

penumbric

speculative
fiction mag

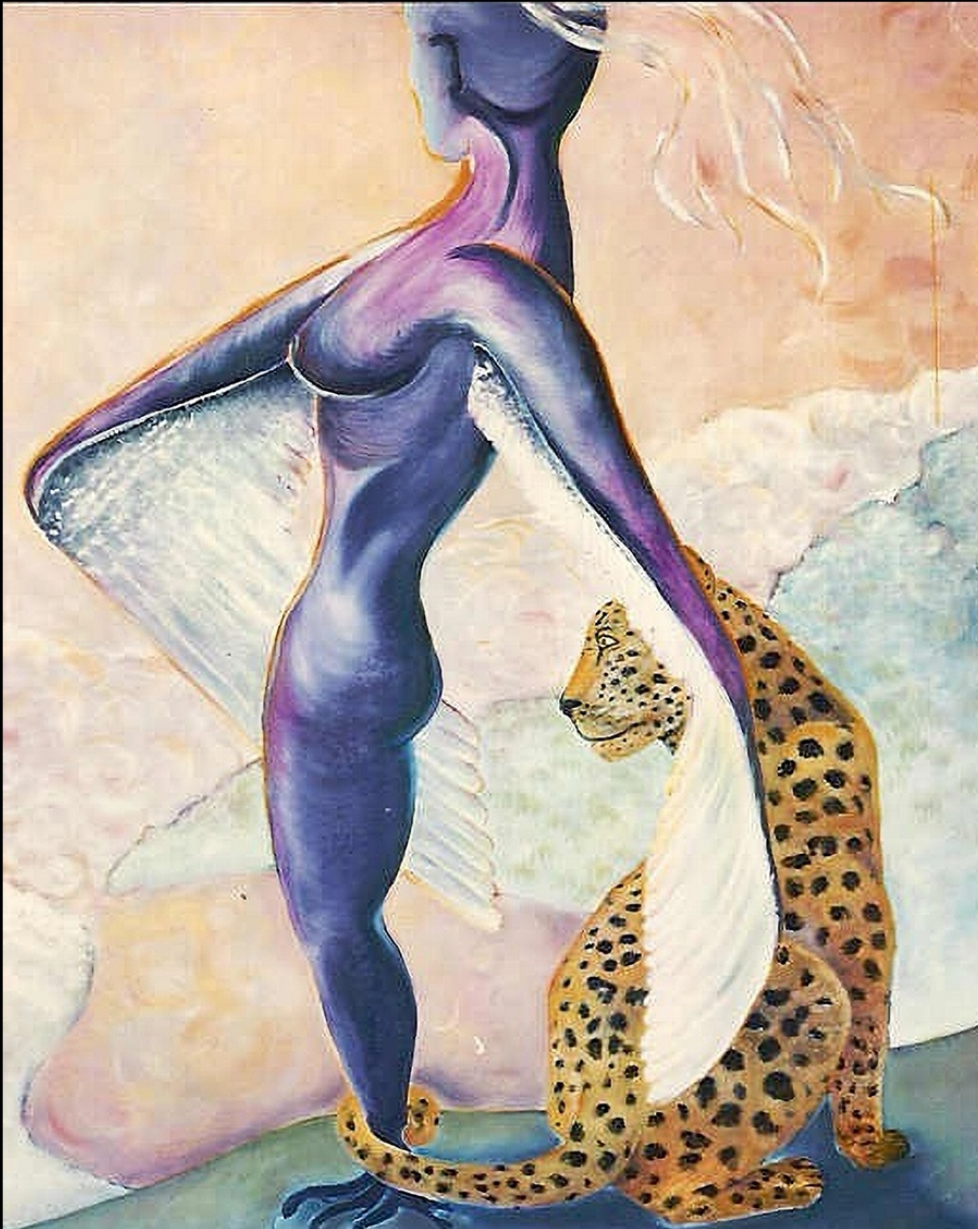
April 2k22 • vol v issue 6

Experimental Realms

Our annual-ish
special art and prose
issue goes to some ...
strange places

featuring work by

Carl Scharwath • Lisa Towles
• Elby Rogers • Zandra
Renwick • Christina Sng •
Douglas Gwilym • Ritiksha
Sharma • Anne Carly Abad •
Toni Artuso • Adele Gardner
• Denny E. Marshall • Matias
Travieso-Diaz • Elad Haber •
Novyl Saeed • Deborah L.
Davitt • Wendy Nikel •
toeken • Aaron Emmel •
Dean Schreck • Shikhar
Dixit • Lynne Sargent • B. B.
Garin • Jesper Nordqvist



My Friends #1 by Dagny Sellorin

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

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

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

Table of contents

from the editor

fiction & poetry

by Lisa Towles
by Zandra Renwick
by Christina Sng
by Douglas Gwilym
by Anne Carly Abad
by Toni Artuso
by Adele Gardner
by Matias Travieso-Diaz
by Elad Haber
by Deborah L. Davitt
by Wendy Nikel
by Aaron Emmel
by Dean Schreck
by Lynne Sargent
by B. B. Garin

Ruba's Rift
Unknown Canadian Artist
Wolf Girl
Poppy's Poppy
Umbrella
Workshop Without End, Amen
The Hook
Black Hole
The Remembrance Engine
Genius Loci
Let Me Sleep When I Die
The Park of Future Heroes
Shaman's Moon
Leave the Myths, Leave Home
The Teaseller

art & g. narrative

by Carl Scharwath
by Elby Rogers
by Ritiksha Sharma
by Denny E. Marshall
by Novyl Saeed
by token
by Shikhar Dixit
by Jesper Nordqvist

girl in tree
Shaft Girl
beckoning in the light
Cargo Drop
Failed frequency
Ouroboros Commute 2174
I Fly on Wings of Onyx Ink
Mondo Mecho

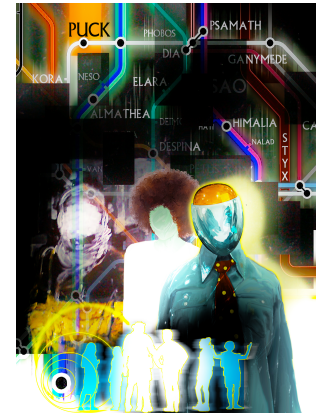
contributor's

bios

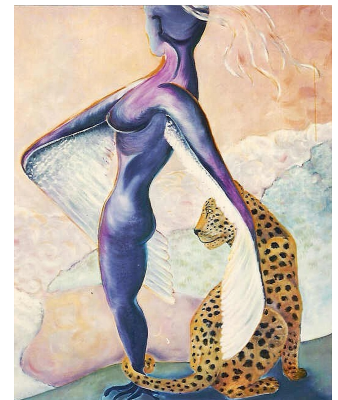
cover: My Friends #1
by Dagny Sellorin



I Fly on Wings of Onyx Ink



*Ouroboros Commute
2174*



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Warning: Hyperbole follows. But it's well-merited, so ...

This issue marks two full years since the return of *Penumbria*! We are thriving, and it's thanks to all of you—contributors and readers—that we're doing more than just paddling along here in this ocean of magazines and other publications. Looking back at April 2k4, one of the last issues before our 15-year hiatus, I can see what I thought back then was a full and vibrant magazine (with six poetry and prose pieces and three artistic works) was nothing compared to today's publication (which, in this special issue, has a total of 24 works). We receive about 150 submissions a month when all our submission windows are open at once, and we're running six to nine issues between an acceptance and publication. When we restarted in June 2k20 I was worried we wouldn't get enough submissions lol. (And also that cutting back on my proofreading work would mean I had less to read.)

The world around us may be falling apart (as I write this, pundits on television are talking like the next ten years are a cliff's-edge walk skirting nuclear, viral, and environmental destruction, with at least some of our fellow humans scheming to push us off the edge, and I'm inclined to agree), but at the very least I have all of you wonderful people and the work you send me to read, and I'm about as happy as an anxiety-ridden, OCD-suffering malcontent can be. I hate to think what this world would be like without you all. So again, thank you!

This issue we have our annual-ish special prose and art issue, with extra helpings of contributors' works taking us into strange and experimental territory—which we do a bit of every issue, but this time ... well, after staring deeply into our cover art by Dagny Sellorin (*My Friends #1*), start off with Lisa Towles' incredible "Ruba's Rift" and see if you don't agree (and, although we don't commission art to

go with stories, nor the other way round, Carl Scharwath's *girl in tree* feels like it has a special connection to that tale). Sometimes this journey is into the strange and horrifying (Zandra Renwick's "Unknown Canadian Artist," Elby Rogers' *Shaft Girl*) and sometimes into the fairy tale-like and fantastic ("Wolf Girl" by Christina Sng, "Umbrella" by Anne Carly Abad, "Shaman's Moon" by Dean Schreck). Some works are very far away, as in Matias Travieso-Diaz's "Black Hole" and Denny E. Marshall's *Cargo Drop*, and sometimes very close to home, as in "The Remembrance Engine" by Elad Haber and "The Teaseller" by B. B. Garin, or even IN the home ("Poppy's Poppy" by Douglas Gwilym). We can live in a liminal space just this side of the future (Aaron Emmel's "The Park of Future Heroes"; token's *Ouroboros Commute 2174*) or the mythic ("Leave the Myths, Leave Home" by Lynne Sargent, *I Fly on Wings of Onyx Ink* by Shikhar Dixit) or on the other side of life ("Workshop Without End, Amen" by Toni Arturo, "Let Me Sleep When I Die" by Wendy Nikel). And some places just don't fit into categories, neat or otherwise—see *beckoning in the light* by Ritiksha Sharma, "The Hook" by Adele Gardner, *Failed frequency* by Novyl Saeed, "Genius Loci" by Deborah L. Davitt.

No issue would be complete without Jesper Nordqvist's *Mondo Mecho*—although we are, sadly, nearing the end of its run. (We're looking for graphic narratives to serialize, BTW ...)

I look forward to hopefully meeting all of our contributors at some point, pundits' prophecies notwithstanding, and thanking you all personally. We are sharing an incredible journey. Again, thank you!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbria

girl in tree

by Carl Scharwath



Ruba's Rift

by Lisa Towles

Nothing rots in winter. Cold, nature's disinfectant, is a freeze frame for the unrequited, a sort of accidental preservative. Homes in disrepair, crooked teeth, even broken dreams don't feel so desolate up here. Montana. February. I've lived here all my life, and wonder if I've ever really lived at all. It's two a.m. and my head is on sideways. Fingers frozen inside Thinsulate gloves, the sky is a pulsing kaleidoscope. Okay, I'll admit to an occasional relationship with hallucinogens. But there's color in the sky even when I'm straight up. And the sightless see plenty.

I travel down an empty path, and hands reach out from the folds of darkness -- from behind trees, draperies of willow weeping for young voices, majestic spruce blue as new angels. It's all there for us, the voice tells me. I can't see it. I can't even hear it, not in an audible way. But I sense a something -- someone -- within my grasp. And being human and, therefore, basically fearful of what I don't understand, I walk. It is all I can do, the only act I own entirely. Thinking, well, that's another story. Thoughts are not my own, for I give them away freely, surrendering every moment to the spastic whims of the unconscious machine. Breathing, a choice of the lungs. But travel. Ah, the sweet scent of volition. I walk and I'm surfing. My feet are a magic carpet. I feel the cold air of wanting on my cheeks, and the river, a dark contralto, moaning under a carpet of pine.

I see her, the dark princess. Only now, in this moment, when before she stayed in the shadows, humming mildly and rubbing herself against tree bark and the little shacks on the edge of the woods. Her dark skin makes her invisible, partly. Without clothes, her entire body is tattooed and she bobs up and down like a schizoid dancer. In her features I see finely chiseled bones assembled expertly by

Michelangelo or Da Vinci. Leonardo built planes but knew how to build perfection in beauty as well. Oh yes, and she is beautiful. Primal, naked, and unafraid. Her bare feet press into the earth. Like me, she is also a traveler.

There she is now...I see her, or the right side of her -- a bare thigh, shoulder, the edgy curve of a muscular breast, and small, razor teeth betraying a sly smile. And now, as I move to see the rest of her, I notice only half of her is visible. The other half lives in another world, perhaps a parallel universe or another strand of time, a few seconds before...or after. Her right eye is upon me, glazing over me, studying, absorbing, mind melding. Yet that eerie smile pervades. Up, down, she bobs by bending her right knee, saying "aaaaaahhhhhh, ah aaaaaahhhhhh." Sort of like song, wailing, and tears. *I'm stuck*, she seems to tell me. *Get me outta here. Please.* What am I really looking at?

Walking. The cold. Yeah, sweet cruel precious intolerable freeze. It's Montana alright. What do you expect? But cold in the context of psychedelic, or psychotropic drugs has a whole new aura. Trees bend down to greet me. The pine needles under my feet turn to shards of glass and bone China when I look down. My parka's a cloak of boa constrictors tangled and hissing around my neck. I allow my roiling mind the luxury of these fantasies because, after all, fantasy is what I desire. Drugs for escape, drugs for adventure, ride the wave, dude. I'm there, I'm riding, my board is too short and fast for me, I'm scared and wanna hide under the water. But I don't hide. I walk on bone China. I hear the sizzle of snakes in my ears. My brain is twisted. I can breathe, but everything threatens me. The cold, loneliness, suffocation, the dark. And there's my ink-black, interdimensional princess behind a Douglas fir six feet ahead.

“I know you,” I say in a voice that isn’t mine. “Sweet dark angel.”

She moves closer, mostly leaning rather than taking actual steps. Her right arm wraps around the tree and makes her bare hip visible. It is simultaneously fleshy and bony, feminine and masculine. My brain makes me want her, but my heart, the seat of my only real intelligence, tells me she is dangerous and from another space.

“Why do you assume I speak English?” the dark princess asks.

I turn my head up and see the canopies of pine, the shimmer of Glacier Lake in the distance. I know where I am. Home. My woods. My land. “This is Montana. What else would –”

Her laugh incites the snakes wrapped around me. When I blink, the emerald lake vanishes and there’s concrete beneath my feet. A parking lot, cicadas buzzing overhead, ninety degrees out and black as midnight. Is it New Orleans or Nairobi? My dark princess is circling me. I cannot see her but I feel a coolness on my back and arms that contrasts with the sudden heat.

“Ruba,” I say. How do I know her name?

“I am,” she replies. “And what else do you know?”

The snakes are quiet now and there’s no broken glass under my shoes. “In Montana, you come as heat, and here, wherever here is, you are cold. The cold quiets the snakes wrapped around me.”

“You fear the snakes.”

“No,” I protest, but it is only half true.

“You are the snakes,” she insists. “You make them. Tell me more,” she says, moving closer. I see the outer shape of her body in front of me with a light behind her, like headlights fifty feet away. “Where are you?”

Breathing. Thinking about the woods, how cold my bedroom is at six

a.m., concrete things. The curdled cream in my coffee, my alarm clock assaulting my ears. “You tell me,” I say. I’m pleading, almost in tears. Emotions are strangers now, unwelcome and capricious.

“Where did you live as a boy?” And now she vanishes again into the cloak of air and soot.

As a boy. Was I ever a boy? Am I a boy now? “San Juan,” I say, barely remembering a string of disparate details. My father’s factory job, the oppressive heat in August, a smelly mattress, the older girl who undressed by the window. When I spin back to the parking lot, it is light out. Mature trees line three rows of cars and the sun burns the back of my head.

“Yes. San Juan,” Ruba says behind me. I turn. She’s not there. I’m learning. “San Juan. Now you are here,” her voice chides.

“What are you, a ghost of Christmas past? Naked Scrooge? Sounds like a porn movie.”

“Is that what you want?” she says quickly, and materializes before me. Her breasts are much larger and she’s wearing tall white boots. “A centerfold Scrooge?” She sways her languid hips, her large breasts move gently up and down; white teeth gnashing at the air. Her laugh is awful, hellish. I feel myself crying and can’t stop. I think of the drugs I swallowed, thanking them for the adventure and damning them to hell.

My mind wants to protest but I’m aware of my energy. It’s waning and I can’t fight her. “I wanted an escape, not group therapy.”

Ruba slides closer, three steps, then three more even slower. Her bare breasts are touching my chest, her lips on my cheek pressing towards my ear. “One ... on ... one. We ARE the group. Therapy is a state of mind.”

I can’t help but look down at her breasts and notice two things. They’re smaller now, their original size, and her body’s only half

visible again, borrowing itself over and over from the other place. Her shadowy presence tantalizes me – even more provocative than her freedom from clothes. More than I want her, I want *that place*, the other side, the shadow. I want to see it, see myself in it and see her other half. What does it look like there? Is the air thicker? Does the ground feel solid, and can I see God?

“You want the other side, baby? That what you want?” She cackles. The sound makes my palms tingle.

“You read minds or something? A talent you took from the dark side?”

“Who says it’s dark?” she says.

“So we’re all in hell and the other side is heaven?” I reply.

The terrible laugh again, like sandpaper on baby skin. “Heaven is a sandbox and hell’s a gas station men’s room. Okay? Don’t be so provincial. We’re capable of big things here.”

“Who?” I ask. “And where?” Looking around, it all changes again. Now I feel the cold under my shoes, but the air is still hot. She’s pushing me back to Montana. I’m feeling the transition. “Big things? Like giant sequoias and the sky?”

“Formations, transformations, reformation.”

As she says these words, I see a luminosity pass through her eyes, changing them from brown to a glowing green.

* * *

Mostly, I love her inside voice, the one no one can hear but me, the one that disguises itself as my own original thoughts. But they’re not mine. Like how I suddenly knew her name. I didn’t conceive of it, search for it, yet it showed up in my head, fully formed, mythical messengers, erect as soldiers poised for action.

“You will take three journeys,” she tells me.

“I don’t need to go anywhere.” I cross my arms like a defiant child.

She rolls her eyes at this gesture. “You want the other side, don’t you? You wanna know where I GO when I’m only half here. You want ... the rift.”

Now I’m on a dock somewhere near the edge of the universe, looming over stagnant, black water that might as well be tar. It’s not moving, so this can’t really be water. “There’s no current here.”

The dark face widens to allow a smile. It’s a beautiful smile she has sometimes, born of white, well-formed teeth and a sincerity to her eyes that’s not usually there. I call it the marketing smile, when she wants me to do something I don’t want to do. How I know so much about this strange being is a question I will undoubtedly ask forever, as I hardly know her. “It can’t really be water because there’s no current? And is there no current just because you can’t visually see the water’s movement?”

I wonder if she’ll ever ask me an easy question. Here, I’ll stick to simplicity. “Where are we going?”

“Three journeys.”

“You already said that. Let’s get on with it then.”

She laughs the terrible laugh, puts a full moon in the sky over our heads and slides into her human form again, this time all of her. I notice first her feet – not too large for her size, but they seem stronger, somehow, than what you’d expect on a petite woman, like they could morph into flippers or claws at any moment. Then, while my eyes slide up her dark flesh, clothes appear – a long, silky dress, tan shoes. “Ready or not ...”

* * *

Without even blinking, I'm standing in line in front of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. She's beside me in full costume with her hand gently holding my elbow. As we approach the entrance, I instinctively reach for my wallet. Gone. What a surprise.

"You won't need it. We're starting outside," the mind reader says. I follow her to the parking lot. She looks up, shakes her head, and walks us right into the middle of Columbia Avenue. Cars are not screeching their brakes, and though we're in oncoming traffic we don't seem to be in anyone's way. I see my own body and touch my arm, then hers. So we're both here physically. I look up at her with a questioning glance.

"Yeah yeah," she says in her floozie voice, "consciousness has many levels." Watching me, she perceives my question. "We're here alright and yes the cars are real too. Why they're not hitting us has to do with the laws of physicality and consciousness. What you see isn't necessarily what's there. In other words, reality isn't necessarily dependent on perception. Look up there," she points to the building. It's a multilayered spiral.

"How did he create it?" she says.

"Who, Frank Lloyd Wright?" I ask. She's still looking up. And I notice, from this strange unreality, that a sudden wind blows up the bottom of her dress, yet I feel none of the wind on myself, and I can't hear it. Come to think of it, I can't hear the traffic spinning past and through us either. I try to breathe but can't get air in my lungs. Okay, Guggenheim. "In segments I suppose, starting with the foundation."

"Remember what I called our three journeys? Formations, transformations, and reformations. From these, you'll understand everything about yourself and the world ... and about the *other* side."

I'm shaking my head. "Formations then? Is that what this is?"

Ruba slides her long, dark arm around my neck and moves my head so it's directly pointed up at the building. "What do you see? Squint

your eyes if you have to."

Squinting, like she suggested, I imagine that I'm a miniature person, an ant on a beach, gazing up at a giant nautilus shell.

"Yeeeeees," she smiles, "nautilus. Do you know what that means?"

"One of nature's miracles, I guess. Like the spots on a giraffe, and the way all rivers flow into the ocean."

"Not a beach exactly, more like a mathematician's laboratory. A nautilus shell is constructed out of a mathematical logarithm, a series of numbers that all succeed each other in perfect order. The equation is based on that madman Fibonacci, his real name was Leo Pisano, and this theory he had that everything in nature is based on a single mathematical equation. So he went out and found all kinds of things, like nautilus shells, that fell into his equation and he managed to get the world to believe every word of it."

"You don't believe it?"

Ruba snorts and walks out of the street toward the building. "I've been around a long time, and seen lots of things come and go, like geodesic domes, meteorites, black holes. Fibonacci based everything in his research on the Golden Mean, which was supposedly discovered by the Greeks and used to create all of their famous historical structures. I guess I think things are more random than that. When you create an environment, any environment, and put intelligent life in the middle of it, well, all bets are off. Dinosaurs and their immensity, that's one thing. They'll eventually consume everything on the planet. Animals, plants, you know. Much different from human beings. The most intelligent beings of our time, like," she nods, "Fibonacci, Einstein, Fuller, Hawking, you know, really got us into the worst trouble of all. Because the more we know about our world, the more we want to change it and, inevitably, fuck it up. The physical impact of a comet, say, is immediate. But intellectual impact takes much longer and has a much more dramatic effect on the nature of the future."

Ridiculous, I thought.

“What’s ridiculous about it?”

“So you’re not big on intelligence then.”

She shakes her head and flings her hand high in the air. We’re walking now around the perimeter of the museum. I see people looking toward us but with no eye contact. “It’s the *level* of intelligence. People like me, you know, who aren’t necessarily rooted to the here and now, call you Midlins. You have a middle level of intelligence that’s higher than animals but much lower than other beings. You’re capable of much more than you actually manifest, but your fear keeps you from going anywhere with it.

“So are you going to show me where all the numbers are hidden in the museum?”

Shaking her head again, Ruba starts to untie the silk dress and pulls it completely off, revealing her fully tattooed nudity, and then kicks her clicky shoes into the street. Noticing my wide eyes, she grins.

“Nobody can see me but you, baby. Keep it in your pants.”

“So your kind of beings don’t subject yourselves to carnal desire?”

“Sex? Is that what you mean? When you get to my stage, you can have whatever you want anytime. If I want an orgasm, I have it. You don’t need other people for that.”

“Well even my stage of humanity knows that. What about communication, though? Intimacy? You simply evolve past your need for other people? I don’t see the point.”

“I know. That’s why you’re at your stage and I’m at mine,” she muses, and suddenly all of my own clothes vanish off my body. I see shadows on the sidewalk and, when I look up, the sky is red. “Ready or not ...”

* * *

I find myself next completely naked beneath an eerie red-streaked sky and, once again, in the middle of traffic.

“I know, trust me, it’s an experiment,” Ruba says, guiding me by the arm to one of the fast-moving cars. She touches one car and it stops moving, and seems to become like us, whatever that means. The back door opens for me and Ruba shoves me in, closes all the doors, and stands genie-like outside of it.

“What do I do now?” I yell through closed windows.

“Relax and enjoy the spaciousness.”

Smaller than a Yugo, I try to appreciate her use of irony. And then a crimp in my lower intestine tells me that wherever we are going next will seem small by comparison. I watch her through the back window – fading again. Half here, half there or wherever she goes or lives or dwells, I don’t even know what you’d call it. That’s when it occurs to me. All I wanted to do was go there, wherever she went, that other place or next world, and maybe these three journeys will help me to get there.

“Get in!” she shouts Gestapo-like.

“The trunk? You’ve got to be —”

Before I finish my sentence, the tattooed, hundred pound princess thrusts me in the trunk of the tiny car with one swift move with her foot. The trunk slams over my head and darkness pushes all the way through me. I had been afraid of the dark as a child, in our huge farmhouse in Grass Plains, Montana. Since the car isn’t moving, I’m able to unfold both legs to relieve pressure in my stomach, and one of my arms reaches out a few inches. I wonder how long she’ll keep me in here, and how many more molecules of air I can suck up before I expire.

“Stop being so dramatic. Just another minute,” she says.

God help me.

“You are God. Help yourself.”

“I’ve had enough! I’ll go back to my —”

“Stop your whining. Do you want it or not?”

“Want what????” I scream from my scratchy throat and strained vocal cords.

“Everything. Knowledge, enlightenment, human progression ... or do you want to live the same boring litany of eternal stagnation? I know, honey, ignorance is bliss, but it’s also for cowards.” She pauses. “I didn’t think you were one of thoouooooooooose, now.”

“It’s dark in here. Can you make it light?” My words are muffled; the air is scarce.

“Close your eyes and take a long, deep breath.”

I mumble something to her and start breathing. Ten counts in, ten counts out. Then I open my eyes and I’m outside in a field of tall grass, lying on a bed and wrapped up in sheets. Just my head is sticking out. Daytime. And so much sunlight I can’t keep my eyes open.

“Not too dark for you now, I suppose?” she chides.

“It’s too tight. I can barely breathe. Can you loosen this, this ... cocoon or whatever it is?”

She laughs now. “Now isn’t that an interesting word for it?”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of karmic hoop jumping I got myself into but I want out. It’s too weird for me. I’m not one of those outward bound kind of guys. I’m a computer programmer for God’s sake. I just ...” I lower my voice, “want to go home.”

“Sorry, baby. And you want your mommy too while we’re at it? Well forget it. Your job is to breathe and absorb all you can in your new environment. You know, build a comfort level with it.”

“I’m in a frickin’ cocoon made out of sheets!” My blood pressure’s elevating, I can feel it. I start wriggling out of the sheets, moving my arms a few inches till the twine loosens.

“You can’t go back.” Her face is inches from mine.

“What do you mean?” Panic arrives in the form of locusts buzzing in my chest.

“You can’t go back to your, you know, old life. If you bail now, you go back ten lifetimes, which is the same as about fifty levels of consciousness.” She pinches her lips. “I guarantee you don’t want to go there. Stay with me now.” With her last command, she makes her voice sound large and hollow and God-like. She slides closer to my right ear. “Stay ... with ... me.”

I nod.

“Good. Now, this next part is gonna seem a bit severe, but in a way, you’re not doing anything. All the change is coming from me. All you have to do is lay there just like you are now, in this pretty field with the sun streaming down on you.” She winks. “Okay?”

Why did I feel like she was turning me into a bug?

“I am, in a way.” And when she winks again, the tree near my bed is a hundred times as big, and so is Ruba. Yet I’m the same size. God help me.

“Stop saying that.”

“See, the funny thing is that I didn’t actually *say* anything, which illustrates the insanity of this whole thing.”

Sigh. “What whole thing?”

“This fucking acid trip or dream.” My heart is swallowing me whole, I can hardly talk. Breathe, I tell myself. “I can’t even go ba-” I can’t stop my snow plough from panic to tears. Ruba’s arms are still folded.

“Not supposed to be that. Wipe your eyes and start being a caterpillar.”

“I can’t move my arms, remember?”

“Caterpillars don’t need to wipe tears from their faces,” is her existential reply.

“Okay. One: they don’t have faces; two: they don’t cry; three: no hands with which to wipe the tears that they don’t shed on the faces they don’t have.”

She’s pacing now. “It’s up to you, Boz, how you want to spend this time. The point is that you experience the suffocating claustrophobia, at first, of a moth in chrysalis, but then eventually the quiet, stillness, and beauty of this profound change and transformation. But sure, you can editorialize yourself out of anything you choose.”

It *is* quiet in here, and very still. It’s light, but the sun isn’t burning my face because I only have eyes, or so it appears. My form has changed, but not my perception. Strange isn’t the half of it. Breathe, she told me repeatedly, while pacing in front of me, this black giant. Most noticeable about this form is my smallness in comparison to other things. I suppose I’m hanging from a tree leaf. A bird on a nearby tree, starling I think, is the size of my prior perception of a skyscraper. Will it eat me, I wonder. It’s safe in here, though, womblike in a way. I’m suddenly completely relaxed – not sleeping, but totally at peace. Drugged, sort of, and I remember this about the biology of butterflies and caterpillars, these chemicals, I think, that are released at different stages of the development of the pupa. I feel

them in my veins, in what would normally be my legs – this liquid warmth. I am completely asleep but completely awake.

I can’t see Ruba’s eyes now – she’s too big and, looming over me the way she does, she’s a big dark blur. I feel the warm liquid inside taking over me, covering up more of my lower half and rising up to my midsection. It’s like a warm, comfortable glue. Or hot butter. Like heroin. I could get used to this. God help m—

“St—”

“Okay, okay. Gimme me a break, I’m a fucking insect.”

“Not for long.”

I’m a double helix. My body is shaped like the twisted threads of DNA strands. My arms, though I’m only inches long, feel like the size of telephone poles compressed into a pencil eraser. Legs that used to be one of my best assets, long as my mother pointed out, attractively strong and hairy as my first wife used to say, have been reduced to tiny dots with no more importance than a toenail. I can feel an otherworldly force, the DNA miracle, working its way down the length of my new body. It’s deciding – on a color palette for my wings. *I want yellow for both bedrooms*, my first wife Noreen is saying in my memory tape. We’re selecting paint for our first house. She would have painted the entire wall space bumblebee yellow. Shit, bumblebees, what do I do about those?

Focus, Boz. Yes, wings. I don’t know how I know, but I know that someone or something has chosen browns and white for me. Not much of a palette, but I know I’m to be a Canadian Tiger Swallowtail, male, with fantastic variegation of color and large, fluid, gossamer wings. Most certainly, it could be worse.

It’s time. The chrysalis sack has thickened, hardened, I’m in the appropriate physical trance with still enough reserve muscle tone for the proverbial prison break. Now or never, my mind tells me, the

guards are sleeping. Go!

“Prison?” I hear Ruba’s silky voice.

Ignoring her, as I still can’t actually see her, I start at the top – my head. It shoves forward through the forest of gluey cellophane sheets. My shoulders move my folded new wings out next, and my lower body and swollen abdomen follow. I’m nearly out and, at the same time, can see myself from a few feet away. The wings are tiny, and will be filled within the next hour with the womb-fluid I’ve been holding in my stomach.

“Well, there might just be hope for you yet,” she says.

“That’s all you have to say? Don’t forget, you’re eight hundred years old. I’m a lowly homo sapien, just a mere mortal.”

“Not anymore.” She’s smiling. I see her, her luminous brown skin, white teeth. Every speck of her an irony of frightening beauty. I wonder what sex could be like between a human woman and a male butterfly.

I use my new wings to fly me up into the sky, higher she tells me, higher, even higher. What’s on the other side of higher, I ask her. She laughs.

“There is no other side, baby. You’re a butterfly, you can go anywhere. Just fly.”

“Where?”

I follow her instruction. The sky’s much colder up here. There are airplanes, I remember them from my last level of consciousness. Not really any birds this high, no trees. Just clean cold air and limitless possibility. I wonder if Picasso lives up here, Jackson Pollock, Leonardo Da Vinci, Frank Lloyd Wright. All the visionaries must live up here, because nothing’s in the way of anything else. No impediments to progress or possibility. Up here, on the edge of the

world, all there is is imagination. Wow.

“Where am I going?” I ask my silent mentor. Up here, right now, Ruba’s a voice I hear sometimes. Gone is her beautiful, radiant dark skin, her sleek body and silent curves, eyes, lips, tiny angel feet propelling her from world to world. I miss her human form; hell, I miss my own form. And in a way, I don’t. I can fly now. Whatever I gave up, from Montana, I got a pair of glowing brown and white wings. How cool is that?

“Keep moving up – we’re going into the dark that’s beyond the fields of blue. Space.”

You’ve seen the films. One was called *Brainstorm*, there have been so many, that take you into the mind immediately after death. The darkness, then the bright light. And then ... the inevitable and endless tunnels. Things coming at you lightning fast, lights, colors, objects, shapes, like going from a giant kaleidoscope to a blender. I’m soaring through this kind of revelatory space, free of the burdens of gravity, temperature, even consciousness, which I now realize has been the greatest burden of all. Yet I glance downward and see that, oddly, I have returned to my human form. No more wings? My wings. Ruba, where are you?

“Here, baby. You can’t see me but I’m here.”

“Where am I going next? You’ve got to tell me something.”

“I said three journeys.”

“You mean death,” I say with dramatic flair.

“I told you already. Reformations.”

It’s dark, and fucking cold, colder than I ever remember being, as if I’m in a place that has not even a memory of heat. It feels like a mountain with walls of rock around me, but I know that, could I see, there would just be empty space. I’m remembering my childhood fear

of the dark, the nightlight I used to turn on after my mother came in to check on my brother and me, and when we got caught with it I remember the stuffed dog I used to place over my right eye so my peripheral vision wouldn't trick me into thinking the closet monsters were emerging. My fear jars me now. I feel my palms perspiring, even here, even now. It's so quiet, that even my sense of terror is a companion – it's at least something else in this place besides the wilderness of my mind. Endless imagination, I guess that's what I thought was out here. I was right. There's nothing ... and everything. I am nothing, everything, and the entirety of God all at once. I think of Ruba once again, but then notice something.

Stillness.

It's like what I felt inside the butterfly pupa – complete stasis, silent, a warm, almost hot vacuum. This, oddly, with nothing around me but more and more miles of nothingness, feels the same, but cold. Still. Silent. Cold. Vacuous. I remember her words about three journeys – formations, transformations, reformation. I don't know what it means, so I breathe, we breathe, my internal terror and me, an endless companion in this sacred, terrible place.

“Okay, what am I doing here?”

“What do you feel?”

“Like something's about to happen.”

“And when it does, baby, you're gonna draw on what you know already.”

“Binary code? What I know as a human, as a computer programmer from Missoula?”

“That's not what I consider knowing.”

“I don't mean to bicker, your highness, but you're saying I didn't learn anything in forty-seven years?”

I can't see her and yet I know the exasperated look on her dark face. I'd give up eternity to see that face one more time.

“Duly noted.”

“Shut up, and stop reading me. I take it back,” I reply.

“I mean that you've learned more in the last hour than in the past forty-seven years.”

“I thought you were going to sa—” and my words are cut off suddenly by an immense, orange orb hurtling through the cold black void. Like if the sun took off running, this is what it would look like. Then I realize it's coming toward me. I don't bother calling her name, as I know she won't answer. And in some strange way, I have no fear now. I'm about to be obliterated by a comet and yet I know somehow that this is part of my path, or some path some part of my consciousness has chosen. I can hear it, a giant scratch on celestial fabric tearing through the very essence of space and time. Can there be sound without gravity? And if I'm noticing sound, is that my old consciousness or the one Ruba's helping me form? So I ignore the noise and float noiselessly, buoyantly, and wait.

Closer.

Breathe.

Closer.

Still breathing, deeper now, trying to think of old prayers from Catholic School. Pathetic, isn't it, what the mind does to comfort itself.

At the precise point of contact, there's no sound. Only a colossal collision of darkness and light in every permutation of the symbolic spectrum. My physical body is scattered into a million pieces, and ... in a way, I can actually *see* them. I see my pixilated self, I don't know if they're/I'm reduced to subatomic particles, if I'm looking at the

protons and electrons that used to make up my cells, or if they're actual tiny chunks of raw flesh.

"Think," Ruba tells me. "What are you thinking?"

"Is this the rift? That other side where you go?"

"Sort of. Ask anything you want."

"What is the hoop I must jump through now? I was obliterated by a comet and I appear, on some level, to be still alive."

"What's your inclination as a result of disintegration?"

"Re-integration ... ah," I smile with my invisible face. "Reformation. I'm in a thousand pieces, and now I put myself back together."

"Yeah, baby, you got it. Draw on what you know, on what you've learned on these journeys."

I'm not afraid now. Even my terror has abandoned me, a cowardly soldier that retreats into the dark night when nobody's looking. From 'formations,' I know that the Guggenheim museum, and smaller things like a nautilus shell, are made automatically by nature through a mathematical equation. So ... anything in nature can be re-constructed if it can be constructed. Find out what my own personal logarithm is and rebuild, or ... use the same equation, the Fibonacci number series or whatever it is, and use that to rebuild my own human body. If I remembered correctly from high school physics, I think the series arose out of adding the last two numbers to get the next number. 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 ... but it went on for infinity. How far would I have to take it?

"Start small," Ruba says, obviously standing by somewhere close, making her alien observations, reporting back to Q or her Klingon ship where ...

"Klingon? Of all the aliens on *Star Trek*, you call me a damn

Klingon? Guinan would have been a nicer choice."

"Sorry to offend you, Highness. Okay, starting small then." I look around me and the particles of my body are already arranged, it appears, in some kind of pattern, though my un-eyes can't distinguish it. I can see the particles or cells, though, individually. *Start small*. How about six? I take the particles, gather them together with my invisible hands, and position them in a linear array, making space for the empty numbers. 0-1-1-2-3-empty space, 5. Watching. Listening. No, that's not right. It should be like this: Empty space for the Zero, one particle, one particle, two particles, three particles, then an empty space where the four doesn't go, and then a cluster of five particles. They look like tiny clusters of peas all laid out in a straight line. I wait for Ruba's commentary, sarcasm, whatever she's cooking up, and I hear nothing. Then I remember that I'm supposed to draw on what I've learned.

The chrysalis.

The silence, the stillness, patience, waiting to inhale, exhale, blink, and transform.

So I wait. It feels like an hour, is probably a year, and I'd love to hear what Einstein would say about this.

I hear nothing, feel nothing, sense nothing, there is no past, no future, and nothing in the present except these molecules of light bridging me to the endless darkness. And then, they begin to move.

That's right, my cells are moving ... on their own. Protons, electrons, making cells, enzymes, proteins, like watching an evolutionary ballet. It's completely silent and overwhelmingly beautiful. I'm aghast with the miracle of this display – the colors change from bright orange, the color of the comet that blasted me, into blues, greens, and reds. I remember bioluminescence from scuba diving, and this is even more beautiful, this colorful, magical miracle of ... myself. I feel my invisible heart cave in and give way to tears, though I'm not in that form yet, so I can only pretend to cry. Where's Ruba now? Is she

watching this? The strings of colored cells are forming into a mathematical fractal. From my one logarithm of numbers, my one little five-piece formula, they're all floating into place. I'm a fractal now, watching, ever watching. It's dark, but now I seem to have eyes, as my vision expands in dimension. I breathe and feel a sort of movement in the front of my invisible body. The fractal is forming itself now. It's fatter, taking on the shape of a sort of stringy sausage. Is it forming into my butterfly wings from the chrysalis? Searching the darkness, I see that it's forming into a human fetus. I think of my mother, though I can't see her from here, and I experience what I felt in the womb. I *remember* what I felt there. Is that possible? It was a cross between a chrysalis and outer space – silent, buoyant, warm, and completely dark.

The fetus is growing – I can see all the body parts. My brain, from this unique vantage point, looks like an MRI scan – greens, bright yellow. It's forming, now, into ... flesh. My consciousness is nearby, hovering, about ten feet away. And my body is reforming on its own from my numerical array, *my* fractal.

“What's next?” I find myself asking Ruba, hoping, praying she'll appear visually one more time.

“Well that's entirely up to you. The possibilities now are endless. Isn't that obvious?”

I'm smiling. “Ohhhh yeah.”

From my physical body, I blink my eyes a few times to try to inhabit and acquaint myself with this new formation of my body, as if to say *hello, old friend* or maybe *hello again*. And what I find, after these three amazing journeys, is the one place where I always felt the most peace. I'm in some way myself again or my new self, John Bozman,

a computer programmer from Missoula, Montana, imagining a beautiful, empty, quiet beach staring into the crested waves of endless blue.

“Do you wish you took the blue pill?” Ruba says, beside me now with her endless sense of humor.

I can't help but laugh, and then I stop when I see that it's really her. Naked, fearless, tattooed with the most intricate patterns of ... no less ... fractals. Is it *my* fractal, meaning the very essence of my being woven into her skin? I gaze at her beauty and wonder how many times she's been reconstituted in outer space, and if there's even a number for it. I reach out to touch her, finally, a raw, physical, purely human impulse. Her flesh responds to my touch, her leg moves slightly, I feel the gentle pulse of her blood beneath the warm, dark skin. I breathe her in through my nose, eyes, my pores, the alluring scent of her, the scent of change, of ancient history and also something entirely new.

I wake in my own bed. I know it's sometime later and though I feel her energy and sense her scent all around me, I don't see her. The practical part of me wonders if we've been together, in this very bed, and if so why I can't remember. A bleakness moves inside my chest and belly. Not something as mundane as sadness or even loss. More like a challenge, or summons.

“You want me?” I can't hear her voice, but her question arrives in my head like a thought.

“Yes,” I reply, with my mind.

“Come then. Do you remember the way in?”



Shaft Girl

by Elby Rogers

Unknown Canadian Artist

by Zandra Renwick

That winter toward the tail end of the last millennium, my father's predictions for the marketability of what he called my spendy eastcoast art degree finally came to pass, and I was forced by economic necessity to set aside my paints and canvas and accept a position in the only slightly less lucrative field of Social Services. Career-minded civil servants and individuals inspired by true vocation to assist those in need filled top slots in our field; the rest of us tended to be artists, misfits, and the generally unemployable.

I'd been born in what was even then still raw and tenaciously beautiful British Columbian farm country, but my parents moved across the border and down the coast before my first birthday. My new mid-sized hometown was one of those in the grip of perennial bust and boom cycles, with red brick peak-roofed houses trimmed in gingerbread, and factories outmoded but still cognizant of their bygone logging glory days in their cathedral-esque vaulted ceilings and the grand sweep of their towering stacks. My childhood had seen more bust than boom, our town's aging population forever in the process of being left behind while younger people flocked to larger cities. Returning from my small private New England college and my stint east brought a stark realization of how little had changed.

Like many civil service jobs mine consisted mainly of paperwork, but because my department handled calls from an anonymous hotline for concerned citizens regarding the health and safety of the incarcerated and the elderly, it was sometimes necessary to venture out in the field. After months of shuffling yellowed documents from one dusty file cabinet to another and performing what seemed endless hours of perfunctory data entry in an effort to modernize the department's silverfish-infested decaying precomputerized records, I welcomed my first home visit assignment with something close to eagerness.

The case I'd been handed was that of a Mrs. Labrett, eighty-two years of age, living alone. The client's address was penned in blue ballpoint at the top of a manila folder that pre-existed, like so many others, the department's digital database. The most recent entry was dated nine years previous and described a home visit by some long-gone social worker (had her art degree finally paid off, I wondered? her book deal come through? her garage band recorded a hit?) who'd responded to a call from a concerned neighbor. Squinting at the hasty jottings of my predecessor, I surmised Mr. Labrett had passed away a few months prior, leaving his wife of fifty years to live alone. Though the agent observed the house to be in a mildly untidy state and noted Mrs. Labrett had seemed lonely (the visit had lasted, if these scribbles were accurate, no less than four hours, all of which as far as I could surmise had been spent in the client's stuffy parlor drinking weak tea), she'd found no imminent concern as to the health or welfare of the client herself. No follow-up visit was recommended, and no further entries thickened the folder.

The afternoon remained gloomy but not overly cold, a common and near year-round condition for North America's Pacific Northwest. The address scrawled on the tab of Mrs. Labrett's file led me to the east side of town, an area across the railway tracks that had never been a more sought-after neighborhood but had certainly seen better days. It was a rundown street but a respectable one, where a concerned citizen might still place a vague and strangely undetailed call to a Social Services hotline to report an elderly neighbor in possible need of assistance.

The Labrett bungalow was typical for its era and its unpretentious origins. Once-white paint peeled in grey feathered sheets from clapboard siding and deep overhanging eaves. Some houses along the

street had been repainted, some gardens populated with stone squirrels or lions or unidentifiable fruit hinting at being pineapples. I mounted the three sagging front steps and knocked on the door, wondering if the anonymous concerned neighbor could be whoever lurked behind the twitching blinds of the house across the street. Perhaps instead it was the owner of the spectacles dimly reflecting bright grey sky in two matching ovals in the upstairs window next door. Or maybe our hotline caller had been the frowning gentleman walking his squat brute of a dog at the opposite curb, his undisguised interest exuding a nebulous but palpable hostility.

Mrs. Labrett answered after my third round of polite but determined knocking. A small lady made smaller by the cruel curvature of osteoporosis, she smiled up at me through a narrow crack between peeling door and jamb, greeting me in a voice much younger than her posture, younger than the stark blue veins standing on the back of her hand where it clutched an old-fashioned dressing gown tight to her throat.

I introduced myself, explaining after the manner of my cursory field training why I was on her doorstep. To my discomfort I found this endeavor considerably more awkward in person than in the flat hypothetical world of training class. She, however, was gracious, and before shutting the door gently she bade me wait a moment and she'd let me in. I assumed she intended to change clothes or in some other way make herself more presentable, in her manner of thinking, to receive visitors. But the wait was brief. Shifting my creaking weight from one foot to the other on the sagging stoop, aware of the intense scrutiny of various observers as anonymous as the call received by our office, I thought I heard a frantic scrabbling on the other side of the door, a wild frenetic clacking of talons scraping wood, punctuated by a muffled snarl and following whimper. When Mrs. Labrett reopened the door she was dressed in the same threadbare dressing gown, her wisping hair gathered in the same loose bun at the back of her skull. She apologized for keeping me waiting, explaining that before receiving a stranger into the house she had to "put the babies away."

Weak, oversweet tea is an acquired taste, but one I didn't mind. The

house was dark, every blind drawn to maintain what she described as a soothing environment for "the babies." With a bit of gentle probing of which I hoped my superiors at the Department would have been proud, I deduced these babies she spoke of must be dogs, strays she had acquired over the years one by one as they'd come scratching at her cellar door on cooler nights, begging for scraps. At first whiff of my concern over the potentially dangerous breed of these dogs, and whether or not their care and feeding might be overburdensome for an older woman living alone, Mrs. Labrett—justifiably, I thought in immediate retrospect—became less welcoming. She explained her babies were no trouble at all, content and comfortable downstairs where they had plenty of bedding and lots to eat. Indeed, the shelves of the open pantry behind her sagged under the weight of several bags of generic dog food, which she apparently arranged to have delivered weekly by "that sweet young fellow from the church." It was on the tip of my tongue to ask to meet these "babies" when she rose, thanked me for my time, and offered to show me out.

In the hallway I paused at the black vertical crack of a slightly ajar door I'd first taken to be a coat closet but now realized must lead downward into the basement. As Mrs. Labrett shuffled on, leading the way out farther along the hall, I leaned in, peering into the dark musty slit of the crack past the door's edge, straining to make sense of what could have been heavy wet panting echoing in the tar-black stairwell.

Hairs prickled at my nape as a sound wafted up, a staccato chorus of wide-jawed smackings of wet tongues against pointy teeth. I peered down into the inky basement, thinking I glimpsed the vaguely canid outlines of several hulking shapes crouched at the base of the stair. That same clatter rang as before in the hollow darkness, long nails scrabbling against wood, abruptly muffled when Mrs. Labrett reached past me to press the door firmly shut.

As if suddenly hard of hearing, she answered none of my queries about the animals in her cellar. She gently herded me out onto her porch and, with one last stilted banality of gratitude for my visit accompanied by an assurance that she was in good health and spirits

thanks to the company of her beloved pets, bade me good afternoon and goodbye. A distinct finality accompanied the closure of her door, and though I stood on the slumped planks under the peeling awning for several minutes listening unabashedly for any sound of Mrs. Labrett or her strange pets, I heard nothing compelling enough to justify a continued intrusion where I'd outstayed my welcome.

Ignoring the twitching blinds and ruffling curtains of nearby houses, I let myself into my car. On the passenger seat lay the Labrett file, innocuous manila with blue ballpoint writing on the tab. I flipped to the last page and scrawled a cursory entry documenting beginning and ending times of my visit. I hated to add much detail, knowing I'd only have to re-enter it later for the computer record and the report to my supervisor.

Back in my stale cubicle deep in the heart of a state government building of un-ergonomic midcentury construction, I began typing into my unwieldy regulation-issue desktop a full report of my home visit. I'd observed nothing of overt concern at Mrs. Labrett's residence; the house had been tidier than my own apartment, where I back then still lived with a recent undergraduate's tendency toward lackadaisical housekeeping and cheap take-out meals. The exterior of the place, while worn, was no worse than many in the part of town where it had stood for better than seventy years. Mrs. Labrett herself had shown no overt signs of dementia or confusion, and if wearing one's dressing gown late into the day in the privacy of one's own home was grounds for concern then every art student I'd ever known would have been carted off to an assisted living facility for the terminally pajamaed.

No, nothing in particular had struck me as worrying, other than the deep unsettling sense of recognition I'd felt when I'd peered into the pitch black of the old lady's cellar and caught the hint of hunched figures squatting bowlegged at the base of the stairs, limned in a red glow seemingly reflected from the moist glinting eye sockets of their fellow "babies" . . .

It bothered me the rest of that afternoon, this nagging sense of

familiarity which had gripped me gazing down into Mrs. Labrett's cellar. The sensation only intensified on my journey home that evening, and as soon as I let myself in I tossed my things aside and went directly to the lone rickety bookcase shoved behind the fold-down sofa which doubled as my bed.

Flipping past the few cheap paperbacks I'd acquired secondhand but never read, I hauled out art history textbooks I hadn't bothered to peruse since their respective semesters passed back at that "spendy eastcoast" Massachusetts university and the grades of my studies in each class finalized. It was with a minimum-wage earner's sense of value that I'd kept these cumbersome relics of my Miskatonic schooldays, a keen wistfulness for the money they'd cost me to acquire, for the years my Fine Arts degree had carved from my life, and for the lack of immediate fame or fortune or even comfort that graduation and supposed adulthood had brought as I'd dimly, in the recesses of my mind, thought it would or should.

Shallowly skimming text and glossy art plates of old masters and new, I heavily tossed aside first one weighty book, then the next. It was in the third, a smaller and less substantial volume but with denser text than either of the other two, that I found what I sought. With no small sense of guilt I read the embossed stamp on the flyleaf, recognized the peeling yellowed parchment label along the spine, and knew it for a book I'd checked out and never returned to the university library. In my hand the cloth spine creased, falling naturally open to its page most used, one with which I'd obsessed myself an entire semester.

My finger itched and tingled where it rested on the page. It was this very sort of ambient discomfort that had remained with me in the years since I'd first come across this particular work in my studies deep in the library reference stacks. In the grip of my fixation I combed crumbling university archives and scoured every antiquarian bookshop in Essex County with sleepless, feverish determination, possessed, wanting, *needing* to write a paper on the painting. Finally, sick, exhausted, and in danger of failing my other courses, I abandoned the notion, finding no available material about the artist,

though the piece itself appeared in several other library texts and was even now, to my knowledge, on display in the permanent collection of a small but prestigious private Boston museum.

The evening had grown dark without my noticing, so intent had I been on scratching this itchy memory. Absentmindedly fumbling for the room's sole lamp I tugged its chain, tilting the page toward the light to better read the caption under the black-and-white plate of what was most certainly a richly colored original canvas. I imagined deep bloodthirsty hues, wine-stain brown splashes, and wet vermilion splatters overpainted with a darkly transparent bitumen wash. The painting showed a richly-appointed lady's boudoir, the setting probably more an invention of early Victorian pornographic photography than of any truer reflection of historical setting. Spiky potted palms, free-standing columns, and heavy damasked drapes dominated the periphery, and in the background an incongruous painted scrim or screen more appropriate for gothic gaslight theater than for portraiture or still life. Even from the black-and-white plate one got a sense of meta-narrative from the piece, the painting within the painting, artist inviting viewer in on a very deliberate joke—or perhaps it was pure artistic commentary, an acknowledgment of the thin theatrical line between real and unreal.

In the painting's background painting hulked the ruins of a crumbling churchyard, eerily lit with the dancing glow of flames just beyond the frame. In the foreground lounged an odalisque typical for the time in her direct gaze and round-limbed beauty, a forthright display of her nude form to titilate or otherwise engage the viewer, pose and demeanor reminiscent of any of a dozen canvases in the permanent collections of national galleries the world over. What was unusual was the small child—unmistakably a boy, barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty and afraid but with a haunted starkness to his sunken eyes—emerging in a manner implying materialization direct from the backdrop scrim's painted landscape. No seraph or robust cherub as in other classic tableaux, this boy child hunched over the odalisque's ripe naked thigh as if over a slab of bleeding meat, poised to feed face-first on the bared human flesh. In the churchyard behind squatted a ring of bluntly feral doglike creatures all wide-jowled and

point-toothed, gouged eye sockets seeping, expressions lit with predatory hungers having nothing to do with food. The faces of these last tilted forward with an unexpected three-dimensional looming quality, an oddly three-dimensional effect that suggested they were the most imminent figures of the piece, despite being rendered as thrice-removed, painted on a painting in a painting.

Squinting in the dull lamplight I read the attribution I remembered from my research: *Untitled (unknown Canadian artist, c.1919)*. See also *works of* Odilon Redon (1840 –1916), Sidney Herbert Sime (1865 –1941), Richard Upton Pickman (1884 – 1926?).

After a fitful and restless night I returned to work the next day to find an acknowledgment of my field report and a query regarding my opinion about whether any of our fellow agencies should be alerted to possible animal cruelty, or questions of minimum habitability standards on the part of the dwelling. The dithering uncertainty of my reply to the first point served only to annoy my supervisor. In light of my throat-clearing indecisiveness, I tried not to take it as punishment for a mediocre job performance that she elected to send me back to the Labrett place for a follow-up assessment.

I put off the task as long as possible, preferring to spend the entire day wearing the pads off my fingertips with the data-entry of fusty files rather than revisit the unmitigated sweetness of Mrs. Labrett and her tea and face my growing unjustified unease over the lady's so-called babies. No matter how I tried to stall or distract myself, I couldn't erase the uncanny-valley effect of that enigmatic painting's monstrous figures in my imagination, or completely convince myself of their irrelevance to my case.

Especially in those days, before the ubiquitous ease of modern technological communication, it was uncommon but not unheard of for Social Services agents to make home visits after hours. Emergencies might call for such, naturally, but even less urgent matters were sometimes best handled in the evening when clients were sure to be home. As a retiree Mrs. Labrett didn't much fit into this scenario, but I clung to it as standard practice, putting off a return

to that hallway door, those cellar stairs, and whatever things squatted in wait at the bottom, smacking their quivering jowls and licking their long sharp teeth.

It was after dark when I drew my car to the curb opposite Mrs. Labrett's. I was relieved to find the street possessed a less sinister aspect than in the flat white harsh of day. Evening was made mellow, punctuated with the warm yellow glow of dining-room windows. All those neighbors with not much better to do during the afternoons than spy on each other past blind-slats and the ruffled edges of drawn drapes were busy watching television or eating supper. The night was mild for the season, if a bit humid for my tastes; nothing to justify the chill up my spine as I sat in my car across the street from the Labrett house, listening to the engine click and tick while it cooled.

For courage, to make myself feel official and legitimize my presence at least in my own mind, I grabbed the old manila file folder off the seat beside me and clamped it under my arm. Halfway up the narrow cement walk bisecting the browned front yard, I slowed. Unlike neighboring homes Mrs. Labrett's place appeared dark, no yellow incandescence shining from any window to soften the black silhouette of the looming house. When I drew nearer the front porch my relief warred with disappointment on seeing a long vertical sliver of blue television-screen flicker from between heavy curtains in the front window of what must be the living room off to one side of the entry.

My foot hesitated over the first step of the short flight to the porch. Rather than letting footfalls announce my arrival I eased my weight onto the bottom stair, and mounted the next with the same level of what my guilty conscience recognized as stealth. With this concentrated silence I picked my way across the weathered boards of the porch, careful to choose those looking less likely to broadcast my approach by creak or woody groan. If any anonymous neighbors had peered then from the well-lit warmth of their homes they probably could not have seen me crouching under the wide dark-draped window of Mrs. Labrett's living-room on a moonless night. In fact, no one—no *thing*—would have detected my presence at that window, my left eye only faintly illuminated where it peered through the

tiniest gap in the drapes at the startling sight inside, if not for the self-betrayal of my involuntary gasp.

That was it: one tiny startled whoosh of air being sucked into my lungs as I glimpsed the hulking brutish dogthings flanking the old lady where she sat facing the other way on a worn but serviceable sofa, a television flickering silently into the room. The savage scoop-shovel heads popped up at the negligible sound of my intaken breath, impossible to have been heard by human ears through glass, past drapes and humid air and the darkness of night. They were not precisely human, of course; no humanity could exist in such slaving, leering, gristled faces, intently staring with bulging inverted eyes—orbs like split grapes turned inside out, slick and turgid—straight into the visible illuminated sliver of mine. I was again gripped by the uncanny-valley quality of their oozing gaze. Their inhuman reddish orbs sparked with cunning predatory intelligence that may have *once been* human. The only place I've ever seen the like is on Mrs. Labrett's humble living room sofa . . . and in a disturbing nameless painting by an unknown Canadian artist, completed circa 1919.

The slaving fiends bounded off the sofa, howling and cursing. Though I could see only the back of Mrs. Labrett's head silhouetted against the flickering television screen, the stark outline of her skull softened by the grey nimbus of wisps escaping her hairpins, I noted she did not turn, did not move even a little as the beasts scrabbled and slobbered toward me at the window. At their hurtling approach I freed myself from my paralysis and fled, all pretense to stealth gone. I clattered down the wooden porch steps, papers from the manila folder fluttering all around like white pigeons escaping a magician's hat. Behind me I heard the thump of large bodies crashing against the inside of the closed front door, the whack of meaty shoulders slamming into the wood. I slowed, thinking to gather the papers from the muddy path near my feet, but a wordless howl rose from inside the house, accompanied by snarls and moans professing unnameable hungers.

Abandoning the file I stumbled onward, over curb and across street,

in a darkness now complete, no longer dotted with the glowing squares of dining room windows or the heartening yellow globes of porchlights—only with the retinal afterimage of something degraded, something from a pit with a bottom I could never see, that promised an appetite that could never be sated.

I drove away that night and have not gone back. Not to visit Mrs. Labrett, not to my job in Social Services—not even to my sad rundown apartment with the next month's rent looming due. The thing I did return to was my art, and to New England, to study *that* painting. On this tortured canvas lay my irrefutable proof some other nameless undiscovered painter had, at least once, witnessed and been unable to forget whatever creatures had clawed their way up from the world's putrefying bowels into my unremarkable midsized

hometown, only to befriend a lonely old lady who didn't fit in with her neighbors.

If I do go back west after all these years it won't be for my parents, or for my old supervisor, or to assuage the nagging guilt that I should've done something more for the woman who never wanted my intervention or assistance to begin with. No. I spend all my days now locked in my damp basement studio on this far side of the continent, painting and painting and painting. Sometimes I stop, quiet my ragged breaths, press my ear to the packed earth wall's thin veneer of crumbled brick, and listen. I listen, knowing if I ever do find myself compelled to return it will be because I, like that other unknown Canadian artist, work better with a model from life.

Wolf Girl

by Christina Sng

Wolf girl
Gathers berries
In the woods,

Swiftly kills
A wild hare
For food,

Gathers branches
She sharpens
As arrows,

Brings home
Thick logs
For firewood.

She marks
The perimeter
With thorns,

Summons
Her wolf pack
To stand guard

As she reads
To the old woman
Recuperating in bed.

No one
Will ever hurt
Her grandma again,

Not while
She has wolf blood
In her veins,

Not while
She lives
And breathes again.

Poppy's Poppy

by Douglas Gwilym

Sometimes I go into Daddy's office when he's out in the garage or still at work and Marjorie and Mama are too busy to want my help. I'm not really supposed to, because of the time I got into Daddy's stamp collection and reorganized it, but I'm older now. I don't touch anything. I just look. Mama always says it's important to remember that you don't look with your hands.

I look, and he looks back, and I don't touch, but sometimes we talk. He whispers, and I listen and try to say something back that he'd understand. Something about how life is now, about how we're all okay, how he shouldn't worry.

I think he worries.

He sat there on top of Daddy's computer desk for a long time before I noticed him. Probably longer than I've been around, since when there was only Marjorie. He's in a frame, but I don't think it bothers him. It's got pretty green and red stones around it, and there's a sparkle like that near his eyes (even if it is black-and-white), so it seems like a good place for him.

He has Daddy's black eyebrows and his eyes look the way Daddy's look when he says, "Elizabeth, this is very serious," and his hair is short but curly, and parted funny to either side, like he doesn't have hair at all but feathers. If I hold my hand over those eyebrows and eyes and the feathers, it's just nose and mouth and chin, and it looks like me, even with the shiny bristle mustache. Like if I opened my mouth and talked in that room by myself, those lips and teeth and tongue would move too, and tell me-and-only-me things reflections in mirrors never do.

He doesn't look like Marjorie at all.

Marjorie says he doesn't look like any of us, that he looks old and dead and flat as a pancake. She says Daddy told her he was Poppy's poppy, that he was my grandpa's grandpa, and when she says the word "was" she says it like she thinks it matters a lot. "He's not a person anymore, Elizabeth," she says. "He lived a long long time ago, and he's gone."

But he's there. He's right there between Daddy's old monitor (so old it doesn't have a touch screen and it's just like a tv) and the stack of books he never finishes. He's there and I can tell he matters.

Yesterday, it rained. Marjorie didn't want to go outside, but the puddles were really good and I asked and asked and you know grandma says "the squeaky wheel," which means "always ask." So Marjorie stood under the porch watching me, making sure I didn't fall into any of the puddles and disappear. She wasn't happy about it, and sniffed a lot and pulled her sweater into her armpits. Finally, she just went in. I knew I wasn't going to fall down any puddles anyway.

Not with Poppy's poppy in the house.

He was the reason when I fell off my training-wheel bike and knocked out my front teeth that it hadn't been worse, that I hadn't *died*.

I'm not stupid. I know about death. When Grandma goes to Poppy's grave, I know what it means. He's under the ground. Like Ms. Boodles, my turtle. I put her in a shoebox and Daddy played the

harmonica and I put the dirt down myself, even if I felt like I wouldn't have wanted Ms. Boodles to see me do it.

Poppy's poppy should have been dead--I knew that, because Daddy said he was born exactly a hundred years before I was--but Poppy's poppy wasn't. He'd sat on tables and desks and even hung on the wall. He watched out for us, the "sons of his sons," he said. Except now there weren't any sons. Just me and Marjorie. And he wanted us to know that that was okay. That he loved us too. That he'd keep us safe until we had sons of our own. That he had ways to keep us safe because he was a *swordserer*.

I danced in the rain, and I could almost see him peeking around the clouds, keeping me from falling down puddles into Hell or coal mines or whatever.

And then it wasn't raining enough, and the puddles were all splashed out, and I started to think about what if I did fall down a puddle and disappear, and Marjorie wasn't there to call the fire department or whatever. So I went in the back door by the garage, peeling my clothes off and feeling a little sore, and when I came through the door into Daddy's office, she was standing there, right there, holding Poppy's poppy and looking at him like he was giving her that look, like he was saying something to her she didn't want to miss.

Which was wrong, and made me feel like somebody was poking me in my belly with a stick.

"Elizabeth," Marjorie was saying, "have you been touching this? You mustn't touch it."

I said no. Because you have to say no to Marjorie when she says things like that.

"Don't be such a *liar*. I can see your fingerprints on it." She didn't say "him," she said "it," but I knew what she was thinking. I knew what she wanted. She wanted to take him away from me. She wanted him for herself.

I got crafty. I told her okay, that I wouldn't, but that she shouldn't touch him either, because he was important to Daddy. That she should put Poppy's poppy down. "Now," I said.

She made a squished bug face and slapped at me with the hand she wasn't using to hold Poppy's poppy away from me.

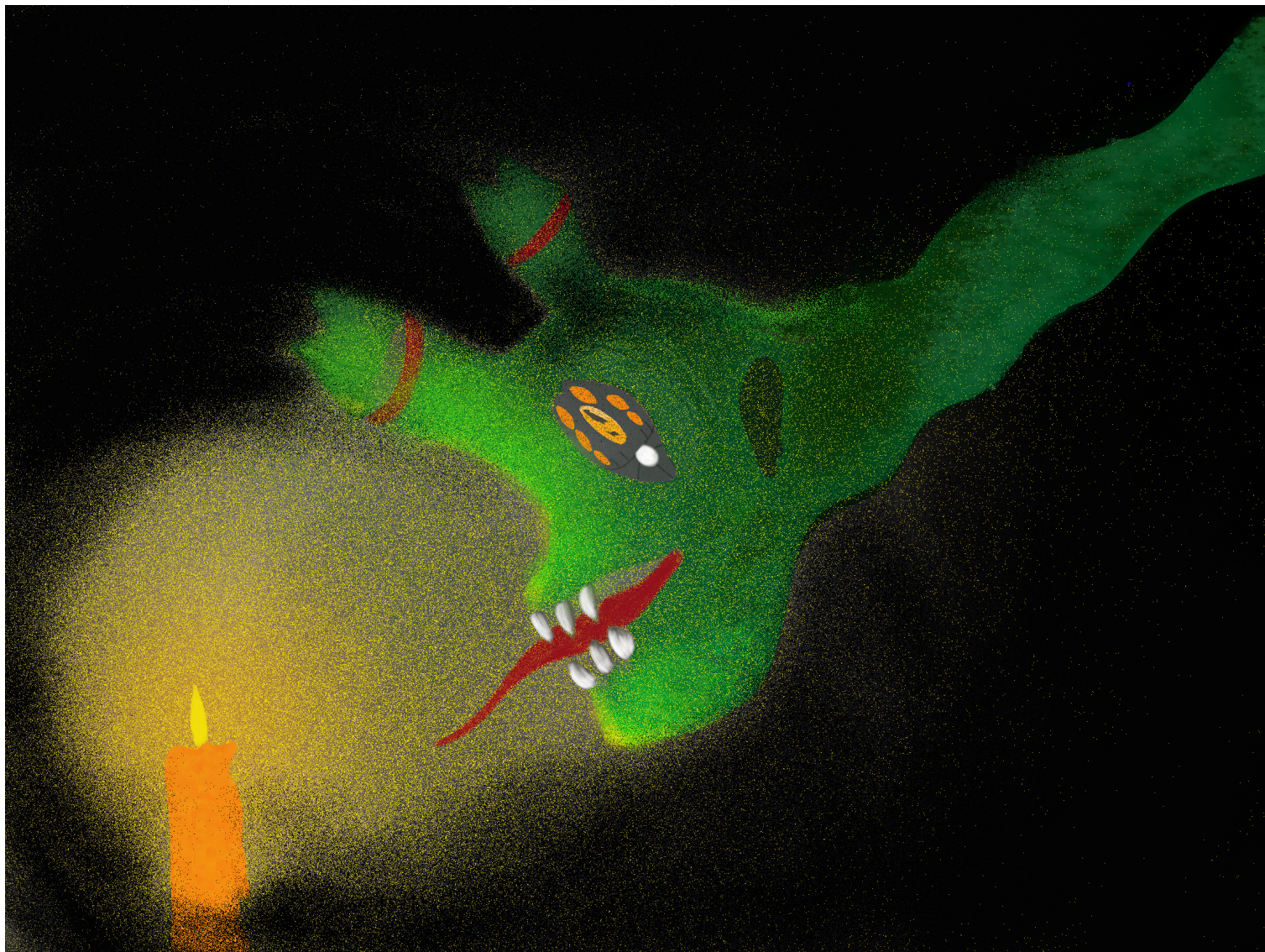
The door was still open behind us. And the rain started to pick up again. I thought of the puddles, and then I thought of Poppy's poppy. He'd always protected us. I had to protect him.

I planted my feet and I ducked under her arm and I grabbed him with both hands. The glass clanked against the frame in my hands. Marjorie slid on the water we'd tracked on the floor and fell out onto the cement, out onto where I lost my teeth. She fell backward and made an ugly sound.

We had to go to the hospital. Poppy's poppy says it's okay. I'm hugging him in his frame and nobody's telling me I shouldn't. Mama and Daddy are crying, but Poppy's poppy says it will be okay. He's always taken care of us.

Marjorie was never going to have sons. Not like my sons, he says. Of course not.

Marjorie doesn't look like him at all.



beckoning in the light

by Ritiksha Sharma

Umbrella

by Anne Carly Abad

If under the umbrella of a flower
you should find a pair of feet
kiss a petal to ease
the creature's shyness.

Offer your pinkie to hold
and walk it to your hallway
where the ants have broken off
their wings.

Look away while it chooses
a few pieces with which to fly back home.

If a match is made,
your hairs will prickle
with a chirp that only your soul can hear.

The creature is offering you
one breath to name anything
so ask of it
to call pain 'pleasure'
or to christen death 'life'—
a chance you may never again come by
to nod as the doctor says it's time
and smile as people come up to you
to tell you you're strong.

Workshop Without End, Amen

by Toni Artuso

Huffing, cradling a sheaf of papers to her ample bosom, Wilma burst into the classroom in a whirl of floral skirts, the rose-scented wave of her perfume wafting in in her wake. She slid into one of the old-fashioned student desk chairs with the built-in writing table. Three members of the workshop—Phyllis, Walt, and Langston—sat calmly in their seats, patiently awaiting her. Each offered their tardy classmate bemused, forgiving smiles. The fourth member, Sylvia, made a show of checking her wristwatch before offering Wilma a wry smirk. Ignoring Sylvia and catching her breath, Wilma turned to the professor.

“First of all, John, congratulations! You got your portrayal of angels right. To get here just now, I had to detour around a couple of them shamelessly copulating in the hall. That’s why I’m late.” She craned her neck to look beyond John, who sat immediately to her left, to fix her gaze on Sylvia, who shrugged dismissively.

John, though clearly the eldest of the group, actually compressed his frame into one of the student chairs in the circle, offering visible testimony of how seriously he took his pledge of treating his students as equals. “That’s redundant, you know, Wilma,” he observed with his usual fastidiousness in his upper-class British accent. “After all, in a prelapsarian state, which angels enjoy, there is no such thing as ‘shame.’ And I would think that you, of all people, would appreciate that. After all, you spent most of your life on Earth ashamed of your gender variance. Now, you feel no shame in being openly female.”

“That’s old news, John. I got over that before I turned 60. By the way, I know we have all eternity, but why are we waiting to get started? Time’s wingèd chariot and all that ...”

“Andy’s not here so let’s not pick at his stuff, okay?” Sylvia observed tartly as she examined the perfectly manicured nails of her right hand.

“Is that who we’re waiting for?” Wilma asked.

John shook his head. “No, my erstwhile amanuensis is not in this workshop. We’ve got plenty of 17th century representation already. After all, you’ve got me, and I’m not exactly chopped liver, you know? No, we’re waiting for a guest.”

“Speaking of who is or isn’t in the workshop, with all due respect,” Wilma nodded to Sylvia, then turned to John, “why is *she* here? I thought if you committed suicide you weren’t allowed to pass ‘Go’ or collect \$200 but went straight to hell.”

Langston, who sat across the circle from Wilma, let out a little chortle, earning himself a venomous stare from Sylvia. She whirled on Wilma, “As a trans person,” she observed tartly, “I’d think you’d have more sympathy for a suicide like me. After all, enough of your trans brothers and sisters offed themselves ...”

“Well, I wasn’t one of them. I died of natural causes ...”

John cleared his throat with stentorian force. “I think we’re a little off topic here, ladies. Remember, this is a poetry workshop, not group therapy.”

Wilma shrugged, conceding the point. “Well, what *is* the topic? Why am I here? What do I need to resolve?”

John held up a bony finger. “Remember, ‘Those also serve who only stand and wait.’”

“Yes, John, but your sight has been restored to you.”

“And your gender has been restored to you, woman.”

At that moment, a young woman, looking like a coed straight out of the 1950s, complete with poodle skirt and saddle shoes, stepped into the classroom. Wilma’s jaw dropped. “Mom!” she gasped. “It is you, right? I mean, I never saw you like this, in your—what? your early 20s—but, somehow, I know it’s you.”

“Of course, she’s late, too,” Sylvia tisked aloud to no one in particular. “Like mother, like daughter.”

Ignoring Sylvia, Wilma’s mother dropped down in the vacant chair in the circle to Wilma’s right. “That makes two of us. After all, I never saw you this way,” she gestured vaguely with her unadorned left hand in Wilma’s general direction. “When I knew you at this age, you were not my daughter but my son, William.”

“Now we can commence,” John beamed. “Wilma, you have sufficient numbers of copies of your poem to distribute to everyone? Ah! Splendid! Please pass them ’round.” He reached a ruffle-encrusted hand toward Wilma.

Fingering the sheaf of papers she’d brought in, Wilma hesitated. “I’m not sure I’d have brought this one if I’d known who’d be in the audience.”

“Nonsense,” John waved a hand airily. “Proceed, madam.”

Reluctantly, she handed the sheets to John, who passed them to Sylvia. When all the students held a copy in hand, Wilma reluctantly cleared her throat and began to read:

GENERATION TRANS

Clearly the eldest in the room, I shift
uncomfortably in the church folding chair,
tugging the hem of my cat-print sweater dress.

I identify myself as *she/her*,
in a voice so croaky I cringe. The young
pixie-cut next to me, purple swish

of bangs falling in a swoop to eye-level,
introduces herself as Quincy.
Ice duly broken, sharing commences.

Quincy huffs, “My mother is clueless,” tosses
on the table a pack of lip gloss their mom
stuffed in their Christmas stocking. “Up for grabs.”

Michelle, the only other transperson here
above their twenties, snags the recycled gift.
Elisheva, a transwoman with a beard

full as mine when I tried to pass for male,
says, “My rabbi makes everyone in the synagogue
name their pronouns now, but one boomer

keeps rolling his eyes like it’s a big deal,
an imposition.” I tug at the scarf
strategically knotted to hide my Adam’s apple.

#

Next month, at the trans conference downtown,
I get lunch with my girlfriends, Suzanne and Rachael,
at the Panera next to our hotel.

Behind us, a couple with two school-age kids

hustles them through picking sandwiches, soups.
Glancing back, they all look cisgendered to me,

yet, they wear conference badges. I try to
imagine my own mother taking me
to meet other trans folk—and utterly fail.

Wilma considered the poker-faced reaction of the group before
settling down to await the first comment.

Phyllis cleared her throat. “In the sixth line, I realize ‘pixie-cut’ is
meant to synecdoche, but I think something akin to ‘young person
with a pixie-cut’ would be clearer.”

Nodding, Wilma made notes on her copy.

“‘Uncomfortably’ in the second line is redundant. A comfortable
church folding chair would be an oxymoron,” Langston laughed.

Her mother huffed, “It’d be just as much of an oxymoron to say a
transgender conference in the 1960s.” She scowled at Wilma, whose
pen paused as she looked up.

“Actually, Lousie,” John intoned, “the more appropriate term is
‘anachronism.’”

“The point I’m trying to make,” Louise leaned forward to meet
John’s gaze, “is that William can’t imagine me taking him to a
conference like that because back when he was little there weren’t
any such things.”

Wilma winced. “Mother, that’s my *dead* name.” She muttered under
her breath, “And, like the poem says, my pronouns are *she/hers*.”

John placed a calming hand on Wilma’s shoulder but leaned forward
to speak directly to her mother, “Louise, whom are you addressing?

There’s no one here by that name.”

Louise sighed, exasperated. “I’m talking to my son.”

“Son, madam?” John cocked his head inquisitively. “Your son,
Donald, isn’t here.”

“Okay,” Louise threw up her hands. “I’m talking to my child who is
here.”

“That would be Wilma,” John gestured to his right.

“Or you can call me ‘Kay,’” Wilma put in.

Louise compressed her lips, then went ahead, “Look, dear, nobody
knew anything about people like you when you were little. What was
I supposed to do?”

“Come on, Mom!” Wilma threw up her hands in turn. “How many times
did you tell me that, just because everyone else was doing something
wrong, it didn’t make it right for me? The same applied to you!”

* * *

Next session, when Wilma swept into the room, Sylvia checked her
wristwatch and offered her a painted-on smile. “Five minutes early
this time,” she clucked. “You’re improving.”

Wilma regarded Sylvia narrowly. “Perhaps we could get started—
with you this time, Sylvia. I started last time, after all.”

John cleared his throat. “Much as I would like to commence
forthwith, ladies, we, alas, must await another guest.”

Wilma cocked a skeptical eyebrow. “Another guest? Surely, it’s not
my mother again. What now, my dad?”

“No,” John shook his head.

“Maybe someone else should have a guest then,” Wilma suggested hopefully.

“We shall see,” John shrugged. “All in good time, Wilma.”

They sat in silence, then, Sylvia checking her watch periodically and Wilma fidgeting, tugging at the hem of her skirt. Finally, Sylvia sighed in exasperation, “This is worse than last time. Then Wilma was five minutes late, and Louise came right after her. It’s already been ten minutes ...”

“Sounds like the right timing for my ex,” Wilma muttered, then hissed as if stung. “Shannon,” she gasped as a young woman in a corduroy skirt and clogs clomped in. “Speak of the devil ...”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Bill,” she offered sarcastically and sank into the empty desk to Wilma’s right.

“That’s my—”

Shannon waved a dismissive hand. “I know, I know, that’s your,” here, she made air quotes, ““dead name.””

“Then why’d you use it?” Wilma huffed.

“Ladies,” John chided. “Shall we begin? Wilma, please pass your poem ...”

Wilma rolled her eyes. “Why can’t someone else start this time? I did last session.”

John held out an insistent hand, and, with a reluctant sigh, Wilma surrendered her sheaf of poems. She didn’t wait for the papers to go completely around before reading.

CORONAVIRUS CONVENIENCE

i. Pat

After a decade of denial—ten bosses come and gone—John, the last one, hired an outsider over my head. Finally,

I admitted to myself that beyond the horizon no promotion waited so I announced my retirement. My last day,

Friday the Thirteenth, John chose to work from home, huddling safely behind the excuse of flattening the curve, not having to face

someone whose loyalty his company punished.

ii. Betty

Every fortnight, my eldest, Jane, trekked to see me at the nursing home, bringing mail, small talk. She thought I didn’t notice her

wrinkling her nose at the sanitary stench or checking her watch. Knowing the answer, she’d ask if her brothers called. Sadly, I’d shake my head.

“Out of an abundance of caution,” she said, she stopped coming but rang ’til her calls stuttered then ceased, even as the virus began stalking

the wards, emptying beds of friends, neighbors.

iii. Terry

Despite appeals to logic, reason, facts of viral spread, Shannon flew on a near-empty plane to celebrate the birthday of a friend,

a man with whom she’d corresponded secretly for years, whom she visited faithfully

one week each month after her announcement

our thirty-year marriage was over. Possessed by a dread of COVID, she declared it unsafe to leave him, willing hostage of a pandemic

whose power she said she only now grasped.

Wilma looked up. Shannon started to speak but gagged, her face turning red.

“Are you all right?” Wilma leaned over, concerned.

John shrugged. “She’s fine. Why don’t I start instead, until Shannon’s, uh, sorted her thoughts?” He turned to Wilma. “I’m concerned that this poem is too deeply embedded in the context of a particular time. I believe this relates to the pandemic of 2020. Perhaps you should have chosen a more universal subject.”

Walt leaned forward. “With all due respect,” he said, tugging at his whiskers. “There’s nothing wrong with a piece being enmeshed in its time. After all, ‘O Captain! My Captain!’, for example, is very much rooted in a time and place: America that triumphant—and tragic—spring of ’65.”

“Truly, it was a momentous time in our country. After all, Juneteenth commemorates that period, but,” Phyllis shook her head, “you, Walt, chose a universal metaphor, that of the ship captain stricken down after guiding his vessel safely through a storm. This poem lacks such a universal trope. In fact, it lacks a single trope.”

“You have a good point,” Langston observed laconically. “That’s why I chose to write of rivers. You, on the other hand, chose to celebrate George Washington, a slaveowner, one of our oppressors.”

“It’s a lie,” Shannon finally managed to rasp out. “I never had, uh, an,

uh,” here, she began gasping again, “affair.”

John looked on her distress impassively. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Shannon. You’re just a guest in my workshop so I can’t fail you, but I am honor bound to let your Legal Ethics instructor, Ruth, know you’ve been lying, and *she’ll* fail you, and you don’t want to have to repeat Legal Ethics again, do you?”

Recovering, Shannon sat upright, gulping. “What is this—some kind of extracurricular test?”

John shrugged and gestured vaguely around the room. “Everything here’s an assessment.”

Regaining her composure, Shannon fixed a withering gaze on John. “I still don’t see how it’s the business of a 17th century English poet to tell a 21st century American jurist what to do.”

John looked down his patrician nose at Shannon. “Unlike you, madam, I’m determined to behave honorably, as are all the faculty here, even the lawyers.”

Flushing again, Shannon shrugged, “All right, but there’s more than one side to this story, and that’s all he—”

“You mean ‘she,’” John interrupted.

“Whatever!” Shannon threw up her hands. “All I’m saying is that this poem is very one-sided. After all, I thought I married a normal man, and, instead, I got *this*.” She waved her hands generally in Wilma’s direction. “Talk about bait-n-switch! That’s ample justification for doing what I did.”

“That was my mother’s excuse,” Wilma observed icily. “It seems like transphobia justifies a world of sins.”

“Well, like your mother, I didn’t grow up knowing there was anything like a transperson.”

“That’s right,” Wilma observed sarcastically, “they didn’t even have burritos in 1950’s Vermont, when you were a kid, let alone anything exotic as a trannie.”

“Exactly! How was I supposed to know what I was getting myself into?”

“And you grew to accept, even enjoy, burritos. I guess trannies are different,” Wilma shook her head.

* * *

Before entering the classroom this time, Wilma hesitated at the threshold, puzzlement creasing her brow. Sylvia, already seated in her usual spot, looked up.

“How is it you’re always here before me? Heck, you’re here before anyone else,” Wilma gestured around the otherwise empty room, the clicks of her high heels echoing as she finally entered. “Do you ever leave this place?”

“Believe me,” Sylvia sighed, “I wish I could ...”

Shrugging, Wilma took her spot one desk away from Sylvia, though every other seat stood open to her. The others filtered in. When John took his seat between her and Sylvia, Wilma regarded him expectantly. He pointed at the empty desk to Wilma’s right. “We shall commence upon our guest’s arrival.”

“*Another* guest?” Wilma practically whined. “This is starting to feel like the TV show *This Is Your Life*.”

“How do you think *I* feel?” Sylvia huffed. “Having to deal with all the issues from your past? I’m bored stiff.”

Wilma regarded her classmate. “Maybe this is purgatory for me, but it seems like hell for you.”

John shook his head. “Ladies, please keep the metaphysical speculations to a minimum. We’re here to discuss poetry.”

A short young woman in her late twenties or early thirties, wearing a red jumper and sneakers, walked into the classroom.

Wilma’s jaw dropped, and she winced in pain. “Kat, honey,” she moaned. “What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here. You should be taking care of your kids. Aren’t they ready to go to college?”

Katherine plopped into the open seat to Wilma’s right and smirked. “It’s nice to see you, too, Dad,” she laughed. “And don’t worry about Kay and Lou. They’ve both got graduate degrees, careers, and families of their own, which makes you a great-grandma.”

Wilma licked her lips. “How is that possible, hon? You don’t look a day over thirty.”

“Dad, you don’t look a day over thirty yourself. In fact, I’ve never seen you this young before—except in pictures.”

“Perhaps I can explain,” John interrupted. “You see, Wilma, time doesn’t move on this side of the veil like it does on the other.”

Katherine, looking wise beyond her years, nodded sagely in agreement. “Yeah, Dad, I lived well into my triple digits.”

“Congratulations! Your great-grandpa and grandfather never made it past 98.” Wilma shook her head. “I don’t see how that’s possible that you’re here if you lived that long.” She whirled on John. “So how long have I been here?”

John shrugged. “That not a relevant question, really. Things can go faster or slower on this side, and time can go forward or backward.”

Wilma cradled her head in her hands. “Just trying to wrap my mind

around that gives me a headache.”

John sniffed. “Perhaps, then, you should focus on the task at hand and pass out your poem.”

Wilma did, then began reading:

THE PRESENT

Just as the trailing end of a string rivets
our cat’s gaze, mine fixes on the silver speck
sparkles on my daughter’s tights as she descends
the stairs to breakfast. I squirm in my seat

as I recognize her leggings. I bought
them years ago as a present for my wife.
I handed them to her, hopeful she’d
look as good in them as the catalog model.

I never found out. She never wore them.
Unfulfilled, I forgot my fantasies,
until now, with my ninth grader filling
them. Silently, I applaud her aesthetic

but dread the fancies she will spark in others.
Her mother bustles in the room, huffing
that our child has raided her dresser.
I keep mum about missed opportunities.

“I’ll start,” Sylvia jumped in immediately, quickly breaking the agonizing silence that usually followed Wilma’s reading. “This poem is not only about missed opportunities, but it *is* a missed opportunity. *We* know that the writer is transfemale, but the average reader won’t, and that fact alone changes the entire meaning of the poem.”

On the other side of the circle, Langston grunted. “How so?”

Sylvia peered across at him. “The speaker bought those leggings for herself, but she was afraid to wear them because she hadn’t come out yet. *That’s* the missed opportunity.”

Beside Langston, Walt stirred himself. “Does a poet really have to reveal his or her full biography in every poem? After all, shouldn’t we leave the critics and professors some work?”

Wilma cleared her throat. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, Walt, I actually agree with Sylvia here. No reader’s going to know what was really going on with me. After all, who’s going to care about my biography?”

Phyllis, to Sylvia’s left, leaned forward. “You’d be surprised, Wilma, who looks at your work after you’re gone.”

“What?” Wilma scowled. “Are you saying some professor’s going to waste his or her time explicating my stuff?”

John cleared his throat with another of his stentorian coughs. “Katherine, perhaps you’d care to offer some observations about this poem.” He peered over his spectacles at her.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I think the focus of this poem isn’t necessarily the speaker so much as the mother, and *her* missed opportunity. She could have chosen to engage with her spouse over this but didn’t. Now her daughter’s showing her up.”

Wilma snorted ruefully. “You did that in more ways than one, hon. After all, you accepted me for who I was long before she did.” She shook her head. “In fact, I don’t think she ever will, even now, even, well,” she threw up her hands, indicating the classroom, “after this she wouldn’t admit, well ...” Wilma shrugged.

“That she had an affair?” Kat prompted.

Wilma looked at the floor. “Yes,” she muttered.

Katherine leaned forward and put her hand on her parent's wrist. "Look, Dad, I've forgiven Ma for drawing me into her lies to you."

Wilma looked up. "When did that happen?"

Kat sat back and considered the ceiling tiles above her head. "When I realized it wasn't *my* lie, after all. She imposed it on me. I mean, you know what that's like."

"How so?" Wilma arched a well-manicured, if skeptical, eyebrow.

"After all, you had a lie imposed on you, by grandma and grandpa, for over 50 years before you came out and transitioned."

At the end of the session, after Walt, Langston, and Phyllis meandered out, Wilma, Katherine, and John stood. Only Sylvia remained fixed in place, seated.

John reached out. "It was a pleasure to get to know you, Wilma," he said, giving her red-tipped fingers a perfunctory shake with his bony hand. "I wish you all the best."

Wilma frowned at this. "Thanks, I think, but you make it sound like I won't be seeing you again."

"No," John shook his head. "The semester is over."

"Already?" Wilma frowned. "That was fast."

"As I said earlier, time does not move on this side as it does on the other," John sniffed. "And you needn't repeat the course next term."

"You mean I passed?" Wilma gasped.

"Yes, you can accompany your daughter. I believe she's anxious to introduce some relatives you've yet to meet."

Katherine beamed. "Yeah," she tugged on her mother's elbow. "I want you to meet Lou and Kay's kids."

As Wilma and Katherine turned to follow in John's wake out the classroom door, Sylvia called out from behind them. "Wilma, feel free to come audit my class, if you'd like."

Wilma turned. "You're teaching this workshop next semester?"

Sylvia nodded. "Yes, John's taking a break, so I get a turn."

"Well, thank you kindly for the offer. Can I take a raincheck?"

"There's no rush, Wilma." Sylvia shrugged. "We've got all eternity."

The Hook

by Adele Gardner

Geremica spun three blue wheels and hooked a star
while she waited for Sal to get over himself
and come back as a human popsicle.

She wanted her turn in the snow.

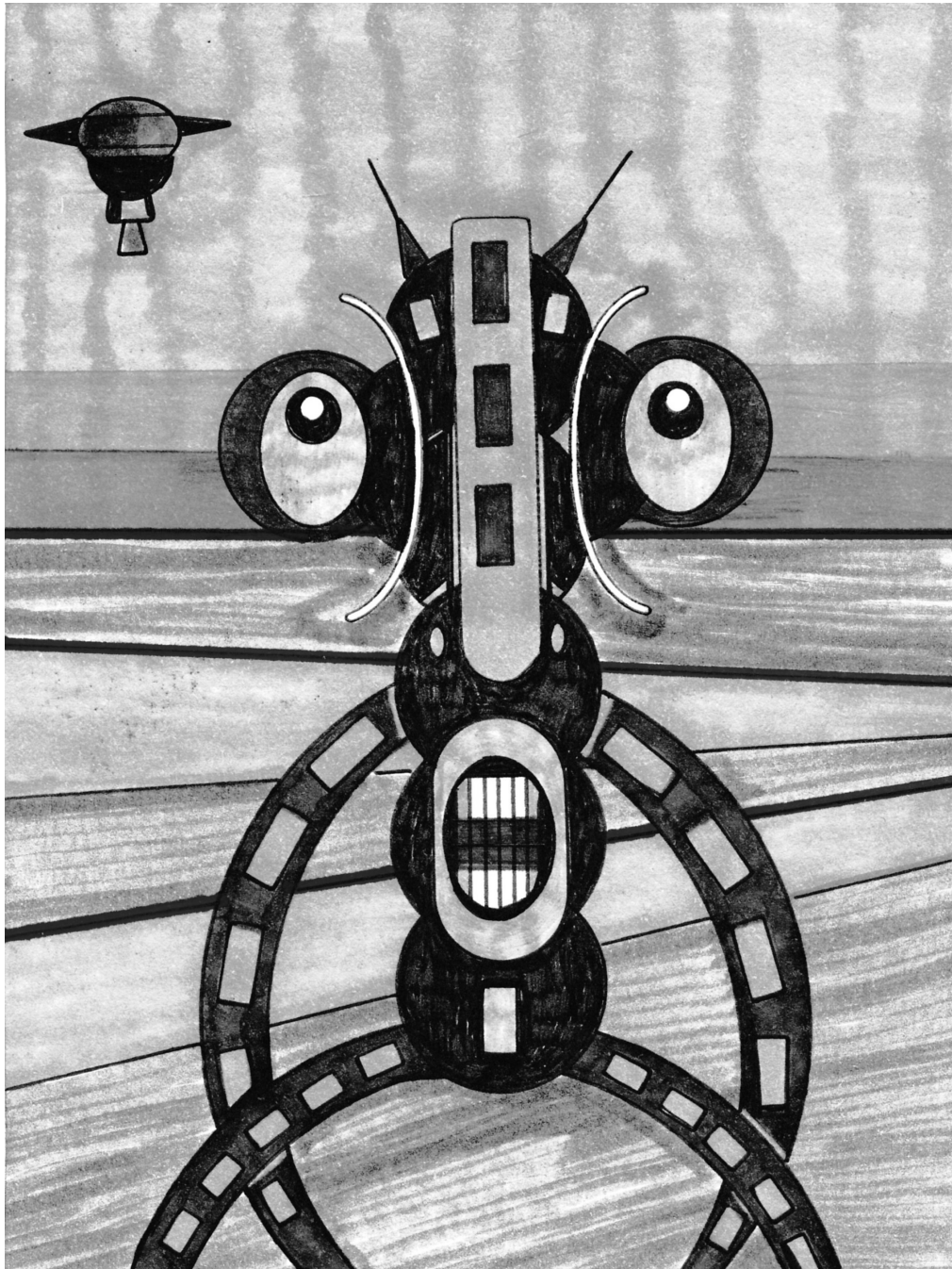
The moment the door opened,
she flattened herself against the ice blocks
till he slid through to melt into a puddle
of green and purple on the hearth mold.
She couldn't help it: she cackled as she spun
out the front door into the starry night,
where each snowflake was another
miniature world, while he gelled
in the mold back into an unreasonable
facsimile of human flesh. The idiot
hadn't bothered to check, as usual, just
left everything to her, and he hadn't
noticed she'd switched out his standard

six-foot shape for a koala bear dressed
like Santa Claus. As she turned her
face up to the snow that fell like stars,
and opened her mouth to swallow worlds,
she tried to ignore the dread looming
behind her like a cave opening.

The Big Ones were coming.

She vibrated to the frequency
of their stomps.

She spun around,
dancing so she'd be harder to catch, spinning
her rotors while she could, lifting off
the ground a few more feet with each
bounding step, trying to ignore
the knowledge that
her turn would come.



Cargo Drop

by Denny E. Marshall

Black Hole

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy*
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I.

1.

L arch Aukai's sleep was cut short by the control mechanisms that continuously monitored shipboard conditions, which had initiated a very slow waking up process that would bring Aukai and other travelers in the CS *Elysium* back to alertness.

For a long while, he felt torpid and confused. As full awareness returned, his first thought was one of relief: their ordeal was over and the trip was only three months or less away from their destination, just enough time to carry out the host of activities necessary to prepare for landing. As he became fully conscious, however, he realized there were distress signals coming from various systems in the spaceship. He got up and shuffled his way to the command and control room, the heart of the vessel.

The onboard navigation systems instantly showed him where the spaceship was, and he was not pleased. The New Ark expedition's target was Kepler-452b, a small planet tucked away in a corner of the galaxy. Kepler-452b was a near twin to the Earth and had been for centuries the subject of covetous attention by humans anxious to abandon the mother planet. It was, however, 1,400 light-years away, so that even with the most advanced spacecraft design available in the late twenty-fifth century, it would take the expeditioners fifteen hundred years to get there. By that time, life on Earth would surely have come to an end: the planet would be like an abandoned ship,

looted, cannibalized, and ultimately destroyed by its own inhabitants, circling silently around an indifferent sun.

Aukai looked at the chronograph on his left wrist and his heart skipped a beat. They had traveled for only 614 years, so they were way short of their destination. They had, however, gone well beyond the outer limits of the solar system and were literally in the middle of nowhere.

Why had their voyage been disturbed? The videos that recorded the progress of the trip had the answer: the ship had been bombarded by countless small meteorites travelling at very high speeds, some of which had managed to penetrate the thick metallic skin of the *Elysium* and had caused still unassessed damage. Together, the myriad impacts had also stricken the vessel like a powerful fist and had driven it off course. At the moment, the spaceship found itself in a relatively empty region of the cosmos, one devoid of stars; ahead, however, there was a faint light, and the vessel seemed to be progressing towards it.

Much of the flight crew and some of the passengers were awake and walking about in disarray. The Captain, Lord Thaddeus Stal, was at one of the navigation panels. Stal was an old apparatchik who, from the moment of his appointment as expedition leader by the rulers of the Righteous World Empire, had involved himself with every detail of the "New Ark" mission to Kepler-452b, from the species of plant and animal life that would be selected to the makeup of the crew and the fortunate passengers. He knew the mission better than any person alive; yet, at the moment he seemed as surprised as anyone at the unexpected turn of events.

"Have you figured out yet what happened, Aukai?" asked Stal.

“My Lord, from the videos and the event recorder, it seems that several years ago, when we crossed the region of the Oort Cloud, we were struck by thousands of fast-moving meteorites and driven off course. The *Elysium*’s outer skin absorbed most of the hits and the onboard systems have repaired much of the damage automatically, but some meteorites pierced through into the ship and made us start losing internal pressurization slowly. We just reached a pressurization level low enough that it called for alarms to go off and revivals to be initiated.”

“Is the mission in any danger?”

“The repairs have already started, and flight can continue normally through a combination of redundant and backup systems. However ...”

“However what?” asked Stal sharply.

“We are detecting a strange energy source ahead that radiates gamma particles and X rays into space.”

Stal was a good administrator but not much of a physicist. “What does that mean?”

Aukai tried to choose his words carefully, so as to convey the seriousness of the situation without causing undue panic. “Sir, often one finds that type of radiation in the vicinity of a black hole.”

2.

Aukai and Amber, his wife of twenty-nine years, were on the flagship vessel, the CS *Elysium*, and were among the first humans scheduled to set foot on Kepler-452b. Thousands of other colonists were onboard the two hundred and twenty-seven ships that would carry away the selected few people chosen for survival.

Shortly after the takeoff from the chosen departure points from Earth, Aukai and the passengers of all ships had gone into suspended

animation, in cryogenically maintained containers that preserved them unharmed in an environment extremely close to death but capable of returning them to a normal living state when needed. Thus, like barely alive mummies, they had traveled for centuries just to leave the confines of the solar system, a one-way trip for which there was to be no return.

3.

It was several hours before Aukai could return to the cabin he shared with his wife. As they sat next to each other in the flimsy plastic chairs sipping their first glasses of wine in years, Amber noticed the grim expression on his face: “What’s wrong, Larch? Is the damage to the ship serious?”

“We are better off than most ships in the mission. Two dozen were destroyed or quickly became depressurized from meteorite impacts, with the loss of all hands. We are assessing whether we can transfer the crews and passengers of some ships that have been seriously damaged to others that are in better shape. It’s going to be messy for the next few weeks.”

“But the mission can continue, yes?” she pleaded.

“I hope so,” replied Aukai lamely.

“What are you not telling me?” Amber knew her husband’s moods well, particularly his reluctance to give her bad news.

“We are having trouble ourselves changing course.”

“We are no longer headed for Kepler-452b?”

“No, and the direction in which we are going is worrisome.”

“Why is that?”

“There is a black hole in our path. Unless we can change course, we

may be getting close to it in less than a month.”

“Why can’t we change course to steer away from it?”

Aukai grimaced. “We don’t know. The attitude control system of the *Elysium* may be damaged, although it shows no signs of malfunctioning. Or perhaps the gravitational pull of the black hole may already be too strong for us to get away from it.”

“Are you afraid?” Amber asked.

“Not for myself, but I fear what may happen to you if things go wrong.”

“I don’t fear death, for my life has already been filled to the brim with our love. As Juliet told Romeo, ‘My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.’”

Amber said nothing else but clung to her husband seeking, or perhaps trying to provide, reassurance. They held each other in a silent embrace for a long, long time.

4.

Over the next few days, attempts were made to jerk the *Elysium* into a different course by momentarily firing the fusion-antimatter nuclear pulse propulsion units while trying to veer the spaceship away from the black hole, whose very dim luminescence grew a little brighter by the day. All attempts failed, and it became clear to the crew that the hole was holding the craft in a mortal embrace.

After the fifth day of fruitless maneuvers, Stal convened an emergency meeting of the crew. Without preamble, he summarized the situation:

“All but two of the ships on the fleet have managed to evade the attraction of the black hole and are attempting to resume the mission.

Only the *Resolute* and us appear to be trapped. Our calculations show that we will be drawn into the hole in a few days, unless we can change course and steer away.

“I’m giving us a couple more days of trying to get free. If we haven’t succeeded by then we will launch the escape pods and radio the other ships to come back and pick us up. There is no guarantee we’ll survive, but here we are sitting ducks anyway. Any questions?”

There was a momentary pause and then a score of hands went up. Aukai was one of those with questions. His question was:

“Do we have enough escape pods for everybody?”

Stal gave him a nasty look. “We have one hundred and twenty pods, each with capacity for four people. So, we can accommodate four hundred and eighty evacuees. There are five hundred and thirty passengers and twenty-five crew members onboard the *Elysium*. Seventy-five people will have to be left behind.”

A clamor of protests followed Stal’s announcement. He waited for the ruckus to subside and went on: “We’ll call for volunteers, and if there are not enough people willing to be left behind, we’ll draw lots for the rest.”

5.

Three days later, the situation was no better and the *Elysium* was drawn into a hasty evacuation mode. Two passengers had died during the flight, so seventy-three passengers and crew had to be selected as sacrificial offerings to the black hole. Aukai, nine other crew members and five passengers volunteered to stay, and lots were drawn for the remaining fifty-eight spots. Amber was one of the volunteers; she resolutely rejected Aukai’s pleas to save herself. “My life is empty without you. If you stay, I stay.”

Contrary to the naval traditions, Stal refused to volunteer to go down with his ship and was not chosen in the drawing of the doomed. “I

must survive to lead the New Ark mission to its destination,” was his excuse. He would be on the first escape pod to leave the *Elysium*.

6.

Aukai and Amber watched, from the observation deck of a deserted command and control room, as the last escape pod issued from the *Elysium*’s belly. “Will they make it?” asked Amber, undisguised rancor in her voice.

“I don’t know,” replied Aukai. “The pods were released pointing away from the black hole. The initial thrust of their engines may have been enough to overcome the gravitational pull of the hole; we never tried to compute their probability of escaping, since under the circumstances it would have been futile to do so.”

“I hate myself for wishing ill on others, but I’m hoping that Stal doesn’t get away,” declared Amber. Aukai was not in the mood to argue with his wife and squeezed her hand tightly as they watched the pod fly into the cosmos’ eternal night.

7.

A week later, very strong bursts of radiation from the black hole – ultraviolet, X rays, and gamma rays – began pounding the *Elysium*. The ship’s radiation control systems had increasing difficulty in absorbing the radiation. Aukai made a risky decision and conveyed it to Amber.

“We are going to be zapped to death even before we crash into the black hole. I must go outside the ship on what we call an EVA and see if there is any problem that I can fix with the reaction wheels that control the spacecraft’s attitude.”

“Hasn’t that been tried before?” she replied, in surprise.

“There was nothing in the control room readings to indicate the reaction wheels were malfunctioning. The activation signals were

sent to them, and they registered normal responses. Since there was no apparent problem with the wheels, and out of fear of radiation exposure and the gravitational pull of the black hole, Stal would not let anyone go outside to muck with them.”

“And you think they may be broken, despite giving no indication that there is anything wrong with them?”

“It is a very long shot, but I can think of nothing else to do.”

“And why do you think you might be able to fix them if they are broken?”

“I don’t know that I will be able to, but again we have nothing left to lose.”

“I see. Well, suit up, but please try to be careful.”

8.

There was a porthole in one of the *Elysium*’s corridors from which Amber could get a good view of her husband, dressed in an EVA space suit and tethered to an exit door, as he laboriously fought the strong gravitational pull of the black hole and crawled his way along the surface of the ship towards the metallic pedestal to which the array of winged reaction wheels was bolted. He could see Amber watching out and waved at her as he turned on a head lamp and produced a combination wrench-screwdriver from a pocket of his suit.

Five minutes later, he raised his arms and held in one hand a small rock, the size of a chicken egg, and mimicked that he had dislodged it from one of the wings of the wheel. He was still waving in triumph when the wings started turning rapidly. One of them struck Aukai on the helmet, throwing him off balance.

Aukai tried to straighten himself up and, in attempting to do so, began floating away towards the black hole. The tether extended to

its full length and the tension of the cord for a few moments fought the gravitational attraction of the hole. At the end, the tether snapped.

Amber watched in helpless horror as Aukai tumbled away and was drawn inexorably towards the black hole. The outline of her beloved became smaller as he approached, ever so slowly, the accretion disk that surrounded the hole. Quantum effects gave rise to streams of hot particles that radiated back out into the void from the edge of the disk, bombarding the astronaut. Aukai's body reached the event horizon at the edge of the hole and seemed to become suspended there.

As he traversed the event horizon and disappeared into the black hole, Aukai went into free fall, feeling no sensation of pain or burning. He was being sucked towards the center, and would be unable to head back even if he tried: doing so would have required reversing time, an impossibility even in such an impossible place. He was being strained through an ever-narrowing funnel that would eventually, at some point in an unmeasurable future, reach the singularity at the center of the hole, the place where time, space, and self no longer existed.

9.

With its attitude modified to point away from the black hole, the *Elysium* engines strained to maximum capacity and finally veered very slowly from their fatal course. The space ship was re-boarded days later by Stal and the escape pod fugitives. They had nearly starved to death but were eager to return to the relative comfort of the ship. Amber greeted them with little showing of affection and received their condolences stonily.

The mission was reorganized with a reduced number of ships and colonists and relaunched. It reached Kepler-452b some seven hundred years later and became New Ark, the first successful Earth transplant in the far outer space.

Calling New Ark a successful transplant of old Earth was a perhaps too accurate a characterization. Within a couple of generations, the greed, intolerance, and ignorance that had plagued the old Earth resurfaced and the colony eventually plunged into chaos, as had its predecessor.

10.

Amber refused to go back into hibernation and remained a solitary figure in the midst of slumbering colonists onboard the *Elysium*, always mourning the love of her life. She died alone, and her desiccated corpse was only discovered many years later. The tale of her ghost haunting the ship was repeated through many generations of New Ark colonists.

Aukai, for his part, continued to lament their separation, and did not stop thinking about her until he disappeared into the singularity at the end of the black hole. Thus, both lovers mourned for each other simultaneously, and in a fashion their romance was to continue for as long as one or both were capable of thinking, remembering, and feeling joy and sadness at the memory of their shared existence.

She had grieved for the remaining years of her life. Aukai, perhaps, did so forever.

The Remembrance Engine

by Elad Haber

There was a string of endings that year that began my decline into madness. First, my father died and, like God flicking a top, my world spun into chaos.

Drugs help soften the blow. After the government began decriminalizing drugs, enterprising dealers and innovative junkies experimented with volatile chemical cocktails. They likened themselves to the early explorers of the American continent: They searched for new horizons, new places to go, and new ways to imbue.

I got my chems from underground drug dens set up below the subway. These were like competing stores in a mall. Once down in the depths, there were flashy signs and pretty girls with tight skirts. They called out for my attention by jumping in front of me, bust-first, but I dodged them and found my favorite spot.

Inside, billowing fabric hid the walls and masked the sewer stench. Long couches arranged in star shapes had a few lounging ladies, smoking. Occasionally a man in a suit would be passed out. Go further into the den and you'll find its master, hidden in shadow. This place was ruled by a large black man in jeans and a vest that showed his muscles. His chair was custom-made, adorned with his namesakes twisted and curled into each other to form the legs and the arms. He went by the name Snake.

"You again." His voice had a deep rumble. As he spoke, he spat out of the side of his mouth. A long-legged girl draped on his throne shifted to avoid the projectile. "Third time this week."

Snake smiled, but his words were also caked in judgment. In the

shadows, I could make out his security. Huge guys with crew cuts and silhouette of rifles hidden in their trench coats.

I swallowed my prideful protest and nodded, "Yes, sir. It's been a tough month." My father had been in the ground for only a few weeks at this point. I kept his bible, always with him in those few last months, perched on my desk at home, a constant reminder.

Snake moved one of his muscled hands to squeeze the ass of the long-legged girl by his side. She wore heavy makeup like a geisha. "Angel here will hook you up. Give the man a discount. He's our new best customer."

I followed the girl's ass to one of the bed-like couches in the far corner of the room. Each of the beds were connected via a series of wires and pumps to a repository at the heart of the star. The repository was a metal cylinder about the size of a beer keg. Inside was a mixture of chemicals that were unique to Snake and this establishment. I liked to imagine that he had a team of chemists working in a clean room next door with white doctor smocks and clipboards and computers.

Angel laid me down on the bed and stretched out my arms and legs. Like a flirtatious nurse, she ran her finger up my arm till she found a suitable vein. She punctured it with a needle she kept in her fingernail and inserted the chem tube into my body.

The high was immediate. It's important not to fall asleep; otherwise you won't get your money's worth. It's equally important to stay alert, to focus on something physical in the world. I tried to find Angel in the sudden haze around me, but she was already gone.

There was a candle nearby. It may have been tiny, a tea light, but from my sudden extreme senses, it looked massive, like a building on fire. I stared at the flickering colors and imagined myself inside that flame. I wasn't burning or dying, just living like that, constantly surrounded by fire. I could cook hamburgers with my eyes, but if I tried to shake someone's hand, I would burn them.

My mind rattled around like this for a long time. I didn't think about my father. Time was impossible to parse, but I could feel when the high was subsiding. Most people hate this part, they much prefer the beginning when everything is weird and twisted and you feel so light inside, if you jumped into the air, you would float into space. But me, I liked the come down. I could feel my real self waking up while most of myself was somewhere nebulous. That was the sweet spot. One foot in, one foot out.

* * *

I met a girl. Not one of Snake's painted ladies, but another customer. We lay down at almost the same time in two adjacent beds. She smiled at me. She had strands of purple and pink in her black hair, thick black eyeliner, and a deep red hue on her lips.

She whispered to me, "Hey, you believe in God?"

I started to answer.

"Don't answer that!" she snapped. "It was a trick question. If anyone asks you that, you say, 'None of your fucking business!' or-" here she took on a druggie intonation and massaged her veins, "'I only believe in this stuff.'"

"Okay," I said. She was funny. I liked that.

She said her name was Dess, as in You-Know-Who-Dess.

The rest of the night was a blur. In the morning, I woke in an unfamiliar bed with a snoring girl by my side. She was naked and

facedown and on her back was a stylized version of Noah's Ark. Animals with thin smiles on their faces running out into the world, free of the confines of the ark. There were monkeys and elephants and hippos, all of them colorful and beautiful. I traced the lines of a Zebra with my finger.

Dess stirred and woke. She smiled at me.

"I don't remember much," I confessed. "What happened? Did we, uh, have sex?"

"Ouch," she said with a grin. She got up, revealing more tattoos down her legs. She slapped her ass and set the long legs of a giraffe dancing. "I think you'd remember."

I'm not so sure.

* * *

I lost my job (because business hours are for squares) and my high-rise apartment.

I found a tiny apartment in a building full of older single guys, mostly divorcees. The rent wasn't much at all because it was the ugliest building in the city. I wrangled a custodial job at the Port Authority. They drug test, but you could buy clean piss across the street in an alley behind the deli.

It wasn't so bad. You're invisible in gray overalls behind a trash can on wheels. Nobody bothers you, not even supervisors. I liked it. Sometimes I'd find crumpled dollars on the floor. Everything went into my pocket and then, in the evenings, into my arm.

I was a fixture at Snake's. I even had my own couch, special just for me. Snake got out of his throne to show it to me. He said, "This," in that bass vibrato that seemed to shake the room, "is all you, my man." He clasped me on my shoulder in a gesture of friendship and comradery. Later, one of his girls gave me a handjob at the tail end of a high.

The chemicals that filled my body were different than any drug I experienced in my youth. They bonded with my white and red blood cells to create a new colored blood. Maybe green? I felt like if I sliced my wrist, a rainbow would emerge. And it wouldn't hurt. My body would heal itself because nothing could hurt me.

I wasn't the only one experiencing a change.

The Chem Craze, as coined by the evening news, spread like wildfire throughout the city. Violent clashes between dealers made the headlines daily. The rich set up private dens in converted penthouses. Restaurants became fronts, food in the front, chems in the back. I heard you could rent a limo with a working delivery system inside. They would drive you around the city while you flew through imaginary skies.

At the lower end of the spectrum, I saw the remnants of poor people drudge through the Port Authority to and from various seedy joints with chem bars in walk-in freezers and locked bathrooms. There seemed to be fewer people in the streets. The subways were deserted even in the middle of the day. Emptying trashcans across the massive complex, I saw people slumped over on benches and asleep on the floor. These weren't your average vagrants and bums, but young people in designer clothes and guys in suits using their briefcases as pillows.

Access to the underground was part of my new job. I had keys to those hidden access paths at the end of subway platforms and maps of the various underground layers beneath the city. I found a better way to Snake's place. No longer did I have to go through the chem mall with the pushers screaming for my attention. I simply opened a series of doors, first through the active train tunnels, then through the abandoned older system, and finally to one of the sewer tunnels. From there it was just a ten minute jog through the darkness to Snake's.

I used a flashlight to avoid any major hazards along the way. I felt the excitement of my night at Snake's already coursing through my

Vulcan-colored blood. I was almost running, but then I stopped suddenly, my senses alert at the sound of a footstep.

"Hey," said a familiar voice.

The voice emerged from the darkness. I shone my flashlight towards it.

It was Dess. She wore a tight black jumpsuit. Her hair looked unwashed and there were smudges of darkness on her skin and a faint odor of the sewer on her. She may have lived down here, homeless or, like me, she spent way too much time in the chem dens.

"I thought I'd find you here," she said. She sidled up close to me and cupped my ass. "Miss me?"

I couldn't remember when I had seen her last. "Sure," I said. "On your way to Snake's?"

"Actually," she said, "no. I'm heading somewhere else. Someplace new."

"New?"

"Different. Way different."

I looked into her eyes. She had that smoky-eye look where the eyeliner was thick as a picture frame. Inside the black border, her eyes were white as the cleanest teeth.

"Can I come?" I asked.

* * *

The first thing I thought when I saw it: It's so clean. Everything in this city is so dirty. Even when something isn't caked with dust, it's black from grease or red from rust. This thing was immaculate. Polished silver, windows as clear as can be, even the steel bolts shone

a little in the light. It stretched back into the gloom, car after identical car. Like cleaning it was the hobby of a team of OCD janitors.

"It's a train," I said to Dess.

"Um, yeah. Duh." She shook her head and walked towards it.

We were in an aboveground station, somewhere in the wilds. I could hear the lazy sounds of an active river, boat horns and seagulls and the gentle crashing of waves. The station looked like it had been abandoned for decades. The windows were broken and the steel beams above were exposed. On the ground was construction debris, as if this place had been used as a warehouse and then forgotten.

Off in the farthest corner was the restored train. Where there was once a number or a letter was just a blank circle. The first few cars, with the clear windows, looked deserted. The last few had their windows tinted.

"Come on," she said, pulling at my arm. She helped me launch myself up a cinderblock step onto the train. Inside was as clean as the outside looked. The metal bars and chairs gleamed. The floor was almost reflective.

"This way," she said, leading me on.

We walked through the train, sliding open the doors between cars. I expected to hear the whoosh of movement every time we stepped between the cars, but there was only the silence of an ancient space. Finally, we reached a car with one of the tinted windows.

The smell of incense hit me first. Multiple varieties, stinking like a dorm room. There were a lot of people crowded into the train car, but they made almost no noise. No one talked above a whisper. Many looked to be sleeping. Dess tip-toed over them, holding onto the beams for support. I followed as best as I could, but I stepped on some fingers and almost hit a girl with my knee. When I tried to say sorry, it was as if the whole carload of people startled and quickly

tried to drown me out with "Shhh!"s.

"Sorry," I said again, quieter this time.

I didn't see any chem cylinders or anyone looking like they were truly tripping. It just looked like a bunch of hippie kids on a train. I got nervous that there weren't any chems at the end of this journey, and my excitement from the tunnel seemed far away.

We reached the end of the crowded car without any major injury. I was preparing some choice words to say to my guide when she disappeared into the next car. I followed.

The car looked like a snow-covered forest. There were potted plants on the benches and Astroturf on the floor. Everything was covered in that fake Christmas snow they sell in places like Florida. There was a teenager in the center of the car flicking tiny paper snowflakes into the air and some well-placed fans pushing them through the interior.

I found Dess sitting crosslegged on the floor near a huddle of bodies. They were moving slowly around each other. I couldn't tell if they were having sex or just playing a silent game of twister. I couldn't count the number of people, they were just a collection of arms and legs and hair.

Dess gestured with a nod for me to join her, which I did. I couldn't look away from the bacchanalia happening a few feet away. Occasionally I would glimpse a male's body, but I found I could focus on the female parts and it made for a pretty good show.

Finally, a head appeared. A woman's face emerged from the backdrop of bodies. She had long white hair and youthful features. She saw Dess and her face brightened. Using some force, she separated herself from the clutch of bodies and stood in front of us, naked and hairless. Dess rose to her feet and so did I, towering a good foot above them.

"Welcome back, dearie," she said to Dess, her voice all sugary and sweet. I could almost taste it like rosewater in the air. "I see you've

brought a new friend."

Dess smiled and nodded. "He was on his way to Snake's."

"Ahhh," she said as if that said everything about me. She extended a hand, palm up as if in offering. "My name is Eve," and then she winked at me, "although that's not my real name."

I clasped her hand in mine, not sure if I should shake it or kiss it. Instead I just held it tight for a few seconds. I said, "You can call me Adam."

"Perfect," said Eve as two more people emerged from the circle of bodies and produced a purple robe from somewhere on the floor. They draped the robe on top of Eve's body and tightened it without her help. Then they disappeared back into the menagerie.

I couldn't help myself any longer. "What exactly is going on around here?" I asked her.

Eve started back towards the front of the car. Dess and I followed. She had an expression of sincere joy on her face, as if she was looking at a miracle.

"We offer a different kind of experience than what you're used to, Adam," said Eve as she caught one of the tiny paper snowflakes in her hand and studied it. She put the paper snowflake to her lips, kissed it, and then let it loose into the fake windstream of the train car. "When did you start using chems?"

I said nothing.

"It's okay," Eve continued. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. Not here. We understand what makes people partake in chems. We've all been there." Here she gestured at the crowded car behind us. "You want to forget. Right?"

I nodded.

"And have you forgotten?"

I hesitated. "I don't understand."

"The thing you were trying to forget. Did it work? Have you forgotten it?"

I thought about my father. It had been months now that he was gone, but images of his face, his withered body in a hospital bed came to me quickly. His voice over the phone. His words, "I'm dying," repeated over and over again. The frantic last-minute flight arrangements. The phone call on the way to the airport. The guilt.

"No," I told Eve.

I sat down, a sudden weariness in my body. Eve sat next to me, her lithe arms draped on my shoulders. "Of course," she whispered. "You can never forget something that hurt you." Her breath was hot in my ear. "There is a better way."

"Would you show me?" I asked.

Eve pulled away and sat up straight. "Kiss me," she said.

"What?"

Dess, sitting on the floor near us, leaped to her feet. "It's okay," she said. "Watch." She leaned into Eve and kissed her lips. It wasn't a long kiss. At the end of it, Dess licked her lips. Her eyes clouded and she almost lost her footing. The kid from the floor with the paper snowflakes was there in a flash to catch her and ease her onto the floor. He grinned at me.

"Your turn," said Eve.

I leaned in for a kiss. I thought, is this woman an angel? Is her blood mixed with chems? It was just the lipstick, I realized, as she used no tongue on our short kiss.

Immediately, I was caught in a memory. I was a child, bundled up, outside on a chilly morning. Trees were arranged in rows for as far as I could see. Sunlight-drenched red apples, dozens per tree, hung only a short grab away. There were step stools and ladders everywhere. I felt a comforting squeeze as my father lifted me to grab an apple. I laughed and so did he.

It was a sound I hadn't heard in so long. It seemed to echo in that make-believe apple grove, a constant laughing loop.

When I snapped out of my high, I was in a pile of bodies in the first tinted car. I recalled other images: my father teaching me how to drive, watching movies on the couch, a football game in the freezing cold. But most of all, that laugh. I felt like if I could go back to that place, I would grab that laugh and hold onto it.

I'd never let go.

* * *

If my brain was a seesaw, it would be dizzy by now.

I became a regular at Eve's, but I still visited Snake's. I would remember during the week and then forget on the weekends. I was like an artist obsessing over a canvas, painting images and then scrubbing them out, or a writer reworking drafts endlessly until the words become meaningless.

At work, I could just barely push my garbage can around. I moved in the slow meandering gait of the elderly or the apathetic. I only perked up in the evenings, on my way to the chem lounges.

One night, after sneaking through my secret custodial passageways, I found myself in the sewers, not sure which direction to go. Snake's was to the right and down another floor and Eve's was to the left and up an incline to the surface. I couldn't remember the day of the week or what I did yesterday. I lingered too long in the spot.

"Hey," said a deep voice from behind me.

Snake emerged from the darkness with some of his people, not the painted ladies from his den, but big guys like him. Security. They surrounded me. Snake towered over me.

"Where are you going?" he asked me.

"Your place, of course," I said. "I ... I seem to have forgot the way."

"Right," he said, distracted. He looked closely at my shoulder. He reached out in what seemed like a friendly gesture, but then slapped my shoulder hard. A white powder flew off my Port Authority uniform. It wasn't dandruff, unfortunately.

"I know where you been, brother," said Snake. Two of his guys grabbed my uniform and lifted me up like I was nothing. Snake spat at the floor and said, "That bitch been poaching my customers now for too long. Take me to her."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" I pleaded. "I'm loyal to you."

The guys dropped me. My knees hit the floor. Snake grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. "Bullshit. Now take me to her." I felt a pressure on the back of my head and the click of a gun.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

I led them down through a series of tunnels to the inclined gangway and the abandoned station. I thought about leading them in the wrong directions, but I was too scared. I was a coward.

In the derelict station, Snake's guys pulled out automatic rifles that had been hidden in their clothes. I stepped back into the shadows while they circled the stationary train.

Dess and I had coined a nickname for the train. We tried to come up with something majestic, like what you would name a castle or a

spaceship. We settled on The Remembrance Engine because it sounded like a ride at a theme park.

Snake stood in front of the train like a boxer assessing his opponent. With only a nod of his head, his guys started firing rounds into the train. It sounded like a massive drill boring into the earth. The sound filled the old station and shook the construction equipment. When the drill subsided, I breathed a sigh of relief. But then the guys reloaded their rifles and started firing again.

I ducked behind some palettes and pressed my palms to my ears until it was over.

After a few minutes of silence, I found the courage to step out of hiding. Snake was staring at the train. He whispered to himself, “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.” He then looked at me, winked, and led his guys away.

The train looked like Swiss cheese that had been roasted. Smoke poured out of the hundreds of holes. There was a crackling of fire from inside. I couldn’t hear any human sounds. I needed to see what I had done.

I used the cinderblock to hoist myself onto the train. It buckled a bit at my intrusion. The floor, once so immaculate, was littered with broken glass and splintered metal. I walked through the cars and braced myself before entering the first tinted car.

It was empty. I’d never seen it empty before. They must have gotten

tipped off. I rushed through the car to Eve’s wonderland, hoping to see the same thing. But I was disappointed.

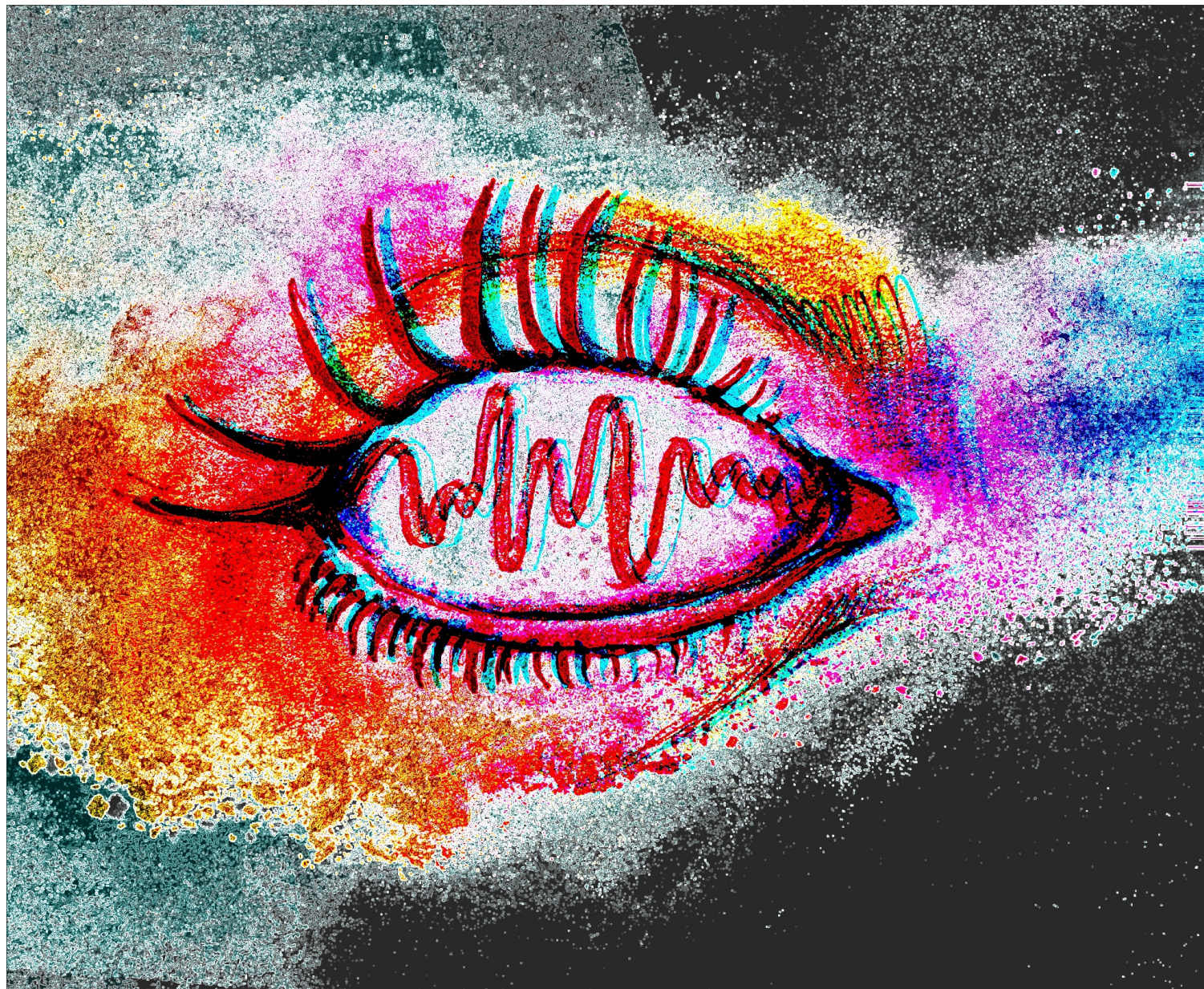
The fake snow was covered in blood. Wisps of paper snowflakes still flew around the room from the one working fan. There were bodies strewn on the floor in startled positions like roadkill. I avoided stepping on them. I found Dess face-down on the metal floor. I reached down to check for a pulse like I’d seen on TV, but I couldn’t find one. I shrunk back like she was made of fire.

I saw Eve in her purple robe on top of some of her people, like she had been trying to protect them. Her lips still sparkled, but her skin was pale and she was bleeding from her chest.

I sat down next to her and held her chin in my fingers. I reached in to kiss those heavily chem-coated lips. Normally, she would stop after a moment or two, but I kept the kiss going, the chems pouring into my mouth and flushing through my system like aggravated caffeine.

I pulled back, panting. The world shuddered as the train started moving. I could feel it dislodge from its resting place and it was suddenly flying through subway tunnels, picking up speed, then out into the surface. It rose above the tracks and flew into the air towards the sky.

And it never stopped.



Failed frequency

by Novyl Saeed

Shaman's Moon

by Dean Schreck

The moon is a shaman's talisman
Phasing winks to the awe of Man,
And oblivious creatures All—
An alchemic clock
Set close upon the inky wall.
A pale clandestine wafer
Marbled black on hallowed white.
Waxing now
Potent with visions
Of boundless divide,
Cradling at zero-point God's
Mobius gates
Open upon the transmuted
Seas of Time and Space ...
Speeding motionless,
Near and far:
Alice might just as well have stepped
Through her mirror to the Moon!
Man's Moon ... but a shaman's palette,
Nurturing the imagined into
The imagined *To Be*—
Latent within the sacred seed
Blossomed into the Manifest:
The moon is a shaman's talisman,
An alchemic clock set
Close upon the inky wall.

Let Me Sleep When I Die

by Wendy Nikel

Family, friends, and whomever else it may concern:

If you're reading this, I'm dead now, and I'd like to stay that way.

Yes, I know, you'll miss me and wish we'd had more time. Yes, I know I never wrote that memoir I always said I'd pen. Yes, I know the fancy insurance plan you kids picked out for me includes a free body upload and five free years' maintenance and repairs, but there comes a time in an old man's life when he has to put his foot down, and this is a hill I'm ready to die on.

You see, there's things about the war I never told you.

* * *

The first man I ever killed, fresh out of boot camp on my first real mission, was a soldier by the name of Anstis. He'd lost his company and got left behind in the smoke-filled ruins of what used to be a city. I'd been ordered ahead to scout out an old warehouse and happened to stumble upon him. Somehow, green as I was, I got my shot off faster.

I watched as the panic on his face warped into pain, then the pain slowly faded to blankness. The blood on his dog tags stained my fingers.

I left his body there. Maybe if I hadn't, things might've turned out differently. Maybe if I hadn't, I wouldn't be writing you this letter.

But that was before. The war was still new, and we didn't know yet

what the enemy was doing with the bodies. We didn't know what they were capable of.

You saw the videos, I'm sure, released after the war, showing white-coated doctors playing Frankenstein with the wires of a man's bisected brain. Picking up a mess of tissue and nerves from one body and inserting it into another.

You saw the images of the troops marching through bombed-out city squares, clothed in the enemy's fatigues. The only thing to differentiate one pale, hairless form from the next was the patch on each chest, bearing the surname of a soldier we'd already killed—a man or woman they'd uploaded into one of those pasty, cookie-cutter bodies, slapping glimmering medals on them for service to their country. Why train new men and pay death gratuities when a cheaper solution was now available?

We called them abominations. We learned to aim for the head. And when the treaty was signed, we celebrated by destroying their corpses.

That night, with the stench of burning rubber and plastic still sharp in my nostrils, I climbed into my tent to pen a letter to my darling back home and found someone already there, his face hidden in the shadows, his knife pressed to my throat, and venomous threats spooling from his tinny voice box.

My instincts kicked in and in the shuffle, the blade found his throat rather than mine, slicing it open with a jolt of electricity that left a burn scar on my thumb. When the bare bulb's light fell upon his fatigues, the name there was all too familiar: Anstis. He'd come to

take his revenge on me — an act of hatred and vengeance, not of war—and the first man I ever killed also became the last.

* * *

I've seen a lot of changes in all the long years since. It's strange, how one era's abominations become another era's prize. How technology once deemed inhumane is tweaked, "perfected," and slapped with a hefty price tag. How empty, white faces once considered ghoulish and grotesque are now held up as the pinnacle of style, "the perfect, fuss-free vehicle for your post-death life."

I've read the pamphlets. I've heard the sales pitches—that I'd still enjoy playing my sax and reading the Sunday comics, that I'd still appreciate the sun on my face and would still know and love each of you. I could see my granddaughter grow, attend her ballet performances, her wedding, and for that, I'm sorely tempted.

But I also never told you about that time, decades after the war, when I thought I saw Anstis at a coffee shop. I had him in a headlock, my

pocketknife to his flabby, inhuman throat, before I saw that his eyes weren't the same—that it was just some poor, "re-lifed" sap clutching a bag of filled long johns—and realized what I'd nearly done.

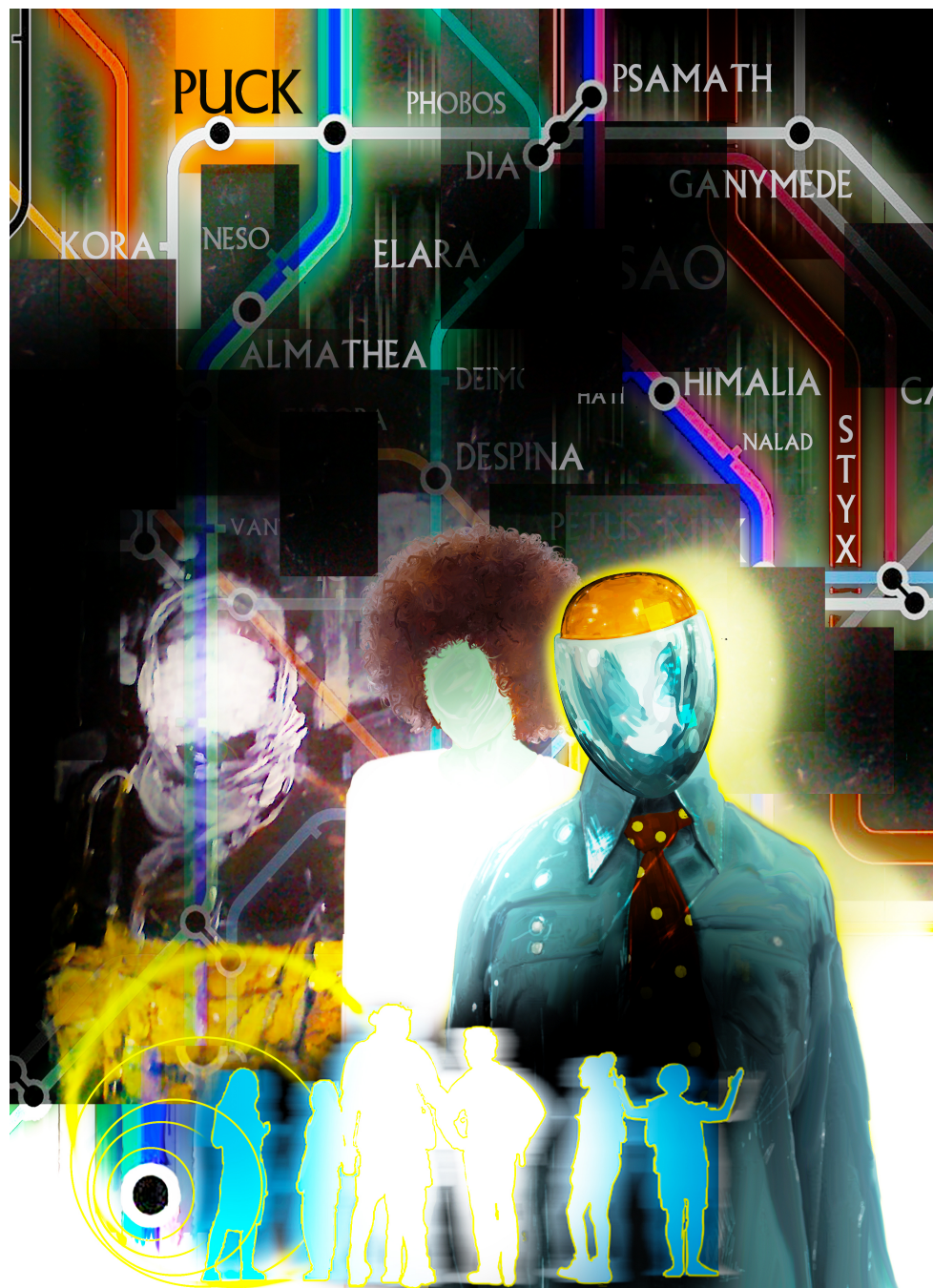
The first time it happened, the cops let me go. PTSD, they said sadly. The second time, third time, they weren't so sympathetic.

You see, they may be walking their dogs or mowing their lawns, driving their cars or attending a show, but all I see are those white faces peering at me across the trenches. They may be placing their order or greeting a friend, reciting a poem or giving directions, but all I hear are tinny, whispered threats. They may be my neighbors, my old friends, my grocer, but each time, that old hatred flares within me. Each time, my gut says to kill him.

You see, now, why I can't take his face, his voice, his skin, his body. I can't look at him in the mirror each day. Not when I've spent so much of my life trying to leave it all in the past. Trying not to become Anstis.

Ouroboros Commute 2174

by toeken



The Park of Future Heroes

by Aaron Emmel

Irini lies awake as her mother sits beside her on the mattress and strokes her hair, but she keeps her eyes closed in feigned sleep so that she can keep listening to the song her mother whisper-sings in the alien tongue she only speaks when she thinks no one else can hear. Irini doesn't yet know that in six years her mother will be cast back out of this world and trapped beyond the Portal. She snuggles into the covers, smiling, comforted by the sound of whirring gears and the pneumatic wheezes of the Clockwork Guards outside her bedroom door, never dreaming that they're not clockwork at all, those strange-faced beings still concealed in their hydraulic suits—that they are biding their time and one day, six years from tonight, they will attack her family and drive them out before they come for her.

At this moment, there is only one path through the maze of her life, and it runs in a straight line from the temporary safety of her childhood bed to the hour she flees the palace in desperation and fear.

Then, in a blink, she is years farther through the maze, and here near the end there are multiple paths, each a possible life, and she lives all of them.

In one, she has returned to the Park of Future Heroes, to defend her native city and defeat the Clockwork Guards once and for all. She looks up and sees the chiseled likeness of her own face gazing down from the carved stone majesty of the statue known as the Defender, until she hears footsteps and the clatter of armor behind her. She turns to confront the Emperor, the former Captain of the Guards, as she slides her sword from its scabbard for the final battle.

But now she is on a parallel path, and the Defender statue lifting its

sword in this timeline bears the Emperor's tentacled maw. The Usurper, the cowering traitor awaiting his blow, wears Irini's face. This time, when she steps out onto the grass, her muscles clench when the Emperor strides up to face her. When he lifts his blade, a smaller replica of the weapon wielded by the statue behind him, Irini wants to run, because the statues reveal to her how this will end. But she stands her ground and raises her own steel, her hands steadied by years of training. The Emperor's blade hacks away her parry and strikes up and across to chop into her neck. As the steel slashes her windpipe, she slips quickly into a different moment of an alternate life.

Irini wanders the labyrinth of her past and future memories, all the simultaneous futures and histories. But there is a chokehold, a single point, between the linear thread with which her life began and the coiling strands through which it multiplies and eventually, in various guises, ends; and this knot is a particular night in the Park of Future Heroes. This is the night her family is betrayed by the Guards, and this betrayal is the beginning of the multiplicity of nows. So she returns to that night, and in this now she is running.

She races to the only place she knows to hide: the Park of Future Heroes. Her feet are sore from her heels slapping the paving stones through her ornamental sandals, her skin is hot and the air is icy against it. She rushes into the park, gasping for breath with her chest heaving, and leans her back against the looming Clocktower. Through the cold, ancient, weathered stones she hears the clicking of gears. Then a figure appears out of the darkness before her. Her heart jumps to her throat. Irini knows this girl.

"Princess Irini," Cheri says, looking at her directly. She's just a few

years older than Irini. Everything about her is a challenge to the decorous palace life Irini has just left behind, from the unrestrained gold-brown mane of her hair to her bold green eyes. “Don’t worry. The Palace Guards won’t find you here.”

“How do you know they’re after me?” Even through her shock and disorientation, Irini is sure as soon as she blurts out the question that it was a mistake. She shouldn’t be admitting that the Guards are seeking her to the park’s caretaker.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Irini has a sensation of the world narrowing and closing all around her, until everything is focused on her and the girl in front of her in this shadowed park. The clicking gears behind her begin to sound loud and relentless. She steps away from the tower, but that only brings her closer to Cheri and her penetrating eyes.

“I can help you escape them,” Cheri says.

Irini stiffens.

“I can see possible futures,” Cheri tells her. “In every one of them, the Guards chased your family through the Portal and came for you. I knew you would end up here.”

Irini looks up at the five statues in their well-known poses, undefined figures carved from rough stone, deliberately unfinished, their hands outstretched or clenched in fists, their faces blank on featureless heads. The Defender, the Usurper, and the Warriors, their identities still to be chipped and incised into view.

“I have to go,” Irini says. “If I leave the city, they won’t find me.”

“You can’t get your family back. But you can stop the Guards.”

Irini flinches. “How do you—”

“I told you. I see possibilities.”

“Can you get me out of the city?” *Until I can figure out how to get back and reopen the Portal.*

Cheri is silent for a long moment. “Yes. But it’s not safe right now. They’re out there looking for you. Let me hide you first.”

From beyond the arched gate, Irini hears the clank and wheeze of the Guards’ armor. She looks at Cheri and nods.

Cheri places her palm against one of the Clocktower’s bricks and pushes. There is a grinding, scraping sound as a concealed door separates from the wall and swings inward.

Irini walks to the doorway and hesitates. Would Cheri trap her to ingratiate herself to the kingdom’s new rulers?

But certain doom is more urgent than the theoretical kind, so Irini follows her through.

She steps into darkness. The perfumes of the city, salty bay air and night-blooming flowers, mixed with the stink of trash in the street, are replaced with the sharp, biting scents of oil and metal and stone. “I never knew there was a way inside.”

“There is much you and your family don’t know of our world,” Cheri says. Springs pull the door shut again behind them, sealing the girls in shadow. Now Irini can see pale strips of moonlight cast at regular intervals through chinks between the bricks. “You’re strangers here.” “I was born here,” Irini says.

“Even so. The conquerors don’t need to learn the ways of the conquered.”

Irini’s face burns, but she doesn’t know what to say as she follows the older girl up a steep, narrow stairway. Her eyes fix on the rise and fall

of the heels of Cheri's leather boots. Rough stone scrapes her elbow as she follows the stairway's curve. The ticks of mighty gears echo through the walls.

"My family are the clock's caretakers," Cheri says finally, more gently, as if apologizing for her cold tone earlier.

"Where are they?"

There's another long pause, and for a moment Irini wonders whether Cheri heard her over the ticking. "It's just me now."

Irini climbs for another minute. They've probably reached the level of the lowest of the fourteen clock faces. Irini is still struggling with a response over Cheri's accusation that she's a conqueror when Cheri speaks again. "This tower is connected to the engines in the heart of the world. Did you know that?"

Now she's just trying to prove Irini's ignorance. Irini doesn't respond. "Do you know why you came to Misith?"

"I told you. I was born here." Irini is out of breath and angry and the words come out as a hiss.

"You wanted our secrets. So you could open the gates between worlds."

Irini grinds her teeth against a retort. She doesn't have to defend herself to Cheri.

The two of them reach a hardwood landing near what must be the top of the tower. Another flight of steps ascends through an opening in the ceiling. Cheri leads Irini past a closed door to an embrasure that looks down onto the park below. Through it Irini can see that the area they just left is filled with Guards.

"They must be using the park as a base to scout the surrounding streets," Cheri observes. Irini watches as several Guards leave her

field of view while others appear, reporting to a lieutenant positioned next to one of the Unknown Warriors. Then she raises her eyes to the caretaker.

"Why are you helping me?" she demands. "Why do you care?"

Cheri keeps her gaze on the scene below. "We have the same enemies. The Guards killed my parents."

"They ..." Irini shakes her head. "I'm sorry. Why?"

"They were your Guards. Why do you think?"

"How would I know?"

Cheri straightens and turns to Irini. "You don't know what the Guards did in your name?"

Irini's cheeks grow warm again. "They were there to protect us inside the palace. That's all."

Cheri narrows her emerald eyes. "Well, now you know they're your enemies, too. And you can return the favor. You can help me."

Finally. Through Irini's frustration and fear and grudging gratitude she can finally find out what Cheri really wants, and what she's gotten herself into. "Help you how?"

"In the palace is the Portal the Guards opened to come to this world."
"Not just the Guards. My parents."

Cheri nods in satisfaction, as if this is an admission. "Your family thought the Guards came to protect you, but they were just seizing the opportunity. The Guards needed your family to find their way here, and your family needed the Guards' strength to remain."

Irini wants to ask how she knows the Guards' thoughts, but she already knows what she'll say. Cheri sees possibilities, and some of

those eventualities must reveal the Guards' intentions.

"All this time their allies have been building reinforcements on the other side, and someday they will march here in their hundreds of thousands. That's what the Future Heroes will protect us against. But even though the custodians can see probabilities, we can't know which side will win."

Irini glances back down through the embrasure. She sees two Guards standing below, staring at the tower. The lieutenant is no longer visible.

"We can stop them," Cheri says. "The Portal can be sealed from this Tower, and the lock can be broken so it can never be reopened. If you help me."

"My mom and dad are on the other side!" Irini realizes, too late, that she's raised her voice. One of the Guards below looks up and says something to his companion. Is it a coincidence? Has he heard Irini through the opening, above the ticking clockwork?

Cheri looks at Irini with a careful expression. "They're gone," she says softly. "Your parents aren't coming back. But you can help me save the world."

Irini locks her jaw. She's not going to help Cheri. But it's probably not a good idea to announce that.

There's a loud boom below them. After a moment, the sound is repeated: a heavy thud that reverberates through the walls. Cheri looks down.

"They've found the door. They're trying to get in."

"Can they?"

Cheri shrugs. The boom comes again. "No one's tried to force their way in before." She heads to the stairway up. "We have to hurry."

"Is there another way out?"

"No."

Irini heads to the closed door instead. "What's through here?"

"Irini," Cheri insists, "I need your help. If you can cut the connection while the Portal is being sealed or unsealed, it's like breaking a key in the lock."

"*Princess* Irini," Irini corrects her. She looks away immediately, disgusted with herself for pulling a rank she's always felt as a burden but not willing to let Cheri see her weakness. She strides to the door and pulls the handle. It yields, and the door swings open.

The next boom from below is followed by the sound of splintering wood and brick. An instant later, Irini hears the wheezing, clanging sounds of Guards stomping into the tower. Cheri growls out her fear and frustration and races up the steps. Irini steps through the doorway.

In a small chamber of bare brick stands a stone pedestal, the same ash-gray marble that forms the unfinished statues outside, supporting a globe of polished brass. Irini's indistinct reflection grows and warps across its surface as she approaches. Her hands are pulled to it, like iron to a magnet, and as soon as her fingertips touch the cold metal she is plunged into the stream of probabilities.

The single stream branches and those branches further divide. All the branches have the same beginning: after she leaves this room she follows Cheri up the steps. She finds her on the next and highest story, in front of a panel of wheels and levers, pulling back one of the levers with both hands. Rows of mirrors capture and amplify the moonlight. "I'm locking the Portal," Cheri announces above the clicking of gears. "Go down and break the connection below."

Irini follows the direction of her gaze to a hole in the center of the floor. She steps to the edge and lurches back in vertigo. The hole

encompasses the machinery that fills the center of the tower and dives down, down, past the ground, into impenetrable darkness, possibly all the way to the vast engines at the incomprehensibly deeply-buried heart of the planet itself.

Then Irini takes a breath and jumps. Her stomach seems to flip inside her. She catches the outer edge of a horizontal gear wheel, one of a pair of bevel gears, with a diameter as long as she is tall. She grabs on as she slips down its angled side until its sharp teeth bite into her palms. The gearwheel flings her out as it turns, and she tucks in her legs to avoid having them amputated by a passing pendulum. The wheel brings her around to its vertical partner, and before she can be chewed up where they mesh, she throws herself into the air—

—past another pair of meshing gears—

—and onto a pendulum just starting its ascent. She clings with her legs and arms wrapped around the metal rod, rising and falling along the arc of its swing. Soon Cheri will follow, and Irini will jump and clamber up to join her on the spindle of a rotating horizontal wheel. They will spend more than a day huddled down here together, shivering with cold and exhaustion and hunger. In only one of the possible branching futures do the Guards discover them before they finally dare to climb back up onto the top floor. In some of the futures, Irini tries to convince Cheri that she attempted to break the connection to the Portal and failed. But in every future in which they escape the Guards, Cheri at least suspects that Irini refused to save her world. She must have known in advance what the outcome was going to be, and in her desperation she reached out to Irini anyway. In each of these futures, Irini leaves the tower alone.

Irini blinks and she is near the end of the maze again, back in the Park of Future Heroes in the doomed role of the Usurper. This time, though, something is different. When the Emperor marches out to meet her in the shadow of the statues, two pale creatures shuffle beside him. They look like bloated ticks, each the size of a pony, encased in shell-like armor. They screech and hurl themselves at Irini before she can take out her sword.

It's not possible, the part of her watching from the tower chamber thinks in the moment before she dies. This is a possible future she's already experienced, but the tick-things weren't there. How can any creature invade and change possibilities?

Have the Guards found a creature that can cross possible timelines, in one of the dozens of worlds the Portal can potentially access?

Now she is back in the Park as the Defender. She turns and draws her blade as the Emperor appears, confident of her victory. She hears the now-recognizable shrieks before she sees them: three of the armored ticks scuttling forward beside her familiar enemy. Their capitula stretch wide to extend sharp feeding tubes. Bulbous eyes on their sides seem to see her, through her—not just the woman in this now facing inevitable death, but the girl still standing in the tower. They will come. They will find her, they will chase her, through any alternate timeline.

Back in the tower, the surge of probabilities hits her like an electric shock and she staggers back. Her fingers release the orb. In the fraction of a heartbeat her skin was in contact with the metal, she lived dozens of multiple lives.

She hears the heavy thud of boots as the Guards begin to mount the stairs at the entrance to the tower far below.

She exits the chamber and bounds up the steps to Cheri. Now she knows the army waiting on the other side of the Portal is more diverse and powerful than she could have imagined. But she also knows that she never needs to come here to the capital again, except to return to the Portal itself. Someone else can be the Defender. As Cheri has reminded her, this isn't her world. The statues are still uncarved.

In the maze of alternate futures, there are times when the Portal reopens and her family steps through. Her parents and sister are there and they love her. It's a possibility that exists. She doesn't need to defend Misith to reach it. Maybe, if the future possibilities are

somehow changing, she can only reach it if she doesn't.

Cheri is where Irini knew she'd find her, on the next and highest story, in front of a panel of wheels and levers, pulling back on one of the levers with both hands. "I'm locking the Portal," she announces above the clicking of gears. "Go down and break the connection below."

Irini jumps down and catches the bezel gear. As she swings around, she looks up and sees a rod connected to machinery suspended from the ceiling above. It looks like a simple, mechanical connection, but she knows from the many lives she's just lived that it's a conduit for the elemental forces that keep the Portal intact.

Her mind returns to the Emperor and its scuttling companions. They are waiting. Whether she is here to stop them or not, they are waiting. She retracts her legs to avoid a pendulum and then kicks them out with all her force. Her sandaled heels hit the Portal rod and it shudders. She kicks again and feels the snap as it breaks free of whatever held it tight down in the darkness. Then she jumps to another pendulum shaft before she can be ground into meat by the bezel gears.

For the first time since the Guards attacked Irini's family, she smiles. The Portal is broken. This is the one action she never took in any of the futures she's just seen, and that means she has no idea what will happen next.

Genius Loci

by Deborah L. Davitt

Do you see my eyes
in the arches of the bridge,
my head outlined
by spare, broken branches?

I watch

You pressed a hand to the stripped bark
of the tree that describes
the curve of my cheek;
I felt you do it

I wait

You pass the fallen statue
of some forgotten hero
at my heart
but you never see me

I learn

that for you, I am just
a place to pass through
a clearing
on your way to better spaces

I forgive

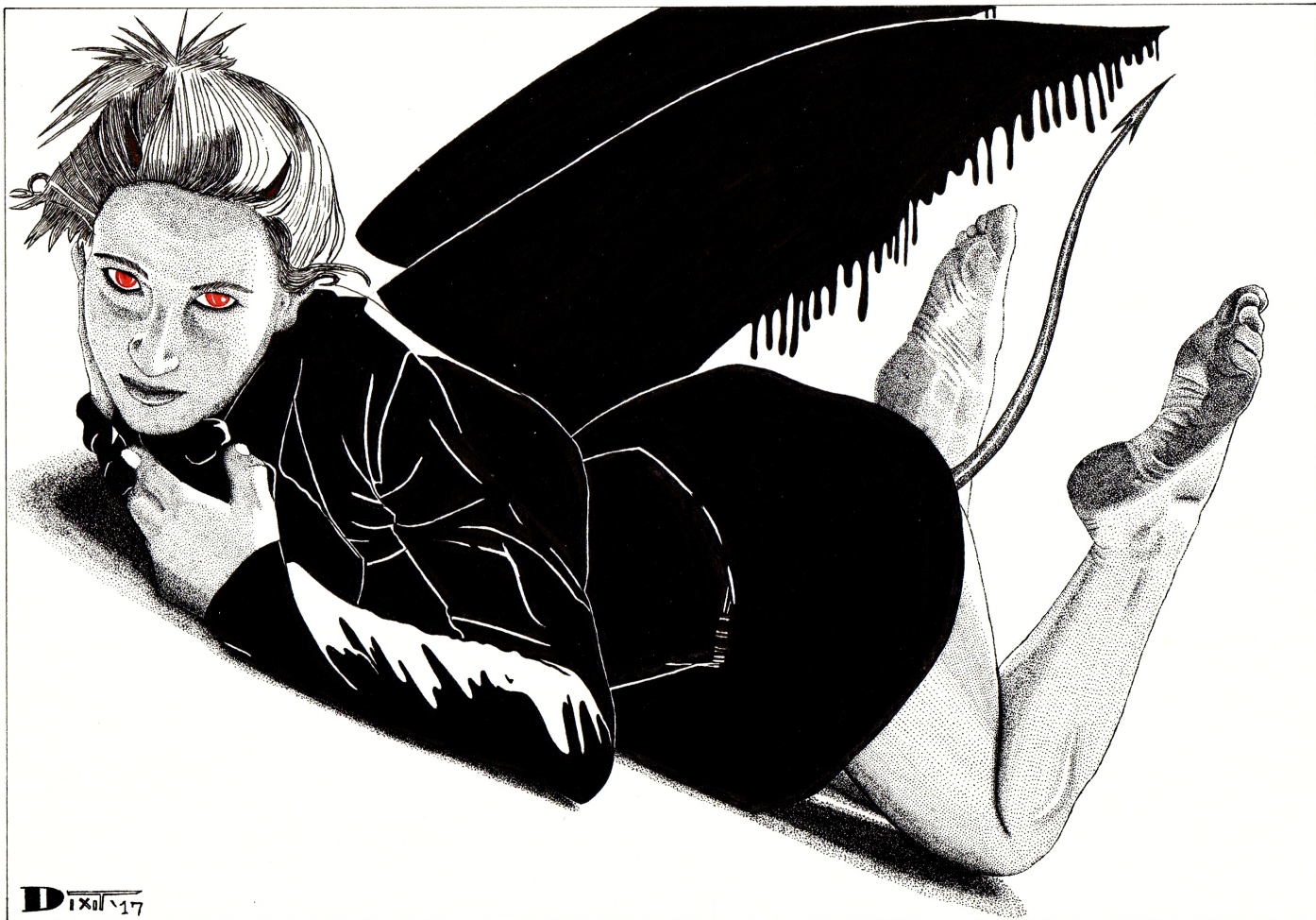
In time, you might return
to where you can see
the brick-walled city,
golden, from my banks

I say farewell

There'll be others, perhaps
who'll pass this way
through the woods,
pressing their hands to my face

I yearn

for someone who will see me,
know me,
whisper my name,
make me real.



I Fly on Wings of Onyx Ink

by Shikhar Dixit

Leave the Myths, Leave Home

by Lynne Sargent

I have so many questions
for you, Sedna,
like:

How many parents try
to cut off their children's fingers
to keep them from reaching

How many will try to uncurl their grasp
even if all they want to hold
is the edge of a canoe
in the midst of stormy waters

How many children will nonetheless go on,
their severed, bloody pieces become
beautiful new life.

How many will grow up
to swim in the seas of satisfaction

despite all those that say they,
like you, are monstrous
for saying no.

How many are punished
for their personhood.

Sedna,

Lady of resistance,
lady of mysteries
found in frigid waters

if all here is your domain
how can we say you are not
whole.

The Teaseller

by B. B. Garin

I met Kat on a summer evening. That wasn't a given when I was young and all the factories still ran graveyard shifts. People worked all hours, met at all hours, lived their lives out in the dead of night, and the smokestacks kept the sky glowing orange around the clock.

Chemical City seemed brighter back then, though everyone burned fickle tallow and there were few gaslights on the streets. None of these new electric contraptions sizzling the night away everywhere you go.

I can't remember who took me down to the basement, rank with sweat and rotgut whiskey. I had a pack of such friends in those days—fellow adventurers in petty transgressions. Boys who faded, grayed into their fathers. Sometimes, I imagine one comes to my stall for a flask of tea, though time and smoke has robed us of recognition.

Yet Kat, when I think on her, remains as bright and crisp as the paper flower she wore in her hair that first night. It would be easy to say she was beautiful. That she danced like the sparks my samovar curls by the fistful into the snow.

Perhaps that is why they outlawed music all those many years ago. It makes it so easy to tell a lie. To make it all sound so simple.

But it wasn't simple. Kat was fire as fierce as any factory furnace. She scorched my lungs and cooked me up from the inside.

When we walked in the street, she had all the grace of the barges docking in Quarter Quay. I had to guide her round carthorses and darting chimneysweeps with a firm hand on her elbow.

"So much noise," she would say.

I shook my head. "It's nothing out of the usual."

She laughed, desperate, braced on her toes.

"How can you stand it?"

"Just watch your feet."

She laughed again, deflating back to her heels. Tension coursed in her limbs. Too soon she'd be gone. To some basement to spin herself dizzy. To come home fevered with it.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked, one of those young nights with autumn closing in. "They hanged a guitar man just last week."

"They won't hang a woman," she said.

But they had before. And they will again.

Councilors Upright and Umbrage died a cloudy century before I was born, but they still hold Chemical City by its neck. My grandfather used to say they must've been large men made for large matters and it was better to be selling tea day by day. I suppose I believed him. How could I not? Imagination breeds sin, or so the Sunday Man always told us.

So, I sell tea. Like my grandfather. In Stone Grove Square, to men on their way to the factory, to mothers with their shopping, to girls off to work in the big houses across the river; even to the little ones, with

extra honey and milk, when they've begged a few coppers.

They bring me tin cups with hinged lids, I fill them, and they hurry on their way. Sometimes they forget their cups and I sell it to them in waxed cloth flasks for half a penny more. Then they have to drink it quick, before the heat seeps out.

I sell tea from my grandfather's samovar, a great steaming beast in hammered silver, perched over the glowing belly of a copper brazier. I'm proud of it. I keep it clean and polished. It keeps my hands busy at night and my mind from wandering, as an old man's often does.

Chemical City can boil and brood, but she'll always drink tea. When Councilors Upright and Umbrage passed their morality laws and chased music underground on the heels of whiskey, tea became the only permissible indulgence left in the city.

The very fine might sip at chocolate. The very rough, down on the docks, may crack new coffee beans between their teeth. But the rest will always favor tea; not too bitter and not too sweet.

They say Stone Grove Square was built when Chemical City was young, long before the good councilors became concerned for our souls, or the sky was ribbed with smokestacks. I can remember when shoppers bustled and sellers squabbled over the best stalls. The trade laws whittled them away. Now only the very sturdiest remain.

The aimless drift in the empty spaces. Boys, mostly, who can't find work in the factories. Some are missing limbs. Some have the sand-etched scars of the Foreign Wars. They lounge against the sculpted tree trunks, playing at cards and stealing nips from dark glass bottles.

Occasionally, one buys a flask of tea. I find it hard to smile at them, though they're always polite, call me grandfather. And they bring clatter and distraction to the day, even if their laughter scratches like a knife on a whetstone.

Then there's the girl, with the long copper braid and big boots

wrapped round and round with laces, who likes to climb the trees. I'm sure there's a law that says she mustn't, but she swings up without a care. She works for Jack Straw, or so I hear, and good luck to her. She's thin, looks brittle perched there among the granite branches.

Her name is Cinnamon and she prefers my tea to whatever the others swallow down. She moves her limbs in a loose, graceful way that reminds me of someone I used to know. And because the memory prickles in the back of my throat, I give her tea for half the price.

These days, mongrels wander in the Square with coats the same tarnished gray as the sky, ribs pressing hungrily against their skin. A lucky one will have something to work his teeth on. An empty-mouthed one will eye me. I've nothing for them. No use for their glassy gazes.

I've always had a round stomach. It refused to shrivel even when I had little to fill it with. The dogs stare, perhaps thinking they'd like to taste something juicier than bone. If there's a loose stone, I'll throw it to make them run off.

It's cruel. I shouldn't. But I do.

When Cinnamon comes for her tea this morning, her eyelids hang low. Her fingers fumble over the coins. I'm surprised she's come at all. Sometimes Kat disappeared for days after a performance. Or maybe it only felt like that to me.

"With milk?" I ask.

I ought to ask if it's worth it. If she thinks about how much it might be worth. If she'll know the line when her toes brush over it.

She nods.

"Drink it quick now," I say.

“Always,” she says.

She sips her tea, swaying away as if she’s still dreaming. If I don’t watch too close, she almost seems to dance.

Jack Straw strolls through later and buys a flask.

“Thought you only went in for stronger stuff,” I say to him.

The Strawman smiles; I can tell he’s forgotten most of what’s gone before us.

“Sometimes it’s nice to let something honest warm your bones,” he says.

That makes me laugh. To most people, the Strawman has been selling contraband since before they can remember. His name feels old. Everyone knows it, has worn it into a certain shape in their minds. But I remember how the man came to be what he is.

He blows away steam. I wish I was still young. I might have the strength to hate him then.

He leaves me with an extra coin, at least, before he takes Cinnamon by the ankle and shakes her out of her tree. He’s a good deal taller than her, but she doesn’t look small standing in front of him.

Kat was tall and strong. Straight and fresh as a bundle of tulips I once saw being taken into a grand house over the bridge.

I shake my head, tend my brazier, and watch embers catch the air.

My grandfather died when I was nineteen and I took his place selling tea. So, I never knew a grueling night of fire and steel. I never knew a factory. I suppose that seemed exotic to a girl like Kat. Besides, it left me a room all to myself. Even if it was a sixth-floor room on Tinner

Alley, near where it crosses the head of Tobacco Row.

How my legs used to ache. Sometimes, I thought I’d rather sleep in the stairwell than finish that climb. But I always kept going, maybe on my hands and knees, but I always made it home.

I keep a modest place on Wayfarers Street now. Not too far from Stone Grove Square, and not too near the docks. Really, the best that can be got this side of the river. It was all Kat’s doing, of course.

One evening, she came swinging through the mist to my stall and proudly handed me an iron key.

“What’s this?” I asked. The metal felt rough and cold after my glowing samovar.

“Come and see.”

I caught her delicate wrist. A loop of silky brown beads dripped from her coat sleeve. Even in those days, wood down from the North Country cost dear. Girls this side of the river wore stamped leather bands if their sweethearts were dockhands, or steel hoops in their ears if they’d married a factory boy.

The wood clicked softly when Kat pulled her arm back from me.

“That boy’s selling them. Aren’t they charming? He’s a clever thing.”

I hadn’t paid the boy much mind until Kat waved to him. He’d been about the Square since early in the summer. Jack Straw was a gangly limbed thing then. His loose hair growing out of a once neat cut. He lounged against a granite trunk winking at ladies and producing trinkets from the pockets of an over-large coat.

“He must’ve stolen them,” I said.

“You sound like such an old man. Anyhow, I’ve a better surprise.”

I took my time with packing my samovar for the night. Kat brimmed with impatience, but it made me feel gruff and stiff to have her laugh at me; to have that boy tip his jaunty hat when we finally strolled away.

Her surprise was a low tin door. She took the key back when I didn't turn it quick enough. Her hands led me into a pair of rooms, warmed through by a black-bellied coal stove and cast in clear light from two real beeswax candles on a dented steel table. She stretched up on her toes. Her fingers didn't even brush the plaster ceiling. She let her arms drift down and grinned.

"Do you like it? I think it suits us."

"Oh, my dear, but how?"

She had wanted praise or applause. Her foot tapped twice in disapproval.

"There's a bar man down Penny Lane," she said. "He's paid us to dance for a week."

I was too much the coward to tell her a roof wasn't worth such a risk. Too grateful at the thought of never climbing another stair after a long day standing watch by my samovar.

"Thank you, Kat," I said.

She turned again, plucked a tin from between the two tarnished candlesticks, and presented it to me with a flourishing arm.

Under the lid was a heap of orange colored scraps, wrinkled and dry and smelling sharp, like something lurking beneath the dust in an apothecary's shop.

"They're from the Foreign Cities. Steep them in your tea, grandfather," Kat laughed. "They'll keep you from worry."

I tried them for her sake. But they turned my tea sour. So, I hid them away at the back of a shelf. I have them still.

* * *

Cinnamon's up her tree today, legs dangling free, heels thrumming on the stone. She's hard to miss. Hard to look away from once you've seen her. There's a burst of white at the end of her braid; a paper flower.

I wonder who makes them. All those clever folds and twists look just the same as the blooms Kat used to wear. How has a person with such a talent survived all this while? Not to mention the miracle of acquiring such sums of paper.

I never asked Kat where the flowers came from. I knew she didn't make her own. She worked in a laundry, scrubbing her hands as ragged as her feet. My tea eased her pains. I was young enough to be pleased by that. To think caring for her would be enough. Still, I should've asked about the flowers.

Perhaps they come from Jack Straw. I've known his fingers to move with undue cunning. Yet today, when he stalks to the base of Cinnamon's tree, he doesn't look pleased by her ornamentation. I hear her voice rising against him. He tries to pick the flower from her copper braid. She yanks it back behind her shoulder, out of sight and his long reach.

I can't say if he's satisfied, or if he's caught sight of the pair of Guards watching from a few trees away. Jack slips into the mist while Cinnamon continues to kick her heels against the unforgiving stone.

I do not recognize the Guards, though I have to admit, most of the faces above the high black collars look the same to me. The tall one scowls in a familiar sort of way. The other one coughs with a harsh note that makes me want to offer him a flask of tea, no charge.

They're just boys, really. And from the set of their shoulders, I'd

wager these two have been in the wars.

* * *

Kat used to tease me for all my grandfatherly ways. The truth was I used to worry I wouldn't grow old. But a week becomes two, becomes a month, years. I remember when the steel rails around the Square bristled with shine. I was just about eye level with them, then. Now, they barely hold a smudge of reflection.

Kat teased, because she knew it would lure me out on damp evenings when I'd prefer to be polishing my samovar by our little stove. She went dancing most nights that autumn. After their success in Penny Lane, bar men quietly clamored to host the Ballet. They were even willing to pay for the privilege.

When I watched, I almost understood, if only for an hour or two. The way my Kat could spin, limbs shaping the shadows in those rooms with their reeking candles and whiskey-slicked floors ... she didn't seem to be made of this cold, hard earth.

But those were silent shows, not nearly so risky as the night Jack Straw appeared in a corner, cradling something all curves and polished wood.

"What's that boy doing here?" I asked.

"He's brought a violin."

Kat's eyes caught the dull light and reflected it with blinding force.

"That's reckless," I said. "This ceiling's too thin."

"You haven't heard him play, yet. It's a marvel."

She spun off to her companions. Jack Straw struck a silencing note. I left with the cry of that single string in my ear, knowing I'd never be rid of it.

* * *

I've never trusted winter. It doesn't settle. It thickens in the air and hovers. Dulls the senses, chokes the blood. It makes all this steel and stone so bitter it feels dangerous to touch.

Even young bones must be twinging with it. That tall Guard's been watching Cinnamon for weeks now. She's been pretending not to see. Until today. She slides from her tree and brings him to my stall, their breath clouding together as I fill their flasks.

I give the man's face a good look. His eyes are coal dark and clever. Suddenly, I remember that look.

"You're Hart Var's boy from over Tobacco Row," I say.

He nods. I've surprised him, I can tell. I've surprised myself. Hart's long dead, of course. I bet his son hasn't been near Tobacco Row in years. But he's the same eyes as his father.

Cinnamon's looking at him as if she's just noticed who she's holding on to. I shouldn't have said it. What good ever comes of the past?

I ought to warn Cinnamon, once he's gone. If she's going to be caught between Jack Straw and a Guard, she'd be better off to run now. To disappear into this city of smoke and soot. There are a thousand ways to do it. But she won't. Not on the word of an old teaseller. Not when her blood is whispering with songs.

Once, when Kat was counting out coins at our battered table, half asleep, half drunk with a night of music, I asked her to go away with me.

"The last barges are leaving for the season," I said. "We could take all that and buy passage north."

"Don't be an old fool." She didn't even look up, just shifted aside the week's rent.

Perhaps it was foolish. If anything, travel papers were harder to come by then, though that wasn't why Kat dismissed it without a glance.

Perhaps, it was selfish of me to ask it of her. To continue to want it.

I bit the words from my tongue, after that night. But I couldn't forgive her for loving the dance more than me. For deciding it mattered more than me. For not making it home in the end.

Jack Straw comes looking for Cinnamon the next day. She's not in her tree and he pretends like it's not what he's come for. Like he just wanted a flask of tea to stave off the chill wind curling up with the river mist. And perhaps it's true.

It might be a little thing, a flask of tea, but people have come to rely on it. I told Kat once, if she really wanted to see a revolution, she should ask me to close up my stall for good. She only laughed and went away to dance.

Before that winter was done, she was arrested three times for colluding with musicians.

The third time, they hanged her.

I remember it was a rare sunny day. How wrong that seemed in this city of gray-eyed heavens.

I didn't watch. I should have. But I didn't.

I never asked Jack how he got away. I never will. Knowing won't alter the shape of it. But now I've lived longer than I ever thought I

could, and just maybe the Strawman has too. So, I ask the one thing that seems to matter, a thing I never thought to ask Kat.

"Who taught you?"

He looks up to the empty canopy of stone. "The fiddle?"

I nod. He does remember.

"My mother."

He says it in a way that tells me she's dead. I remember that skinny boy, in a grown man's coat, grinning until his face must've ached with it.

Snow catches on his eyelashes, dragging them closed. He flicks it away with an impatient hand, scarred and calloused.

"Winter be damned," are his parting words, raising his flask in salute to me.

Another man might tighten his knuckles in reply. But I'm old. My hands swell and stiffen in the cold. I blow on them to ease the pain, and reach for a new waxed flask.

I sell tea. That's all. To rusty-haired dancing girls. To Guards in polished black jackets. To orphans with rag-wrapped feet when winter begins to steal their toes. To hollow-eyed men devoured by the factories. To faces I have seen many times before. And ones I may never see again. I take their coins, give them a brief swallow of warmth, and pretend I know forgiveness.



MONDO MECO PAGE 84 20041114 © JESPER NORDQVIST

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

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!

Most of the cyborgs' armor is made of several layers of "Plascrete", an extremely hard plastic polymer.

"Hard as concrete, light as air" is the company motto.

"Plascrete alloy" is a common name for armor with mixed layers of steel and Plascrete.

Arc has this in his head only, for increased protection.



MONDO MECH

RANDOM ART DAY 12



NOTES

The background here is a photo from the beach in Barcelona, Spain.

(It was a little windy ^_^)





NOTES

Need an aspirin?



IT FEELS LIKE...MAYBE...
COULD BE THOSE BORGS,
Y'KNOW...

YEAH...
WHY **DO**
YOU HAVE
SO MUCH
AGAINST
THEM,
REALLY?

I DUNNO... IT'S JUST LIKE
THAT... IT'S LIKE, WHENEVER
I SEE THEM, THEY REV ME
UP, LIKE...

AND WHEN
THEY ANNOY
ME, MY MIND
GOES ALL
BLANK, AN'
I DO ALL THIS
CRAZY STUFF,
Y'KNOW...

ER... NO, I DON'T KNOW,
ACTUALLY. WHAT IS YOUR
BODY DOING?

DON'T ASK ME 'BOUT STUFF
LIKE THAT... IT'S NOT LIKE
I'VE MET ANY OF 'EM
BEFORE, ANYWAY...

...SO, I SAW YOU WERE
GOING REAL FRIENDLY IN
THERE! HOW IS IT TO
SCREW A CYBORG ANYWAY?

GAWD,
JEMMA!

LIKE
I KNOW
...

...THAT'S QUITE
INTERESTING.

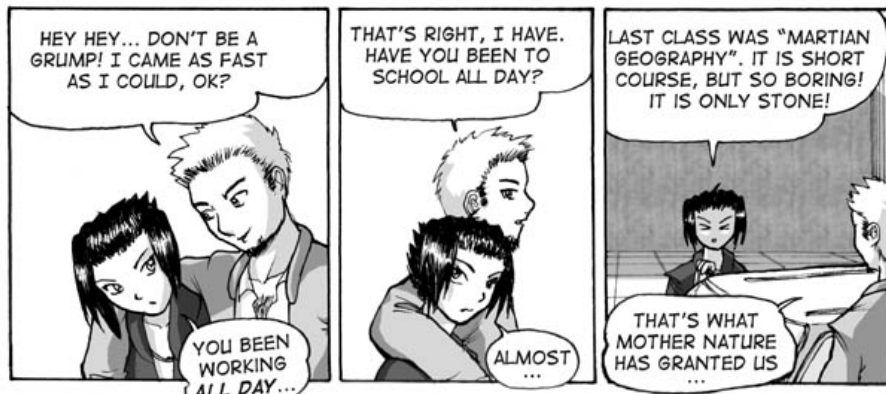
...NOW...

NOTES

Aha! Mysteries!

There's some really neat inking
in this page, but the tones take
away the effect a little...





NOTES

This page became more complex than I'd thought, which probably is a good thing. I like the backgrounds in the first frames.

"Ahou" means idiot, if you didn't know...





NOTES

I quite like how this turned out!
I've also saved a bit on the shadow tones, to show the lineart more and to significantly reduce the time it takes doing that shit..

The final result doesn't suffer from this, I think...





NOTES

Another page to my liking...

Doesn't happen much, but damn it looks good, imho :D

We'll be havin' us a wee bit of action soon enough. Yes, for real.



Contributor's Bios

ANNE CARLY ABAD received the Poet of the Year Award in the 2017 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards. She has also received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award. Her work has appeared in *Apex*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Strange Horizons*, to name a few. Her first poetry collection, *We've Been Here Before*, is now available through Aqueduct Press: <http://www.aqueductpress.com/books/978-1-61976-222-0.php>

* * *



TONI ARTUSO is an emerging/aging transfemale writer from Salem, Massachusetts. Recently retired, she is refocusing on her writing, as well as transitioning and trying to accelerate the emerging and slow down the aging. Toni's fiction has been featured in *Once Upon a Crocodile*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, *All Worlds Wayfarer*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *quip literary review*, *Fiction on the Web*, *96th of October*, and *The Broadkill Review*.

* * *



DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and son. Her prize-winning poetry has received Rhysling, Dwarf Star, and Pushcart nominations and has appeared in over fifty journals, including *F&SF* and *Asimov's*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Analog* and *Galaxy's Edge*. For more about her work, including her poetry collections, *The Gates of Never* and *Bounded by Eternity*, please see www.edda-earth.com.

* * *



SHIKHAR DIXIT is a writer/illustrator whose two newest stories in print can be found in *Weird Horror* #1 and *Space & Time* #139, both magazines available on Amazon. He has sold over thirty stories and one hundred illustrations to such venues as *Dark Regions*, *Strange Horizons*, *Not One of Us*, *The Darker Side* (anthology edited by John Pelan), *Songs From Dead Singers* (anthology edited by Michael Kelly) and two Barnes & Noble anthologies. He lives with his family in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey, where he is currently at work on his first novel. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com

* * *



AARON EMMEL's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fireside Fiction*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Starship Sofa* and many other excellent magazines and anthologies. Find him online at www.aaronemmel.com and on Twitter at [@justicioaje](https://twitter.com/justicioaje).

* * *



ADELE GARDNER (gardnercastle.com, none/they, Mx.) is a fiction writer & award-winning poet with a poetry collection, *Halloween Hearts*, forthcoming from Jackanapes Press and work in *Analog*, *Strange Horizons*, *PodCastle*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. This genderfluid night owl loves libraries, samurai films, and reading comics with cats. Adele serves as literary executor for father, mentor, and namesake Delbert R. Gardner.

* * *



B. B. GARIN is a writer living in Buffalo, NY. Her echapbook, *New Songs for Old Radios*, is available from Wordrunner Press. She is a recipient of the 2020 Sara Patton Fiction Stipend from The Writer's Hotel. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Swamp Ape Review*, *freeze frame fiction*, *3rd Wednesday*, *Crack the Spine*, *Inklette* and more. She is currently a prose reader and blog contributor for *The Masters Review*. She earned a B.F.A. in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College, and continues to improve her craft at GrubStreet Writing Center, where she has developed several short fiction pieces, as well as two novels. Learn more at bbgarin.wordpress.com.

* * *



DOUGLAS GWILYM is an author and editor who has also been known to compose a weird-fiction rock opera or two. He edited four years of the themed annual *Triangulation* (now in its 17th iteration) and is an active member of the Horror Writers Association. He has served on staff at Alpha Young Writers speculative fiction workshop and is the Gwilym in Gwilym & Oreto's Good Dark Fun. Check out his stories at *Novel Noctule*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, *Dark Fire Fiction*, and *Danse Macabre's DM du Jour*. See him read classic weird fiction on YouTube and find more stories at douglasgwilym.com.

* * *



ELAD HABER is a husband, father to an adorable little girl, and IT guy by day, fiction writer by night. He has recent publications at *perhappened mag*, *Not Deer Magazine*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, and *The Night's End Podcast*. You can follow him on twitter @MusicInMyCar or on his website, eladhaber.wordpress.com.

* * *



DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Fifth Di...* Sept 2021, interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares* #118 Sept. 2021, & poetry in *Shelter Of Daylight Autumn* 2021. In 2020 his website celebrated 20 years on the web. Also, in 2020 his artwork is for sale for the first time. The link is on his website. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

* * *



WENDY NIKEL is a speculative fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips, and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. Her short fiction has been published by *Analog*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Nature*, and elsewhere. Her time travel novella series, beginning with *The Continuum*, is available from World Weaver Press. For more info, visit wendynikel.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.

* * *



ZANDRA RENWICK's award nominated fiction has been translated, performed on stage, produced in audio, and is currently in development for television. Find her stories in *Asimov's*, *Ellery Queen's* & *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *New Canadian Noir*, and *The Year's Best Hardcore Horror*. More at zandrarenwick.com, or sporadically at online social haunts under @zandrarenwick.

* * *



ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *

NOVYL SAEED can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username @lyv0n.

* * *



LYNNE SARGENT is a writer, aerialist, and philosophy Ph.D candidate currently studying at the University of Waterloo. Their work has been nominated for Rhysling and Aurora Awards, and has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Their first collection, *A Refuge of Tales*, is out now from Renaissance Press.

To find out more, reach out to them on Twitter @SamLynneS or for a complete bibliography visit them at scribbledshadows.wordpress.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.

* * *

DEAN SCHRECK is a retired and relocated Long Islander who has been writing since the age of fourteen. His poems began appearing in small press magazines at seventeen with a bit of fiction here and there. Dean's work has been published in *New Myths*, *Trembling with*

Fear, Space and Time, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Littoral*, *Altered Reality*, *Magical Blend*, *Owlflight* ... among others. He has also done work in comic books, including—*Bloodscent for Comico* (1988) and *Now Comics Twilight Zone* #7.

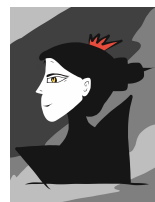
* * *



At 19 **DAGNY SELLORIN** decided she had to be an artist; got an MFA from Reed College and spent her life moving around the world, taking part in group and solo shows on the West coast, USA, Grenada, WI, Venezuela, Hong Kong, and private shows in Cambodia. A small number of pieces are in private collections of discerning collectors around the world.

End game goal: Drop dead while making a fantastic piece of art, with a smile on her face.

* * *



RITIKSHA SHARMA is an artist, poet and occasional prose writer based in India. She completed her masters in History from the University of Delhi during the pandemic; and is interested in the complexity of caliginous splinters of people, anti-heroes, old havelis and their stories, sharp piano notes, the number 99 and colonial cemeteries. Doodling one-eyed creatures and writing about them keeps her going; it's her soul-food.

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the two-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Dreamscapes* and *A Collection of Nightmares*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and have garnered many accolades, including the Jane Reichhold International Prize, nominations for the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Pushcart Prize, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and

Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's essay "Final Girl: A Life in Horror" was a finalist in the 2020 Bram Stoker Awards for Superior Achievement in Short Non-Fiction, and her first novelette "Fury" was anthologized in the multiple award-winning *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women*. Christina lives in Singapore with her children and a menagerie of curious pets. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media @christinasng.

* * *



Lover of wine, women and song, **TOEKEN's** had work published in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Antihumanist Magazine*, *Blood Knife Magazine*, *Novel Noctule*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Unfading Daydream*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mysterion*, *Lovecraftiana Magazine*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *SQ Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *The Future Fire*, *The Drabblecast*, *Helios Quarterly*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *RobotDinosaurs*, *Ares Magazine*, *Double Feature Magazine*, *NewMyths*, *Non Binary Review*, *Persistent Visions*, *ParAbnormal Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Devolution Z Magazine*, *Cracked Eye*, *Nothing's Sacred*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Gallows Hill*, *Econoclash*, and *The Weird and Whatnot* and painted book covers for authors and editors such as Bryan Smith ('Kayla'), Tim Meyer ('The Thin Veil', 'The Switch House', '69'), Chad Lutzke (Night as a Catalyst), D.W. Cook (Intermediates: A Cuckoo for Mankind'), Millhaven Press ('Fierce Tales, Lost Worlds'), Cemetery Gates Media ('Halldark Holidays', 'Murderers' Bazaar'), Gavin Chappell ('Kek vs Cthulhu'), Douglas Draa ('Funny As A Heart Attack'), and Trevor Denyer ('Railroad Tales'), among others. You can find his stuff here: <https://atookeneffort.weebly.com>.

* * *

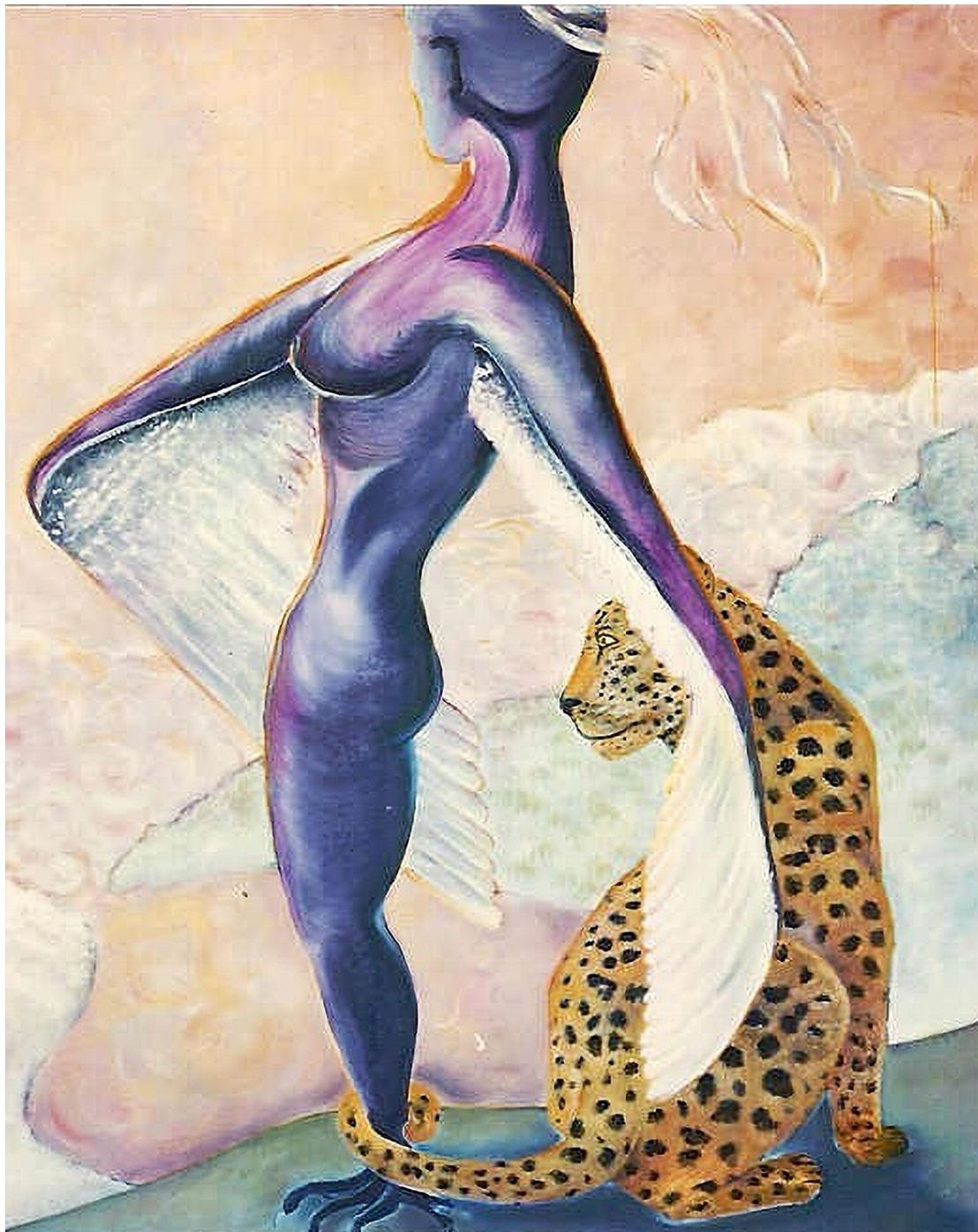


LISA TOWLES is an award-winning crime novelist and a passionate speaker on the topics of fiction writing, creativity, and Strategic Self Care. Lisa has seven crime novels in print with a new title forthcoming in June of 2022. Her latest thriller, *Ninety-Five*, was released in November 2021 and won a Literary Titan Award for Fiction. Her 2019 thriller, *The Unseen*, was the Winner of the 2020 NYC Big Book Award in Crime Fiction, and a Finalist in the Thriller category of the Best Book Awards by American Book Fest. Her 2017 thriller, *Choke*, won a 2017 IPPY and a 2018 NYC Big Book Award for Thriller. Lisa is an active member and frequent panelist/speaker of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. She has an MBA in IT Management and works full-time in the tech industry in the San Francisco Bay Area.

* * *



MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to his long-time passion, creative writing. His work has been published or accepted for publication or use in over sixty paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts. Some of his stories have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of publications.



My Friends #1

by Dagny Sellorin

(full image)