *



LORRAINE SCHEIN is a New York writer. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *Full Bleed*, *Enchanted Conversation*, and *Little Blue Marble*, in the anthology *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath*, and forthcoming in *Hybrid Fiction*. *The Futurist's Mistress*, her poetry book, is available from Mayapple Press: www.mayapplepress.com

* * *

LIZZ SHEPHERD is a freelance writer living in Alabama.

* * *



CLAIRE SMITH writes about other worlds. Her poems have most recently appeared in *Alchemy Spoon*, *Corvid Queen*, *Illumen* and *Spectral Realms*. She is studying for a PhD at the University of Gloucestershire. She lives in Cheltenham with her husband and their very spoilt Tonkinese cat.

(*Self-Portrait*, 2018 – Oil on Canvas – created as part of Art Shape's professional development programme Art Bridge Evolve)

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, Elgin Award runner-up *Astropoetry*, and *A Collection of Dreamscapes*. Her poetry, fiction, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, as well as received honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's first novelette, "Fury," was published in 2020's *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women* and her next book of poems, *The Gravity of Existence*, is forthcoming in 2022.

* * *



Lover of wine, women and song, **TOEKEN**'s had work published in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Unfading Daydream*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*, *Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mysterion*, *Lovecraftiana Magazine*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *SQ Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *The Future Fire*, *The Drabblecast*,

Helios Quarterly, *Kaleidotrope*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *RobotDinosaurs*, *Ares Magazine*, *Double Feature Magazine*, *NewMyths*, *Non Binary Review*, *Persistent Visions*, *ParAbnormal Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Devolution Z Magazine*, *Cracked Eye*, *Nothing's Sacred*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Gallows Hill*, *Econoclash*, *The Weird and Whatnot* and painted book covers for authors such as Bryan Smith ('Kayla'), Tim Meyer ('The Thin Veil', 'The Switch House', '69'), Chad Lutzke (Night as a Catalyst), D.W. Cook (Intermediates: A Cuckoo for Mankind'), Millhaven Press ('Fierce Tales, Lost Worlds'), Cemetery Gates Media ('Halldark Holidays', 'Murderers' Bazaar'), Gavin Chappell ('Kek vs Cthulhu') among others. A **TOEKEN EFFORT** - current (weebly.com)

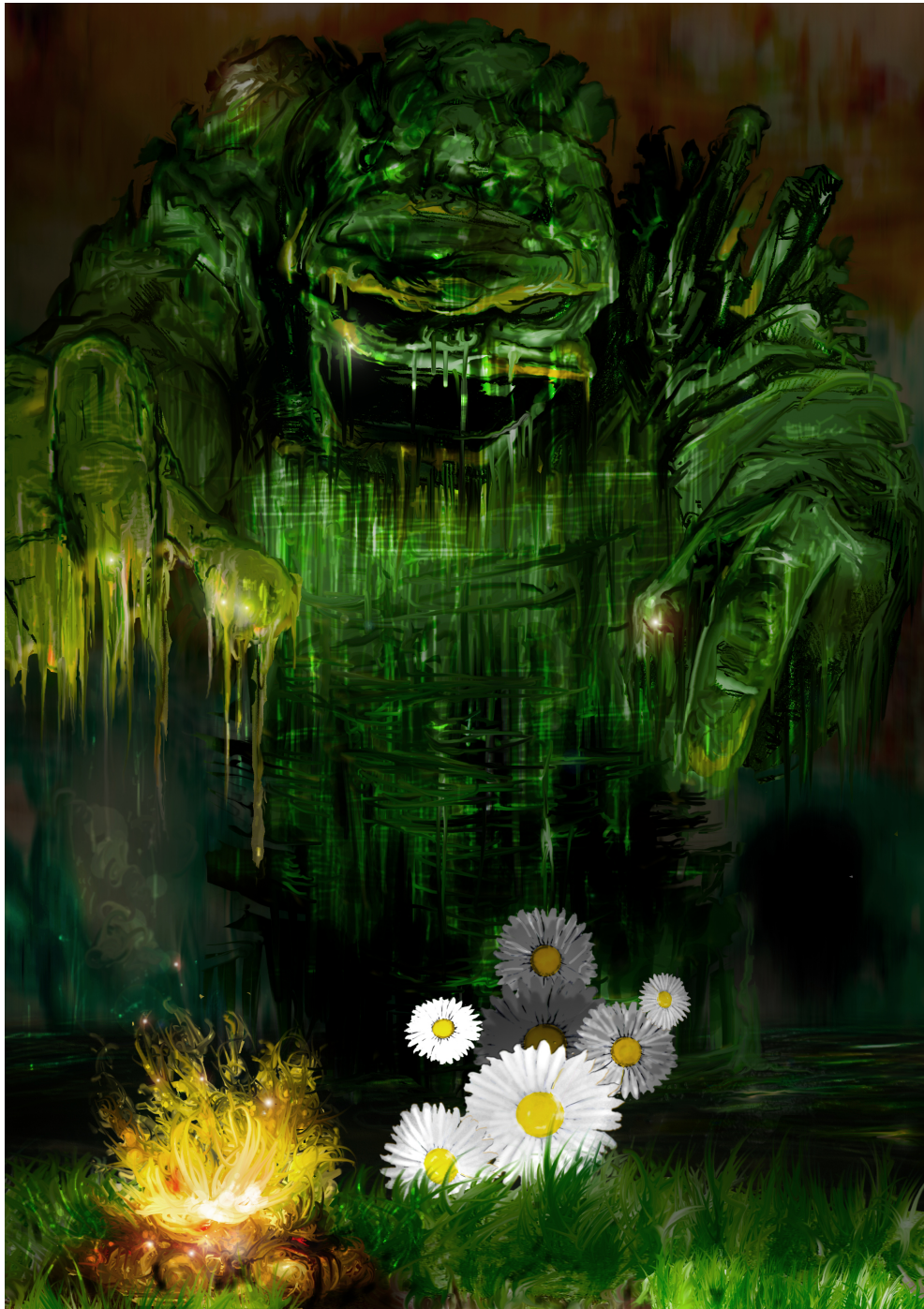
* * *

GRACE WAGNER is a queer, nonbinary writer living with a disability in Houston where they teach at the University of Houston. They have attended the New York Summer Writers Institute and work as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*. Their work has been featured in *Salmagundi Magazine*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The Offing*, and is upcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

* * *



ROBERT ALEXANDER WRAY is a graduate of the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, has won various awards, and been published and produced in New York, regionally and abroad. Other works include: *Bullet for Unaccompanied Heart*, *Savage Variations*, and *All is Always Now*. He's based in Charlottesville, VA.



Omi Wilde's An Argument in a World of Wonders (full image)

by toeken