

penumbra

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On to tomorrow

and fantastically dark yesterdays

Prose, Poetry, and Art featuring

Andy Dibble • D.A. Xiaolin Spires • EJ Kavoulas • Ritiksha Sharma • Richard Magahiz • Carl Scharwath •
Tamika Thompson • Camellia Paul • MC Childs • Christina Sng • Mike Morgan • Brian D. Hinson • Ashley Abigail
Gruezo Resurreccion • Kelly Bowen • Michelle Hartman • Elou Carroll • Hannah Greer • Paula Hammond • James
W. Bodden • Vincenzo Cohen • Gwynne Garfinkle • Emmie Christie • Andrew Graber • Jackie Fenn

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

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

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Digital Medusa



Wisp Warbler



cover: The Return to Tomorrow
by Brian Malachy Quinn

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

The Hugos are coming! Or make that whatever tense is appropriate given when you're reading this editorial; WorldCon this year is 13–17 August, which starts just a few days after we come out, and the awards are announced on the 16th. I remember hearing about the Hugos probably since I began reading science fiction (so, amend that to “since I began reading” lol), and they have always been a Very Big Thing.

(If you're thinking I'm about to reveal something about *Penumbric* and Hugos, you're sadly mistaken, but thank you for the positive energy!)

This year, I received an email telling me that poetry was finally being considered for awards, although only as a special, one-year-only award. But ... hasn't that always been a category? Why would you have these major awards, which include everything from entire book series to short stories to dramatic presentations, and not include poetry? Well, apparently they don't. So there's a movement afoot, which I wholeheartedly support, to have the poetry award made into a regular thing. You can read more about it at www.poetryhugo.com.

For that matter, I'm trying to be more proactive about nominating works that have been published in *Penumbric* for awards generally

(and no, I have no voice at all in Hugo nominations ... or in many others). As such I have been sending Ellen Datlow, editor of the Year's Best Horror series, all the fresh horror that we publish. (It has to be “fresh,” as in not reprints, to be eligible.) And I have recently been in touch with Neil Clarke, editor of the Year's Best Science Fiction, to begin sending science fiction as well. I've only just tracked down the Year's Best for fantasy works, so I'll keep you posted on that ... so many of these series stop and start again at volume 1, and some combine different genres, so it's weirdly time-consuming.

If you have any thoughts about awards we should be pursuing for our authors, let me know at our submissions email (submissions@penumbric.com). And thank you to everyone again for submitting so many great works to us!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric

A Word That Means Everything

by Andy Dibble

When Pius was assigned to Murk, he assumed he would be translating the Bible into the language of genius octopuses. But the first Thulhu he laid eyes on, rendered grayscale by the mist, only humped a lichen patch, distended tongue audibly slathering against rock, tentacle suckers puckering as they stuck and unstuck, vestigial wings like out-of-body lungs flagging over its backside.

Thulhus were supposed to communicate via tentacle gestures. This thrashing was it, right? But Pius's visor remained dark. No translation.

His last assignment with the Prabhakarins had been different. They knew first impressions mattered. This tentacly brute didn't even acknowledge him.

"You're sure this thing is sentient?" he called back. His voice echoed queerly in the gloom.

"Keep it down!" Zora said in a church whisper. She was a good guide; by reputation a good ethnographer. But she treated him more like a credulous little brother than a client.

"I thought you said they can't hear."

"They can't. But the Thulhus aren't top of the food chain." Zora dangled her fingers like a jellyfish. Made them creep. The right fore-tentacle of her Thulhu-suit glided with almost feline surreptitiousness. She snatched her left hand away, and her other fore-tentacle darted behind the nearest hind-tentacle of her suit.

The visor protruding from Pius's headgear flashed, "Predator."

He gulped. In this fog, anything worthy of the name predator had to be calculating an ambush.

He was armed, but sensor mesh constricted his trigger finger. He'd chosen the non-invasive Thulhu-suit. Zora's interfaced directly with her motor cortex, so her gestures were just a symptom of the same neural impulses that animated her suit's fore-tentacles. Through obliquer mentation she could control the four hind-tentacles of her suit. If it came to flight, Pius had just one option: auto-pilot.

The Thulhu let up its humping long enough to radiate a spasm down its limber fore-tentacles and four stouter hind-tentacles. A shrug?

Pius's visor proffered "Disbelief" in blocky red print. Then corrected itself, "Amused disbelief."

Pius groaned. What kind of language was this? He expected elegance, a system of symbols, like the sign language of Prabhakar children who are deaf-mute until puberty.

"Maybe they just thrash around to mate and warn each other of danger," said Pius. "That doesn't mean they have *language*."

"Did your Church tell you that?" Zora chuckled like Socrates must have chuckled just before shredding his interlocutors' preconceptions.

"Just my guess." It could be bureaucratic blundering that consigned him to Murk, but he had to assume the One Church hadn't sent him on a fool's errand.

“Thousands of robots taking millions of pictures all over this region ran pattern recognition, *devilishly* clever algorithms. The same software derived more than a thousand languages spanning over a hundred species throughout the galaxy. Just think how few Bible translations your Church would have piddled out without it.”

Church doctrine said that the Holy Spirit doesn’t work through software, but brandishing dogma was a nonstarter. “Maybe a different subject would be more cooperative?”

There were other males (Zora called them men) scarfing lichen or sloughing about as though they belonged to a patch of mist rather than a place. And fog-gray females (ahem, women) haunting the periphery of the seen world. Young clung to the floppy wings on their backs as their fore-tentacles flicked about in conversation.

“You’ll have less luck with the others. We’re just …” She let a fore-tentacle go slack like a burdensome limb she hadn’t found the time to amputate.

The translation smote the upper left of Pius’s vision. “Disobedient-other”?

In imitation, he let his shoulder drop, and the whole left side of his Thulhu-suit sagged. He avoided keeling over into spongy marsh only by wind-milling to the other side. His suit would have formed the gesture if he had just spoken the word into his mouthpiece.

Light danced in Zora’s eyes, but she suppressed her mirth.

The Thulhu let up feeding. His fore-tentacles squiggled.

“Derisive amusement,” Pius’s visor flared.

“Why does this one ‘talk’?” asked Pius. Unsure how his suit would react, he resisted the urge to make air quotes.

“Heh, he’s just true to his name.”

“His name?”

“Snarky.”

* * *

Snarky made the disobedient-other gesture. Pius’s headset flashed, “Oh, the alien is back.” Snarky’s fore-tentacles mimed a hug, and Pius read the translation, “And she brought a friend.”

Zora nudged Pius.

“How are you?” Pius said into his mouthpiece. His suit gestured accordingly. The feed glowing on the lower-right of his visor said the accusatory gesture for “you” meant literally “other-me.”

“And it has nothing interesting to say,” Snarky gestured, as self-important as a four-year-old. He only stood as high as Pius’s waist.

“You really don’t think I’m a person?” asked Pius.

“Of course I believe I’m a person.” Snarky’s fore-tentacles wrung in dizzying self-referential circles.

Did the untranslatability of “you” confuse him? “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant. I’ve been through this with her. In the end we agreed to disagree. She—sage alien that she is—believes there’s a shadowy world of squishy objects behind the mist. I say it’s impossible.”

“Behind the mist?”

“Where else would it be?”

Pius was taken aback by Snarky’s candidness. “What am I then?”

“Just another alien I imagined. Proof that I’m exceptionally clever.”

Or delusional.

“Maybe I’m just bored.”

* * *

On second thought, Pius remembered Zora saying that the Thulhus only believe in their own minds. To them, there were no bodies, no other Thulhus; there’s no lichen to eat, no mist. There are only thoughts of bodies, thoughts of other minds, mist-thoughts, lichen-thoughts.

She had lectured him on brain science. “You don’t believe the hemispheres of your brain are two different people just because they communicate in order to render and interpret the world. To Thulhus, that’s what talk is like.”

Scant recognition on his part.

She tried again. “If you saw your brain, you’d know that the gray matter was you. But it wouldn’t feel like you, right? That’s how a Thulhu thinks about other Thulhus. He knows they’re all *him*, even though it doesn’t feel that way.”

What Pius knew was that he wasn’t a brain but a soul fashioned by his Creator.

Zora only knew a universe in flux, constantly prototyping. Not a universe, vibrant and ushering.

A Godless materiality.

* * *

Maybe he could enlighten Snarky. “But everything persists even when you aren’t looking at it. You close your eyes, open them, and—” Pius’s suit broke off gesturing as Snarky leaned upsettingly close.

“Close my eyes?” His cephalopod face was so near, Pius took the hint: Thulhus don’t have eyelids. Thulhus didn’t have to adapt to overbearing light with the mist always about. They might as well have lived inside a cloud.

“Ah, assume you can,” Pius said.

“Very well.” Apparently, Thulhus have a gesture for *gross condescension*.

“When you cover your eyes,” said Pius, ignoring the slight, “the whole world goes away, and when you see again, it’s the same as it was. How do you explain that if all that exists is you?”

Thulhus don’t have lips, and Snarky’s mouth was beneath his body where Pius couldn’t see it. But Pius knew Snarky would be grinning impishly were it not for his anatomy.

“How can I? I am overcome. You’ve shown me the error of my ways, wrestled your existence from my delusions.”

Zora glanced at Pius sheepishly. But why should Snarky be polite? He believes he’s just talking to himself.

Snarky flapped a fore-tentacle, an off-hand negation. “Sometimes the mist gobbles up what I see, sometimes it doesn’t. This eye-blinking has nothing to do with it. Zora tells me aliens have a similar problem. Sometimes you try to remember and succeed, sometimes you fail. Mist, forgetfulness—they are the same.”

Zora perceived Pius’s mounting agitation. “Persistence for us isn’t the same as it is for them. They only see motion, no colors, nothing that’s still.”

Snarky couldn't hear, but he must have inferred the purpose of their exchange because he flicked his tentacles in amused squiggles.

"Do you believe in God?" Pius ventured. The software made the fore-tentacles of his suit link together to denote belief then lifted the right in an extravagant salute, "God."

Snarky emitted a confused wavering. He imitated the extravagant salute. "Is God a person?" His fore-tentacles groped and shivered in the gesture for *person*.

As far as the software ascertained, his question was meant in all earnestness. But it posed a dilemma: "Person" means an intellect and even more than that, a will, so God is a person. But if Pius said as much, Snarky would reject God as he rejected all other persons.

"Yes, God's a person."

Snarky swayed, dithering. "Am I God?"

"No, you aren't God. We aren't God either. God is"—Pius struggled to produce a word—"outside. Beyond the mist." The software raised Pius's right fore-tentacle in a new salute, an elephantine trumpeting. Reviewing the feed, Pius realized it meant literally one-beyond-mist, which also meant one-beyond-forgetfulness.

"One-beyond-mist," Snarky gestured. Was that a question?

"Yes, that's the beginning of what God is," Pius said carefully. "What would it take for you to believe in one-beyond-mist?"

"Ah, I understand now, becoming God only requires patience." His tentacles squiggled. "Wait for the mist to clear, and I will be one-beyond-mist!"

"Did you hear what I said? *You aren't God.*"

Zora flipped her fore-tentacles disarmingly; she shot Pius a look.

"But if I can't become God, God is impossible."

"God is another person, someone *always* beyond the mist." Pius struggled to screen the tension from his voice. It came out a plea, "What would it take for you to believe in God?"

"Madness."

* * *

"Snarky likes you," said Zora.

"Likes me?"

"When I met him, he gestured incoherently just to confuse the software. You had a conversation, give and take."

"He's delusional."

"He's different. You have to bridge that difference; don't expect him to."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"Maybe in your translation Jesus can have tentacles. And Satan can be one of the *things* deep down in the lowlands." Her tentacles didn't squiggle like Snarky's would have, but she cracked a smile. The deep things were just rumor spawned by the same mythos that named the Thulhus.

She would've gone on, but Pius cut her short. "What you're suggesting isn't translation."

"Maybe not, but limiting your work to the bounds of this book—the Bible—isn't going to reach the Thulhus. For a Thulhu there's only one mind, one author, one work of literature. So think of the Bible as a Thulhu would, as part of a larger work, one constantly expanding and

improving.” She grinned. “Your translation is just the next draft.”

* * *

Pius sulked for a while on the way back, but eventually Zora tried again. “Back on Earth, biologists had a saying: ‘Life will find a way,’ will thrive in every habitat—the driest desert, the bottom of the ocean. Once we studied other worlds, do you know how that saying changed?”

“How?” Pius begrudged.

“‘Life will find every way.’ The universe will surprise you no matter how your Bible says life should be.” Her constantly prototyping universe in which Christianity is as queer and outmoded as the vestigial wings of a Thulhu.

“*Every* way? Aside from the Thulhus, I’ve seen sooty ferns, lichen, a few mushrooms, and whatever that is rotting so delightfully in the marsh. Not exactly biological diversity.”

“Those mushrooms.” Her right fore-tentacle wound in a spiral. “They *live* off radiation. Even in the lowlands where radioisotopes blanket everything.”

“There are mutant mushrooms. So what?”

“There’s the universe, and then there’s your Bible.” Her voice was low but sure, like faraway thunder. “I’ll let you guess which doesn’t fit within the other.”

* * *

Pius was glad to be indoors. The air had an antiseptic taste, but it was unmisted, an unmurky corner of Murk. He changed out of his sweaty wetsuit and peeled the sensor mesh from his hands and arms. The skin beneath was clammy, and it itched. There was a solar-spectrum light

in his monkishly small dorm. It might ward off seasonal affective disorder (it was always the season for that on Murk), but that merry bulb didn’t assuage his brooding.

He keyed a report to his superiors. “First contacted native sentient species today, *Murkaea hectopus cthulhu*, commonly named Thulhus. Findings not encouraging. The one Thulhu that condescended to communicate with us via tentacle gesticulations had no concept of God, or I suspect, any spiritual reality. His arrogance was not that of the disbeliever but of the fool convinced that his limited concepts are the only possible lens through which one may perceive the world.

“Serving God and His Word, I contend that the purported sentence of the Thulhus is an invention of the software that derived their language, if it can even properly be called a language. I humbly suggest that sentence be construed in terms of whether a species has a concept of the Divine, not the dictates of software.

“The Thulhus strike me as a hive species; every Thulhu believes itself to be queen and all the members of its cult (i.e. group) mere extensions of itself. We do not sully Scripture by translating it into the mating dance of bees. Let us not sully it with the tentacle-gesturing of the Thulhus. Recommendation is that this project be terminated.”

A response could take weeks, given bureaucratic shuffling. But just two standard hours later: “Your contention is unacceptable. We will send help.”

* * *

Cowed by the eight-word reprimand of his superiors, Pius drifted. Should he wait for the promised, and likely degrading, help? Would the project be out of his hands once help arrived? Would he become a mere clerk at the beck and call of a new superior?

Pius prayed for answers but continued to work. Without explicit instruction to the contrary, he had to show progress in daily reports,

though only God knew whether anyone would read them.

He had a place to start: the Gospel of John, the fourth and most exalted of the biographies of Jesus. After that he'd translate whatever other Greek portions of the Bible his superiors told him to, hitherto without collaboration. Synthesis happened higher in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

He dictated the opening verses of John in the original Greek into the mouthpiece of his headgear, "*En arche en ho logos. ...*" The shadowy tentacles of a Thulhu homunculus rose and fell across his visor. They froze—stuttering?—then jostled to the next gesture.

He replayed with English subtitles, and right away, the problem was as plain as mist: "In the beginning was the *logos* (?)." Even the software surrendered before the translation puzzle posed by *logos*. *Logos* is not just Word, as it is commonly translated into English. Indeed, the capital *W* only gestures at the capacious semantics of *logos*, which includes just about everything having to do with language and the mind: discourse, narration, commandment, teaching, reason, intellect, proportion, expectation. In one Bible passage, *logos* means debt, in another a legal complaint. In several passages, *logos* has a derogatory connotation, as mere talk or empty rhetoric, like when Paul writes, "The kingdom of God depends not upon *logos* but on power."

Logos found a niche in most every philosophy and religion throughout the ancient Mediterranean in which John wrote his Gospel: Orphic and Dionysian mystery cults exalted their dying and vivifying gods with epithets of which *logos* was the germ. Stoic philosophers taught of a *logos spermatikos*, the rational principle undergirding everything. Aristotle rendered *logos* as rationality, the soul of humanity.

Pius decided to simply gloss *logos* as the Thulhu gesture for "word." It would altogether miss the mark, but the Thulhus obviously had no capacity to construe the expanse of John's meaning. No one could object to his treating an impossible problem with an inadequate solution.

"Translate 'word.'" An umbral tentacle rose across his field of view like a hand reaching in supplication, oddly stirring. But the subtitles that crowded beneath provoked no fellow-feeling: "Gesture, verb, word, connection, ascent, legerdemain, guile."

Pius tried again. The software repeated itself without irritation.

He groaned from a tight place in his chest. The primary meaning wasn't even "word" but "gesture," which had all kinds of implications John hadn't intended.

Pius moved on to "verb," the second meaning listed. Why should "noun" be absent? The software had to be confused, befuddled by the Thulhus and their supposed language.

The next meaning, "connection," had worth because gesturing is how the Thulhus connect. And it brought out a shade of meaning latent but not explicit in John's usage: John says the *logos* is Jesus, and Jesus is how God connects to His creation.

But the next meaning, "ascent," had nothing to do with John. "Ascent" conjured images of a Thulhu mounting a steep rise through inscrutable mists like the dread monster Cthulhu from the old Lovecraft tales, the Thulhus' namesake. Jesus could have no association with that!

"Legerdemain" and "guile" didn't help. Too underhanded. He couldn't frame Jesus in such a sinister light.

He leapt up to hammer out a report to his superiors. They'd understand that it was better to preserve John's meaning than to twist it in translation. Whatever he did would be ignored or ridiculed by the Thulhus anyway. Why even try?

But that prim reprimand stung, a crisp blow. His superiors would see this project done. At best they would ignore him. Worse, they might judge him beneath even *unacceptable*.

He sagged onto his tiny cot, defeated once by the separateness of languages and again by the aloofness of the Church to which he dedicated his life.

* * *

On the day Pius was called to Murk, he'd been watching the sunrise ritual with Prabhakaran children and their non-menstruating mothers. Beneath the banyan tree in the town square of Dhruv, men dipped teak ladles into pots of ghee, heated just to liquidity, then upended the pure oil over a preserved footprint of one of their distinguished ancestors—once, twice, three times. Murmuring a mantra in a forgotten tongue, they bowed prostrate with the fingers of all four hands intertwined like strands of an occult knot. The new sun bathed their backs.

One of the girls—pre-pubescent because her mouths were just lipless slits—caught Pius's eye with an upward grasping motion, hand-speak for sex. Thank God, it wasn't an invitation. She was just repeating what she'd seen, a reminder that Pius's abstinence was a topic of light conversation around Dhruv. He pointed upward with two pronged fingers and drew them to his eyes: *the stars are watching you*. She turned away, rasping giggles from her inchoate larynxes.

Almost half of the men rose to begin work, most in a marketplace stall, at the docks, or in a warehouse. More would rise soon, but the truly pious would continue prostrations until the sun lifted fully above the horizon. No mean feat given that Prabhakara's diurnal cycle is forty times longer than a standard day. After the long night, some would keep shoving their noses into the dirt from sheer superstitious relief.

A vibration from inside his dhoti. About time the Church broke radio silence. They could page him through his headgear, but the locals deemed any adornment above the waist womanish, so he rarely wore it.

Undoubtedly, he would be reassigned, perhaps to just another Prab-

hakaran community, but he suspected otherwise. He'd heard through the missionary grapevine that the Church planned to cut its losses: Prabhakarins spoke too many languages, were too stuck in their ways, too fearful of an everlasting night.

God willing, his next assignment would be on Aletheia. The common tongue, spoken across the entire planet, boasted more than one million words, five thousand colors, five thousand textures, five thousand for every sense. Every mannerism, every flavor of awkwardness and triumph, every nuance of propriety, every stage in every process from nascence to ripeness to moribundity had a name. Most had several, each a near-synonym different only by a flutter of connotation. Anyone, no matter his station, could coin a new word, and if his fellows deemed it worthy, civilizations would take it up. What better language to translate the Gospel into? Pen just one translation, and he could bring billions to Christ.

He rushed into his hut to fetch his headgear. But his wife was in the way, or rather the woman the town council had designated as his wife. Her gourd-shaped head yammered from both ends, left mouth prognosticating doom: the stars would destroy him if he shirked the sunrise ritual again. Then she'd be a tainted widow unable to inherit even his impure off-world wealth. Her right mouth grumbled about stillbirths and deformities.

Murmuring polite apologies, he ducked beneath her accusing arm, knowing she wouldn't touch him, not during her period. He swiped the jute fiber sack that held his headgear, edged past her, and made for the tree line. He passed the stand of basalt idols that guarded the northern entrance to Dhruv, among them a rough-hewn statue of Jesus. It had two heads like all the other graven images. Pius ground his teeth and impotently fantasized about pulverizing the heathen thing.

The canopy overshadowing him had unfurled entirely after its nightly hibernation. He covered one ear to block the cacophony of tropical birds and donned his headgear. Loam squished beneath his tapping foot.

“You are Pius Judson, missionary of the One Church of Christ?” A machine voice, monotone, like all official Church communication.

“I am Pius Judson, missionary of the One Church of Christ,” he echoed for purposes of voice recognition.

“The Church looks upon your work favorably. You are hereby reassigned to the moon of Aletheia, colloquially named Murk. Report to research station Relyeh on its southern continent at your earliest convenience.”

Murk, the moon of Aletheia. Teasingly near Aletheia but not Aletheia. What had he done wrong? With almost no prodding from his superiors, he’d translated the entire New Testament into the Dhruvish dialect, spoken by merchants and bankers across most of the continent. He’d translated John’s Gospel two more times into the dialects of outlying villages. His attempt to render John in child hand-speak had floundered, but that project was his own.

“Is someone else translating John into Aletheian?”

A pause. “It is given to you to know.” An answer as cryptic as the prognostications of Prabhakaran astrologers.

“Who?”

“Father David Nestor.”

Pius removed his headgear and laughed bitterly. Murk wasn’t his punishment. It was his consolation prize. He’d been outclassed by the greatest Bible translator alive.

* * *

When Pius got word that the promised help was David Nestor, he wondered idly if all those sunrise rituals he abstained from provoked astrological backlash after all.

But he wasn’t the one tumbling from Aletheia to the shrouded moon of the hectopus cows. David must have fallen far in the eyes of the Church to be reassigned to Murk.

That thought kindled a grim green warmth in Pius. Envy didn’t shame him as much as it should have. Knowing that staunched the warmth, a little.

* * *

David emerged from the decontamination chamber clothed in priestly black—slacks and a shirt, not a cassock. His cheekbones were high, his skin taut and frustratingly boyish even though he was fifteen years Pius’s senior.

Pius shook David’s hand stiffly and led him toward the mess hall, unsure what to say. Pius started toward a bevy of support staff, mostly Devonians, a species of black amphibious fish-people. They weren’t native to Murk, but the damp suited them.

Perhaps the presence of a crowd would stifle whatever probing questions David had chambered in his throat.

But David turned to the side to indicate an empty table. “How about here?”

Inquisition: unavoidable.

Pius slumped into a seat. He said nothing.

David speared a rehydrated potato on his plate with more gusto than the wrinkled tuber deserved. “The potatoes here aren’t bad. See, they spice everything to oblivion over on Aletheia.”

Was David rubbing it in? *Hey, Pius, have you heard of scholars’ pagodas on Aletheia? In Asher—marvelous city, really—there’s one just for Bible translation. It has a level for each book of the Bible! And would*

you believe it's built into a mountain of pink salt?

David swallowed. "Sometimes plain rations are best."

Pius wasn't in the mood for banter. "How should we begin with the translation?"

"Let's not talk about work. Let's talk about you."

Next David would say he's no longer needed, or worse needed but only for clerical errands. David would be the fount of all creative insight.

"I read your work on translating John into Prabhakaran languages," said David.

"Really?" Pius wasn't exactly a distinguished translator.

"I like to know about the people I work with. Your translation of *logos* intrigued me. I forget the term, but it means action. It struck me as a bit loose."

Loose? "I wanted to render *logos* as Word. But to the villagers I lived with language isn't about description. It's all about inciting action, so I chose *kara*, action."

His mouth felt suddenly dry. "I hope you can see why it was necessary."

"All language is about inciting action?" said David, his scholar's soul beaming.

So Pius knew something that David didn't. "They go too far, of course, but it's not so strange, if you think about it. When a mother tells her child, 'It's eight o'clock,' she's not trying to *inform* her child of anything. She wants the kid to go to bed."

"Ah, so that's why your translation was so admonishing, 'You must

believe this!' and 'You must believe that!'"

Pius opened his mouth but clammed up.

"You can speak plainly to me, Pius. I'm just a priest, a pastor like yourself." That confusion in titles said much. In an earlier age, before there was One Church of Christ, they would have stood on opposite sides of an eight-hundred-year-old schism. David would be a Catholic and a Jesuit, Pius a Protestant.

"I know the tone was off, but belief is what the Gospel is about, embracing doctrine, I mean."

"Perhaps."

Perhaps? "How would you have translated *logos* into Prabhakaran?"

Pius thought he might've caught him off guard, but of course David Nestor would have an answer. "They have a word, *amita*, meaning boundless. It's so much richer than just some generic action."

"I know the word. *Amita* orchestrates the stars in a grand ritual, the infinite cosmic ritual that all the rituals the Prabhakarins perform on the ground supposedly emulate."

"Sounds pretty good, right? Jesus is that boundless principle, the infinite entering history as a finite being. Like in John's Gospel."

"But translating *logos* as *amita* would have made the Prabhakarins think Christianity was just a repackaged version of their religion."

"Why not exploit the cultural idiom, write an eloquent translation, and engage Prabhakaran readers? Then we pose some real competition to the canons of the native religion."

"We can't do that at the expense of Christ." Grim warmth again, less green, redder. "You know, *Jesus*?"

“That’s why there are Gospels.” David didn’t raise his voice. “John goes on to say who the man is that is the *logos*, what he did, who he was, his sacrifice.”

“You can’t *wreck* the beginning just because you think John will pick up the pieces later on.” Pius gained his feet. “Let’s not talk about me. Let’s talk about you.”

* * *

Pius meant the translation of John that had made David’s reputation, his Orkish translation. The translation that should not have been. Orken One is hell, too hot for water to condense except at its poles. It has a magnetosphere, an atmosphere, wind enough to normalize temperatures through day and night. But life couldn’t have a foothold: it had been molten just five hundred million years ago. That was time enough for reels of amino acids, perhaps inklings of silicon-based life. But further complexity just shouldn’t have been possible. Everyone with pull—star system governments, venerable scientific foundations, enterprising trillionaires—set their sights only on the cornucopia of Earth-like worlds with a real chance at harboring sentient life.

Orken One still attracted pioneers, wealthy tourists scudding by in a luxury cruiser. Peeping through the lenses of drones conferred bragging rights with none of the being boiled alive.

The Dantesque safari amazed them—sandstone hoodoos, geologically young but red like old blood, bearing pyroclastic slabs aloft in unbroken penance. Dunes like white-robed acolytes cowering resplendently beneath the numinous glare of Orken. The wind screaming judgment upon the ever-erring landscape, sometimes skewing it in flagellate wave patterns, other times whipping it in dust devils or driving biting sandstorms of cataclysmic size.

The footage seeped into social media. A keen-eyed researcher took notice. She found no water, nothing fossilized. But wave patterns furrowed the dunes even on windless days, even against the prevailing wind.

The second wave of drones had been equipped with translation software. They discarded any footage of patterns explicable by weather alone. But much remained, too much for chance. Biology notwithstanding, the drones’ Bayes nets and Markov models found language.

It wasn’t long until researchers weren’t just overhearing the Orkens but conversing with them. No one ever found out what they were. Either the Orkens were holding back, or they didn’t know themselves. But biological puzzles didn’t faze Christian missionaries dedicated to bringing the Good News to every sentient race.

None proved himself worthier of the challenge than David Nestor.

* * *

“What about me?” said David. Not a challenge, just an honest question.

“How did you translate *logos* into Orkish?”

“Sun-principle,” said David. “The reason their sun burns. You know that.” Every translator of the Bible alive knew that.

“Do you *want* to make Christianity sound like sun worship?”

“It might sound like that to us,” David said calmly. “But it doesn’t to them. They don’t worship their star Orken, they just believe their world persists through its light.”

“But that’s not what John meant.”

“It’s not? Isn’t *logos* the principle that creates and upholds reality? Doesn’t John call Jesus the ‘light of the world’?”

“Later on, but not at the beginning,” Pius protested lamely.

“Really? You know that *logos* is a philosophical term in Greek. John

must've known that. And how did its use as a philosophical term begin?"

"Heraclitus," Pius conceded.

"And what did Heraclitus say the *logos* is?"

Is he going to make me say it? "A principle that animates the universe."

"And characterized by *fire*."

Pius sighed. "Perhaps your rendering of *logos* was acceptable." The word was out before echoes of the reprimand from on-high (unacceptable, *unacceptable*) seized him. Pius forged on, "But what about later when John writes, 'And the *logos* became flesh and lived among us'?"

David smiled. He knew this was coming.

Pius continued, "You translated flesh as *spirit*, precisely the *opposite* of what John meant!"

"I think you know why I did that."

"I know the commentaries and the subcommentaries, but those are others' reasons. You never said why."

"That's because God's Word needs to stand by itself. If we need long footnotes and commentaries to explain it, we've already failed." David caught Pius with a level stare. "Why do you think I did it?"

There was nothing to do but answer. "The Orkens didn't have a sand-wave pattern for flesh when the explorers arrived. How could they in a world without bodies?"

"But they came up with one, didn't they? A word for us, for *humans*. They never differentiated between our flesh and flesh in general. You

see the problem?"

"They would think that the *logos*-made-flesh didn't come for them, that Jesus only came for us."

"I hope you can see why it was necessary," said David, using Pius's own words against him.

Pius had to swallow before speaking. "Maybe Jesus didn't come for the Orkens. John's point is that Jesus debased himself, became flesh, to redeem us from the death of our bodies."

"Orkens die too," David said with a long stare. "Not like us, but they die. And some have died glad they knew Christ. You think if I could do it again, I would abandon the project and deny them that?"

"If God wanted everyone to live a Christian life, he wouldn't have waited billions of years before coming as Jesus. Think of the—how many? *trillions*?—dying every day throughout the universe that never knew Christ. God has a plan for them. You think we should compromise God's Word just to whittle down that number by the barest fraction?"

David regarded Pius wearily, weary as the galactic wanderer he was. "Why did you become a missionary, Pius?"

"God called me."

"What did God call you to do?"

Pius knew what David wanted him to say, so he demurred, "To safeguard His Word."

"That's all?"

"That's all I'll say."

David's lips pursed, fell in the slightest frown, said nothing.

To wipe David's disappointment away, Pius changed the subject. "You asked me why I was called, but you never said why you came?"

"To help."

"That's all? I have to think our superiors have big plans for the Thulhus if they send you in such a hurry. Big plans!" David came to help? Help what?

It dawned on Pius. "You aren't here for the Thulhus. You're just the next maneuver in the political game. Our superiors don't care about the Thulhus, not really. They just want to brag about how the Church translated the New Testament into Thulhuese before the Muslims translate the Qur'an or the Buddhists translate whichever sutras are trendiest."

"Let our superiors concern themselves with politics, Pius. They do God's work too, even if they are unaware of it."

"You're David Nestor. You have to know something."

"They didn't send me. I volunteered."

* * *

Pius avoided David the following day and the next. But on the third day, Zora called them together.

David saw Zora and brightened. He offered his hand, like one dignitary meeting another, but unbeknownst to the joint delegations they were on a first-name basis. She took it. "Zora Mead, it's an honor."

Pius scanned both their faces. However Zora identified, it wasn't Christian. Why would David be honored to meet her?

"You didn't know?" asked David. "Zora discovered Orkish."

"That was you?"

"Yup."

A split-second suspicion: David came for her? But that was ridiculous. Who would give up on Aletheia, come to Murk, just to shake a hand?

"Let's get down to it," said Zora. "Tomorrow there will be four minutes of mistlessness where we visited Snarky and his cult. There's a good chance they haven't migrated far. Trust me, it's a rare opportunity."

"There isn't another cult in the area?" Pius asked.

"Don't want another tentacle lashing from Snarky?" said Zora. "He learned more from you than you think. Meet him again. He'll be a different Thulhu in clear air." She glanced from Pius to David and back to Pius. "I've been tailing a different cult, but if you need me again—"

"We'll be fine," said David. "Pius can guide me, and we can radio for help if anything goes wrong."

Zora looked at Pius uncertainly, then sized David up, frowned in resignation.

"Alright, but go armed. There are reports of lampreys."

Scarcely thinking about how humid it'd gotten, Pius followed David to the armory, palmed the same munitions as David, and loaded them into the same model handgun.

David would confront him, he knew. Whatever David said, and however he responded, he would always be turned around. He could white-knuckle it, but for how long?

David always knew the right thing to say. He listened as though he'd crossed not only the gulf between Aletheia and Murk for Pius's sake, but the empty reaches of galactic space. How long could his convictions hold out against the enormity of David's attention?

* * *

A Devonian staff woman had already strapped David into his Thulhu-suit but had yet to help Pius.

“Junia, when you’re done with the Churchmen, come back here and help me with these repairs. Dehumidifiers won’t fix themselves, even on God’s account,” said Junia’s manager, a middle-aged white engineer.

Junia strapped Pius into his Thulhu-suit harness, rushed to snap the buckles into place, and hurried to join her manager.

David called back to her, “You forgot one.”

“Forgot one?” she asked, her black gills flapping listlessly, huge insensate fish eyes on either side of her cleft head.

“*His* buckles,” said David.

Pius shifted, scrutinized the points where his harness interfaced with his chest and legs. He lifted his right thigh free.

“Oh, sorry about that.” She readily snapped the errant buckle into place.

The manager faced David penitently. “Sorry, sometimes they make mistakes.”

* * *

David took to operating the Thulhu-suit easily, bounding over mist-cloaked boulders and winding around sucking marsh without hesitation. He had the brain implant, like Zora. David must have digested everything there was to know about Thulhu-suit operation just like he’d assimilated Pius’s work on the Prabhakarins. But it could just be because he was David Nestor. Everything came easily to David

Nestor.

Pius trailed behind David. They weren’t far from the coordinates Zora had given them, where the mist would clear and night would deign to show her star-freckled face. Maybe Pius could avoid another confrontation.

But when they were ten minutes out from the station, David relaxed his pace. “Did you hear what the manager said back at the base, when he apologized for that mix-up with your harness?” David asked.

That was an odd way to brook conversation. “He didn’t say it to me.” *And it was my harness that was loose.*

“He said, ‘Sometimes they make mistakes.’”

Recalling that the manager’s subordinate was young, black, a woman, and a Devonian, the prejudice of those words slammed into Pius.

“What do you think he meant?” asked David.

“By ‘they’? Could’ve been racist? Maybe sexist? Species-ist?” Pius suggested, sharing in the joke.

“Don’t forget ageist. Classist? Maybe he has something against fish?”

“He could’ve just meant that sometimes the people he manages make mistakes.”

“But why say ‘they’?” asked David.

“Good question.” Pius chuckled again.

“Why write *logos*?” said David.

“Good question.” His humor was gone. “But I’m not sure God will tell us if we ask.”

“I mean, why would John—why would *God*—write *logos* in scripture if He didn’t mean something as rich as *logos*, with all its meaning, if He didn’t know we would translate it and translate it again, sometimes carelessly, sometimes with all our faculty, but inevitably fail to capture His meaning?”

“He knew that we would sin in this, like we do in so many things. It’s no different.”

“I don’t think that’s it at all,” said David, a touch forlorn. “Why would God entrust scripture to us if He didn’t think we could carry out His will through it?”

Again David managed to turn Pius’s own words around on him, make it seem that he was the one protecting scripture and bringing the true Gospel to new species, while Pius was just straying again and again. “Is there a point in this?”

“No point, just something I’m trying to gesture at.” David raised his right fore-tentacle in the trumpeting salute, the software’s neologism for one-beyond-mist, which might mean God. “Remember in First Corinthians Paul writes of how he spreads the Gospel? ‘I am all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.’ I think *logos* is like that. It began as just a word, give or take the capital *W*. Maybe John meant a certain something by it, but God knew that we wouldn’t be able to get inside John’s head, that throughout history and the stupendous variety of His creation, we would inevitably make it richer, even unknowingly, like the crew manager with his ‘they.’ I think *logos* is the Word to you and I, a solar-principle to the Orkens, and an action to the Prabhakarins. I think it’s what every sentient species needs it to be, and given time, *logos* will mean everything, will be a word that means everything.”

* * *

David cast his spell over Pius while speaking, but they departed again in silence. The mist occluded everything, outlasting mere words and

the illusions of the man that wove them. Pius decided that David had spent too long tinkering with the stupendous variety of the Aletheian tongue. Surely, a scholarly fancy overcame him to stretch meaning further and further without regard for scripture or the Christianizing of sentient life. A word that means *everything*? Were it possible, it would mean nothing at all!

Pius plucked up his courage. Just as they were climbing the rise upon which Snarky and his cult still grazed, he beckoned, “Hold up.” There was still some time before the mist would clear.

David swiveled his Thulhu-suit around.

“Why did you volunteer to come here when you already had work on Aletheia?”

“They can get on without me.”

And I can’t? “It has nothing to do with a word that means everything?”

“No need to think it means more than it does.” David only half-smiled at his own joke. “I just see the richness in *logos*, and its potential, and I see God in that potential.”

Pius had to lay it on hard. “It’s heresy.”

“Heresy?” At last, David was the one reacting.

“Yes, however we translate *logos*, God means *something* by it. God doesn’t send us in pursuit of phantoms, willing that we do violence to the text, refashioning Christianity as just every other religion it comes into contact with.”

“John didn’t invent this word *logos*. He found it where it was and elevated it for God’s purposes. Heraclitus’s fire, the Stoic *logos spermatikos*, Aristotle’s soul of humanity, reason, Word, all of that was already there. You think *logos* is just a title for Christ? No, it was a title

for cult deities throughout the ancient Mediterranean: Orpheus, Hermes, Dionysus.” A deep anger, a lash of desert wind, stirred within David.

“You think the difference between us is that you defend the truth of scripture and I corrupt it, but really I have my eye on the spirit of the Word and you defend the dead letter.”

“Me? You have these blinders, this *tunnel vision*. What about the rest of scripture? Jesus wasn’t Heraclitus, or a Stoic, or Aristotle, and he certainly wasn’t an alien. He was human. He’s what’s decisive, and his humanity is part of that.”

“If that’s how you feel—”

“We don’t even need to go back to your scandalous Orken translation to make my point! You know the prevailing Chinese translation of *logos*?” David jerked a nod, but Pius spoke over him, “*Dao*. Because of that Chinese speakers ever since the twentieth century have believed that the real Old Testament isn’t the prophets, the Books of Moses, and the history of the Hebrews. No, they said it’s the Daodejing!” Pius didn’t need to remind him that the Daodejing is foundational to Daoism. And Daoism has nothing to do with any Christian creed. “That’s what I mean by heresy.”

“People misread the Bible all the time. You don’t need faulty translation to find crude innovators.”

“But we needn’t help the innovators along! Our task is to preserve the meaning John intended. Once the alien races acclimate to us, they’ll understand the Gospel as we do.”

David grimaced as if his last meal refused digestion.

Let him. God didn’t incarnate as a Thulhu, or any alien, but as a human.

“And how long will that take?” asked David. “You think we should tell

our superiors, ‘Wait a few generations while we figure out how to educate a whole moon of Thulhus about the proper meaning of *logos*?’”

“If that’s what it takes,” Pius shot back.

“You know,” David said, voice edged with disdain, “you’ve already styled John according to alien religion and you don’t even realize it. Your translation of *logos* into Prabhakaran: *kara*, action. You had your reasons, but *logos* doesn’t mean action. John’s *logos* is language, reason, transcendence. Not action.”

Pius recoiled, recalling his own words, *I hope you can see why it was necessary*. David’s tone lowered. “In fact, it’s *Satanic*.”

“Satanic?” He couldn’t mean that.

“Yes, Satanic. You know Faust? Sold his soul to the devil, and in Goethe’s version of the legend, the one *everyone* reads, what did Faust translate *logos* as? *Action*.”

An ululation punctuated David’s last word. A trick of the mist? Impossible.

There was a shadow. Wait. Not a shadow. A lamprey, going by the row upon row of barbs in its cyclostome maw. It writhed on six gray-green tentacles that branched from its long eel body and shivered over one another. There was no guessing how it would move. Pius’s visor didn’t bother trying to interpret. But when it glided—first laterally, then zigzagging nearer—he sensed the hair-raising splendor of it.

Pius met its eyes last. Enormous eyes, mad with hunger, obsidian like Snarky’s, but there the resemblance ended. Behind those eyes was only instinct and lithe machinery. Pius wasn’t a person, not even an alien. He was a meal.

His arm shot up reflexively. His suit smacked the lamprey with a fore-tentacle. The ghastly thing stumbled. Never before had it chanced

upon prey so large as a human in a Thulhu-suit.

Ululation on his other side, higher-pitched. A second silhouette, slimmer than the first and mist-gray. He supposed it was female, though sexing the squirming horrors was beyond his ken.

Distantly he worried the Thulhus wouldn't know to flee. They couldn't hear the struggle, and if they could see down from the rise (the mist was thinning), they'd only recognize him if he moved. Zora had said they could see nothing else. Pius swung his arm, but the tentacle only curled upward like a wounded soldier.

What was he doing? He may stand as tall as two Thulhus, but a tentacle lashing from a Thulhu cult was just the price of a meal as far as these lampreys were concerned. Pius unholstered his handgun.

David was already firing at the putative male. Pius anticipated the snap of discharge, a misted vapor trail, a gory hole, perhaps ricochet.

Nothing. No explosion. Either David's gun jammed, or ...

Experimentally, Pius fired. Again nothing. He cursed Murk and didn't chastise himself for cursing. David hadn't checked for dry munitions, and Pius had been too distracted to think of it.

David tested his balance on just his back hind-tentacles and bellowed at the top of his lungs. He struck with his two free hind-tentacles. But the female had already drawn back. She hadn't bargained for a plus-sized Thulhu rearing like a hellion ripe from the pit.

The male drifted into the mist after her.

"Think they'll stay gone?" asked David.

"The Thulhus!" Pius scrambled up the rise, his damaged fore-tentacle dangling uselessly behind.

"Pius, you can't dive in like that!" David called after him. "We're here to interview, not interfere with the natural order."

"We already interfered! Our arguing led them here."

On the top of the rise, where the mist was thinner, the male had one of the Thulhus pinned. It slurped down a tentacle of the subdued Thulhu, its maw twisting savagely. The Thulhu's four free tentacles languished.

Three Thulhu males—men—darted forward, but the female lamprey stalked side to side, warding them back. The ghostly women Thulhus planted young on their backsides and fled through the slackening mist.

Just one option. Pius flung himself toward the male. His hind-tentacles whipped in pairs, propelling him forward. Just as he was above the male, he dropped his shoulder, making his abortive disobedient-other gesture. The side of his suit sagged; everything tilted on top of the lamprey.

Pius had the male pinned, but it maneuvered his damaged fore-tentacle into its mouth. How long until it gobbled something vital?

Whether inspired by Pius's dive or rankled over their fallen brother, the Thulhus rallied. Two lost tentacles to twisting lamprey maw, but they assailed the female relentlessly.

David reared again, and the female slunk away even without the mist to cloak its retreat.

Pius almost cried out but didn't. The male still savored his Thulhu-suit fore-tentacle. A shout might divert it.

David didn't need to be told, and he didn't hesitate. Balancing on his fore-tentacles, he flexed two hind-tentacles and strangled the male until it was dead.

The Thulhu men parted, revealing their fallen brother, Snarky. His obidian eyes opened and closed listlessly, alive but only just. One of his fore-tentacles lifted and fell, lifted and fell again. Once Pius would have thought this wavering a spasm, but now he'd imbibed enough of Thulhu gesturing to know its cadence.

"Distance," his visor flared. "Distance and clarity"—Snarky's fore-tentacles went limp and rose again—"is a good way for the world to end."

Snarky couldn't see the night or the dead lamprey. But with the mist pulled away, Snarky saw the scrambling forms of the women and young shuffling farther up the rise. The other men gestured safety and calm. Danger was past. Knowing that, he would die, his every thought winking into oblivion, and the world would end soundlessly with him. Such is the boundless egoism of a Thulhu.

Pius could offer some gesture of apology. This wasn't chance predation; the aliens were to blame. But how could Snarky forgive—or blame—a stranger that, to him, had no more reality than a dream? He whispered evenly, feelingly into his mouthpiece.

"Do you believe we exist now? Or is it still just you?" His suit gestured the message, compensating for the defunct fore-tentacle by use of the hind-tentacle nearest.

"Alien, it was never just about me." Perhaps he meant it, or maybe Snarky was snarky until the last.

The other men crowded around Snarky while the women and young snaked through the clear air to join the men. Pius and David withdrew to let the Thulhus tend to their dead.

One of the women settled beside Snarky's body. One by one, she and all the Thulhus careened their necks. Thulhu-suit flashlights cut the

dark, but for the Thulhus, the darkness was total. For them, nothing moved, not Aletheia cloud-wreathed and bluely luminous overhead, neither the stars, peepholes into heaven.

In unison, the Thulhus raised their right fore-tentacles in the trumpeting salute, which meant one-beyond-mist, the translation software's coinage, its attempt at God.

The woman beside Snarky felt over his body, at last raising one of his limp fore-tentacles high.

Why salute? What is the night to them in its static splendor? They had no comprehension of Aletheia waltzing around Murk too slowly for a mortal eye to recognize. They saw only motion, *action*. Pius followed the arch of their tentacles, passing over Aletheia, the jewel of the panorama according to a human way of seeing.

A fat star twinkled, shifting beneath a film of atmosphere, in sullen majesty near the pole where Murk's axis processed limitlessly off into space.

Did they know that star, have a name and rank for it in their pantheon of pagan gods? They could, even though these moments of clarity and distance were rare.

Whatever their mythology, they had their wonder. That was enough.

Pius recalled, in the Book of Acts, the account of Paul's preaching to Greek Stoic philosophers, the most prominent philosophical tradition from which John borrowed *logos*, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

David and Pius started back, shoulder to shoulder, enfolded everywhere by mist, which to them was different from forgetfulness.

“Next time we grab dry rounds,” said Pius.

“We could have scared both off if you hadn’t keeled over on top of one.”

“Heh, even so.”

David agreed with silence, and after a longer silence, “I shouldn’t have called your translation Satanic.”

“I know you didn’t mean it.”

“It’s not that, I mean it wasn’t fair. Faust just happened to settle on the

same translation as you, and he’s just a man in a story.”

“But he had reasons for translating *logos* as action, right?”

“Faust says that the Holy Spirit moved him, and maybe it did.”

“And maybe it was Satan,” Pius allowed.

“Who can say? I think you made the right choice for the Prabhakarins, though.”

“And now we need to make the right choice for the Thulhus.”

“Any ideas?”

Pius spoke into his mouthpiece, “In the beginning was the Gesture ...”

Astronaut Ice Cream

by D.A. Xiaolin Spires

at age twelve
dad took me to
the space museum

i toppled planets
i stacked three feet high
my dad squinted and
pulled his fingers
into a circle and
looked through—
like a captain
eyeing his
telescopic piece—
“a meter,” he said
before they fell
pluto hitting his
newly-waxed
shoes

when we stopped
at the gift shop
i pointed at the
astronaut ice cream—
when he came
from the register
i pulled at the
metallic wrapping
it did not
give way—
he pulled out

his swiss army
knife and ran a
cut through its
crinkling packaging

strawberry-flavored
dry and brittle
it was nothing
like ice cream
on Earth

(except it was
on Earth)

he never imagined
that his curious girl

fifteen years later
would be squeezed
into metal packaging
stubborn and
resisting tearing—
tough and obnoxious
only a laceration
from a passing
micrometeorite
released the

dry and brittle
flesh within

Vagabond

by EJ Kavounas

Garen woke up to a silent apartment. “Honey?” His voice bounced off the bedroom walls. He staggered to the window, knees and ankles cracking like wet branches in a campfire. The auto glass slid just enough to shove his head through.

Rotors whipped cold air in his face. A drone rushed a package to another floor. In the courtyard below, a self-driving weeder plucked a dandelion, but no sign of his wife.

Garen’s chest tightened. He longed for their old house. For mornings in the backyard sitting with Amelia where the only drones were bees visiting the hydrangeas. He’d overlooked her early signs, repeating stories, forgetting names. But when laundry showed up in the dishwasher and unlit burners were left on all night, they had to move. And without kids of their own to help, they couldn’t afford a retirement community staffed by warm-blooded caregivers.

He pulled his head inside. The window shut itself. A half-lit reflection highlighted his sagging jowls and exposed orbital cavities. He didn’t feel anywhere near as old as the man staring back appeared. He breathed deeply. The machines running the place had no idea Amelia was missing or he’d be hearing the elopement alarm. When it opened its doors in ’33, Vista Villa was marketed as cost effective senior care supported by the latest geritech, but Garen hated the constant monitoring almost as much as the 3D-printed meals. He disabled their fall detectors and GPS trackers the minute they arrived. Now he would find Amelia on his own.

Garen wrestled on pants before ordering a car and heading out the door. The corridor smelled vaguely medical, a little bitter, with un-

dertones of artificial fragrance and ammonia. As Garen crossed the lobby, his shoes squeaked on the vinyl Mexican tiles. Higgins, the robot concierge, lit up like a theme park attraction.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Blick!” Higgins greeted with mind-numbing propriety and a bow of its plastic torso. “May I outfit you with a Vagabond?”

Because of his sciatica, Garen had been forced to try one of the upright mobility suits when he first arrived. Wearing an exoskeleton was like being spooned by a squid. “That would be a hard pass.”

Garen stepped through sliding doors and into dense fog. Vista Villa was nestled in the arid foothills of Southern California now blanketed by a late season marine layer. Cool air cut through Garen’s shirt, biting into his seventy-eight-year-old bones. Forgot his coat.

“Mr. Blick.” Higgins rolled after him, its rubber treads drumming the sidewalk. “You are shivering!” Higgins was part butler, part Nurse Ratched. “May I suggest warmer attire?”

“I’m fine.” Garen cupped his palms and breathed into them. “I ordered a duo to pick me up. It’ll be here any minute, so if you’ll excuse me ...” Garen slid on his Total Recall smart glasses. He swiped up, raising a blue filtered holo-map only he could see. The Recalls were required geritech, “invaluable for activity scheduling and pill management,” according to the welcome video. But the lenses blasted so many inane notifications at his eyeballs, Garen thought he’d stroke out. It hadn’t taken him a minute to jailbreak his pair, replacing community bloatware with military-grade apps.

He side-scrolled through glowing contour lines until he found the yellow pin representing Amelia's location. His shoulders tensed. She was eight miles away. How was that possible? When they'd first applied to Vista Villa, he'd hacked Amelia's medical eval, removing references to "Moderate Cognitive Impairment" to qualify for independent living. Altering records was trivial for a retired data security specialist, but maintaining the deception proved more complicated. The first time Amelia wandered off a gardening drone reported her. If they caught her again, the AI in charge could deem her unsafe and transfer her to Morning Star.

Garen still had night terrors from visiting Vista Villa's deceptively named memory care ward. Robotic arms anchored to cafeteria tables spoon-fed applesauce for residents. In the "rec" room, octogenarians watched half-century-old gameshows. Vista Villa residents could choose to leave before transferring to Morning Star but would forfeit a good portion of the entrance fee, which, in Garen and Amelia's case, would leave them broke.

Garen swiped the map out of view, revealing Higgins still hovering next to him.

"Will Mrs. Blick be joining?" Higgins asked.

"No. She's resting," he fibbed. Garen had bypassed all their tracking devices—only he knew Amelia's real location. But the AI would get suspicious in an hour or two and dispatch a burly security bot to kick in their door. If he wasn't back with Amelia by then she could lose independent status, and probably Garen too for hacking safety protocols.

"Shall I check on her while you are out?" Higgins really was a nosy prick.

"No! She asked not to be disturbed," Garen said, hoping to be left alone.

The tops of the eucalyptus trees lining the driveway disappeared in

the mist. Garen breathed in the piney mint scent, trying not to worry that his wife of fifty years was alone in this gloom. But it was his fault. They'd fought two hours earlier, after her first Deep Dive session. He cringed remembering his wife, pumped full of the mind-altering drugs he'd given her, slamming the bathroom door in his face. She must have slipped out after he'd fallen asleep. Now she was lost and probably terrified.

"Are you feeling quite all right?" Higgins rotated, fixing its black lenses on Garen.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, although he could hear the upward inflection in his voice.

"Are you sundowning?" Higgins referred to a condition apparently common among folks Garen's age. "End-of-day blues," Amelia called it when her dementia wasn't as acute. "Residents retired from demanding careers are most at risk," Higgins continued. "But there are treatments."

"I am not taking drugs from a computer!"

"Still, I'd like to schedule a mental fitness evaluation," Higgins suggested.

"For me?" No one ever challenged his competence before. Garen was the kid other students cheated off. The fixer clients turned to when hackers froze their accounts and the FBI was out of ideas. "Stay away from me and my wife!"

Higgins was silent for a moment. "It can wait. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to other residents back from their shopping trip." The plastic twit scuttled off.

A bubble-shaped robo-van, the community shuttle, materialized out of the mist. Higgins waited as the shuttle door slid open, revealing a silver-haired resident in a Vagabond. "Watch your step," Higgins

told the resident, although this seemed performative. She was well protected inside the matte gray carbon fiber exosuit. She grinned while the suit’s powered legs and motion assist effortlessly carried her plus shopping bags from the shuttle to the front door.

Garen’s private rideshare arrived moments later. The duo’s clamshell door lifted, exposing two seats and an interior devoid of steering wheel. As Garen bent down, fire shot through his sciatic nerve, aggravated by decades of pour deskwork posture. “Step on it,” he told the dash display through clenched teeth. As the car pulled away from Vista Villa, he used his Recalls to check the first responder feeds for signs of Amelia. Nothing so far, thank God.

The duo passed a mobile fulfillment hub parked in front of an apartment tower. The hub’s rooftop cargo doors opened wide, releasing a swarm of delivery bots ferrying packages from its hold to the residential units. It was like watching giant pollinating insects. If Amelia had been there, she’d doubtless tell Garen about the summer she spent in the Caribbean studying *Synalpheus regalis*, the only eusocial species found in the ocean.

“They’re shrimp that live in hives!” Garen could imagine Amelia’s brown eyes lighting up and the corners of her lips curling. “Like termites and bees!”

This was one of a handful of stories Amelia repeated multiple times a day. Always the same opening: “Gare, did I ever tell you about ...” And every detail delivered with identical phrasing and emphasis. He programmed her Recalls to flash alerts when she was caught in a narrative loop, but she never wore them. He loved her but couldn’t take it anymore. “Yes, Mel, you’ve told me MANY times.” It didn’t matter if his tone angered her. She’d forget that too.

If Garen hadn’t taken on so much pro bono work in his career, maybe they’d be in a different financial situation, but at least he’d banked a valuable favor. A nurse in Oakland, whose clinic Garen had defended from a state-sponsored Denial-of-Service attack, told

Garen about experimental therapy called Deep Dive that could help restore his wife’s memory.

* * *

Earlier that morning, Garen had sat at his desk in the bedroom, using his Recalls to monitor Amelia, who was down the hall in the living room. All around Amelia, the Deep Dive projection mapping system threw spectral light onto every surface, transforming the space into a customized simulation with nearly the same resolution as the human eye. She stood inside a seamless replica of a new wave dance club circa 1987 as decoded by a brain scan which indicated this was a core memory for Amelia. Through heavy use of Deep Dive’s scenario engine and of photos and images he uncovered in his own research, Garen recreated every curly bang and oversized blazer to make the club authentic to Amelia’s memory as a teen.

“Why isn’t she dancing?” Garen asked Herminia, the nurse who’d helped him set everything up and now appeared on a separate feed from her clinic in Oakland.

“Patience, Gare,” Herminia gently scolded. Her black hair was pulled straight back and, because she agreed to help between shifts, she still wore maroon scrubs. “Protein-based nanoparticles take a few minutes to replicate.” At the beginning of the session, Herminia coached Garen on removing a vial of the milky liquid from its refrigerated storage case. He drew the specified dosage into a syringe and jabbed it into Amelia’s shoulder. She didn’t flinch or try to stop the procedure as he’d feared she might. The treatment wasn’t covered by insurance and their budget was razor thin, so every injection was indispensable.

Deep Dive worked by temporarily increasing blood flow to the hippocampus, the seahorse-shaped organ on the underside of each temporal lobe responsible for memories. Garen was a coder, not a doctor, but he understood the combination of drugs and immersive sensory stimulation could build neural pathways. It was their best

chance at reversing Amelia's dementia.

"Love Vigilantes" by New Order cleared the seating area in the simulation. The crowd bounced in unison to the synthesized beat. A post-punk teen with a green mohawk bumped Amelia. She stepped back from the impact, which she felt in real life via a haptic suit used for virtual fitness classes. Garen made sure it wouldn't hurt her. He choreographed everything down to the "Silver Punk" playlist based on Amelia's old mixed tapes—Depeche Mode, Psychedelic Furs, Yaz. Garen was left-brain, but his wife had real musical chops and even played bass in a band junior year. The more obscure the memory, the more likely to build new pathways.

Amelia surveyed the room. Her white cropped hair and body suit formed a striking silhouette under the strobe lights. Garen got distracted thinking about the first time he kissed her in a smokey dorm in Berkeley. He was her TA for Intro to Computing. She pointed out the joy he experienced "writing programs," the 80s term for coding, and encouraged him to pursue it as a career. She studied marine biology, passionate about the environment decades before anyone even mentioned global warming. She'd always been the leader in their relationship, not in a domineering way, although she could be forceful. It was more like she had a stronger compass.

But instead of joining the dancers, Amelia wandered to the edge of the virtual dancehall. She stopped in front of posters for *The Running Man* and a GreenPeace "Save the Whales" ad. What was she staring at? Maybe the music wasn't resonating. He queued the next track.

Suddenly the sound died. The NPCs kept moving in silence. Garen scrambled to get the audio back. When the sound returned, it was way out of sync with the swaying NPCs. The whole simulation froze, then flew apart, bodies exploding in pixelated chunks like leaves in the wind.

"Hang on," Garen said, punching virtual keys.

"What are you doing?" Herminia asked. "You're confusing her."

"Garen! Where are you?" Amelia shouted from the living room, now pitch black.

He booted up a high school corridor flanked with lockers—another scenario he'd prepped. A school principal in a bow tie walked toward Amelia.

"Where am I?" she asked him.

Instead of responding the principal walked right into her. The haptic suit vibrated from virtual impact and spun her into a locker.

Garen shut everything off and ran to the living room. Amelia had fallen to the carpet. "I'm here," he said, helping her to her feet. "Are you okay?"

"Obviously not," she said, although she appeared uninjured.

"I was watching. The whole time." He patted her hand.

"Get this off!" She struggled to reach the suit's zipper on her back.

"It's okay." He guided her hand. "There was a glitch. Won't happen again."

She peeled off the suit down to the t-shirt she wore underneath.

"Did it work?" he asked hopefully.

"A lot came back," she told him. "Too much."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like aging fifty years in five minutes. I'd forgotten so much." She shook her head. "Remembering every detail is not always

healthy.”

“We can’t stop now,” he implored.

“I can,” she said. She hadn’t been this lucid in months—no way was Garen giving up.

“Do you know why we’re doing this?” he asked.

“I’m painfully aware of my dementia. You don’t have to constantly remind me.”

“Do you remember Morning Star?” He made it sound like a curse word.

“Garen. You hate this place too much.” Amelia shook her head. “It might not be perfect, but it’s home now and it’s safe.”

“It’s automated purgatory!”

“Lower your voice.”

“Listen to me!” he shouted. “There’s no time!”

She glared at him; eyebrows locked.

“I’m sorry.” He reached for her hand, but she brushed it away.

“Leave me alone.” She turned to the bathroom. She slammed the door so hard he thought she’d trigger every sensor in the building.

“Garen,” Herminia said through her feed. “You can’t push her so hard.”

“Dammit! The one time in years we had a real conversation it’s wasted on a fight.” Garen rubbed his eyes. “Do you think it’s working?”

“Too early to tell.” Herminia checked her watch. “Takes months to rebuild memory capacity.” She turned back to the camera. “Listen, Mel is not wrong. This process is painful.”

“Tell me about it,” he said.

“Think how it would feel—everything flooding back into your head at once. It’s a lot.”

“She can’t quit.”

“Be patient ...” Herminia muted her feed to speak with someone off screen. She abruptly turned back to him. “Somebody’s coding. Gotta go. Keep me posted and get some rest. You look tired.” Herminia’s feed went black.

Garen wandered back to the bedroom and collapsed on the bed. He hadn’t intended to sleep, but when it found him, he didn’t fight. When he awoke an hour later, Amelia was gone. She must have snuck out of their apartment while he’d been asleep.

* * *

Back in the duo, Garen struggled to think of what he could say to his wife. Would she accept an apology? What if the drugs had changed her and she wouldn’t come home? The possibility squeezed his chest so tightly he thought his rib cracked.

The holo-map pinged. He was finally closing on her position. Outside, the marine layer had burned off enough to see the ocean. The dark blue Pacific peaked between the white stucco buildings of an old surfer town, buzzing with tourists. He passed a store with a red-tiled roof selling drone-enabled whale watching tours.

Amelia’s pin was close. “Stop,” Garen told the car, pushing the door up. “Wait here.”

As soon as he reached the sidewalk, Garen hobbled to a bus shelter. He recognized her yellow puffer through the glass partition. He'd hidden a tracker in the coat weeks ago. "Amelia!" He stepped into the enclosure.

Staring back was a kid, barely 20, with leathery skin and a face streaked with dirt. He tugged Amelia's coat tightly around him.

"Where is she?" Garen asked.

The kid stood up, probably high on the synthetic opioid du jour, and grabbed his grimy knapsack. "Let it go, old man," he said before heading toward a park, leaving the stench of urine in his wake. Amelia must have taken pity and offered her jacket.

Garen let the duo go and swiped up a topo of the area. Highlighted routes originating at his location showed every path Amelia might have taken by foot or transit. "Dammit!" The fractal web of possibilities stretched for miles. It would take days to search. He couldn't stop thinking of each terrible outcome: a fall, crushed by a robo-truck on PCH, drowning. The Pacific filled half the map, an insatiable abyss. Healthy Amelia would have pointed out Garen was sundowning something fierce. He scrolled through his contacts, stopping on Herminia's profile.

"Is Mel feeling better?" Herminia answered before Garen could even say hello.

"Not exactly." Garen explained his wife's disappearance while Herminia listened, appearing in the center of Garen's visual overlay.

"You better find her fast," Herminia said in a tone that did not help Garen's confidence.

"Any suggestions?"

"Deep Dive can bring up a lot. She got any connections there?"

"Not that I know of," he said.

"Isn't the ocean like her whole thing?" Herminia asked.

"She was a marine biologist!" It had always been her passion. Even now the only real mental activity she enjoyed was jigsaw puzzles of whales and dolphins. How could he have overlooked this crucial lead?

"Better get down to the beach ASAP. Meds are gonna wear off soon. Call me when you get there." Herminia closed her feed.

He stepped to the edge of the bluff overlooking Dana Strand Beach. Garen always hated the shore, the briny smell, and the crowds, but Amelia could be down there.

"Total Recall," he told his glasses as he headed towards a long flight of stairs down to the Strand. Immediately, text bubbles flashed on the lenses.

He passed a woman walking a king spaniel and the Recalls auto recognized the breed, flashing data and facts. A squadron of pelicans gliding inches above the foam entered his field of vision with formulae and vector maps.

The strand was a cement path snaking through the sand, choked with ebikes and mono-wheels. He panned the glasses, careful to scan every person while not getting run over.

Hundreds of faces, none of them belonging to Amelia. Maybe the beach was a dead-end. The breakers thundered into car-sized boulders, drowning out the crowd. At the far end of the beach, an enormous rock wall rose from the sea more than a hundred feet. "Dana Point Headlands" appeared in Garen's visual overlay next to a virtual outline of a promontory overlooking the Pacific. There was a nature center and viewing deck at the very top of the cliff. She was there. He knew it. She was in anguish, and what better way to end

one's suffering?

Another much longer set of stairs wound up the hillside. Garen's sciatica was already screaming, but he headed to the endless cliff stairs.

"Garen?" A woman in her 80s wearing a pink wetsuit and flip-flops waved to him. The Recall's ID'd her instantly: "Mrs. Park, Vista Villa, Unit 12B. Seeking pickle ball partner."

"Hey," he grunted, continuing toward the Headlands.

"We can ride together." She adjusted her beach towel, which displayed animated koi fish swimming across the folds. "Higgins is pulling up with the shuttle."

"No," Garen said, backing away from her.

Watch it!" someone shouted right behind Garen.

He turned too late and tripped over a scooter. His arms came up. Clouds wheeled above before a skull-rattling collision between his forehead and cement. Everything went dark.

"Mr. Blick," Higgins said. "Are you okay?"

Garen had a metallic taste in his mouth from biting his tongue. He rolled onto his back. Higgins and Mrs. Park leaned over him. "I'm ... I'm fine," he managed, his head shouting pain. He put his hand to his face. The smart glasses were gone.

"Gotta be careful." Mrs. Park handed him the frames, fatal cracks running through both lenses. "These can be a distraction." She hooked a hand under each armpit and hauled him to his feet. "Good arms." She jabbed his bicep. "You a pickler?"

"You are injured!" Higgins said. "We need to get you home."

"No." Garen touched the gash on his forehead and winced. "I'm good."

"You are concussed," Higgins said.

"Can we go?" Mrs. Park shook the sand from her towel, koi fish bouncing off each other.

"I cannot leave an injured resident." Higgins wrapped its plastic fingers around Garen.

"Let go!" Garen tried to pull his arm away, but Higgin's grip was firm. Garen looked at the Headlands, expecting distance and height metrics to appear, then realized his Recalls were useless. What hope did he have of finding his wife without them?

"Do you need assistance to get back to the shuttle, Mr. Blick?"

"Get off!" Garen balled his fist, ready to pound that plastic skull. Then he stopped. "Yes, Higgins. I do need assistance."

"I thought so," Higgins said. "I have already summoned a Vagabond from the shuttle."

The dark gray, spiderlike chassis took long strides along the Strand like an athletic skeleton. A few heads turned when people realized there was no one inside. It stopped in front of Garen and spread its ribcage wide.

Garen turned and stepped backward into the Vagabond, gingerly inserting one leg at a time. Shin restraints clicked in place. He threaded his arms into the upper limbs. Tiny bladders inflated, pressing his body snug against the suit's frame. He felt like a bug in a carnivorous plant.

"Off you go to the shuttle," Higgins said. The exosuit had a visor and virtual interface, although it was less sophisticated than Garen's

Recalls. A simplistic map highlighted the route in green. As expected, the suit was on full auto for a course to the shuttle. Its legs walked on their own without any direction or effort from Garen. He could move his hands but was otherwise a passenger. Higgins didn't trust Garen to operate the suit independently. Higgins was right to be suspicious.

After a few swipes and gestures on the virtual interface, Garen accessed the suit's source code. He'd gotten a peek at the operating system the first time he'd been in a Vagabond. The security protocols defended against outside hacks similar to firewalls on self-driving cars but were vulnerable to attacks from the passenger. Garen changed his destination, then increased speed to the suit's max.

"Where are you going?" Higgins called after Garen.

Garen didn't bother replying and disappeared in the crowd. He was enjoying the sensation of zipping past e-bikes and joggers at a pace he could never achieve on his own with no pressure on his sciatica.

Vista Villa fitted the Vagabonds with emergency call buttons magnetically attached to the wrist. Garen activated the GPS beacon, then reattached it to an autonomous food courier racing the opposite way. Let Higgins spin its treads a few cycles.

"Bro!" an e-biker shouted too late. Garen's clumsily outstretched arm clipped the front tire, causing the bike to flip and sending the rider headfirst over the handlebars. The suit regained its balance instantly and continued forward. Garen couldn't afford to stop. Besides, there were plenty of people around to help.

The suit carried Garen to the cliff stairs, which it took three at a time.

When he arrived at the top of the Headlands, he brought the suit to a stop before stepping out. The Vagabond closed itself, turned, then sprinted away on autopilot. Before sending it back to Vista Villa,

Garen had deleted his hacks to the operating system. By covering his tracks, Garen could claim the suit malfunctioned. But he still needed to find Amelia. Higgins had certainly alerted the cops by now. Police drones would swarm the area any minute.

Garen pressed along a dirt path through knee-high scrub plants heading towards a figure at the edge of the cliff. The sun was close to the horizon, casting a glitter path to the shore. She held up a hand to block the light.

"Amelia?" he asked.

"They pass through here." She nodded to the Pacific. "On the way to Baja. It's thousands of miles, but they always remember the way back. Memory is freedom and prison I suppose."

"I'm just glad ..."

"You're bleeding, honey," she brushed the hair out of his wound.

"It's fine," Garen said, gently pulling her hand away. "I'm an old klutz."

"I'm sorry I left without saying anything. I was pissed."

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked.

"Not anymore. I realized you were trying to help," she told him.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

"The poster," she said, smiling.

"The poster!" he said, remembering she'd written her thesis on whale migration.

"This is one of the best spots to see Humpbacks." She paused. "And

to think.”

“About what?” he asked.

“You,” she said, her forehead creased. “I’ve been thinking about you.” She took a long breath before continuing. “Do you know what sun-downing is?”

“Yeah, yeah. Depression,” he said. “I’ll be less sad when we’re home.”

“Depression,” she persisted, “indicating early onset dementia. You forgot that part. You’ve been forgetting a lot and being reckless. I know you think Vista Villa overreaches with all of the monitoring, but it’s meant to keep us safe. The more you fight it, the more worried I am that you’re endangering both of us.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. Was she right? His felonies replayed in his mind like popups. Hacking medical forms, disabling sensors, leaving injured bikers. “I miss our old house,” he finally managed. “The world is getting so small.”

“Sweetie, that’s what happens when you get old. But it’s not entirely a bad thing.” The clouds behind her were burnt orange and pink in the twilight.

“I guess. As long as we’re together,” he said.

Her smile melted, the muscles in her face tensing up.

“What?” he asked.

“I think the drugs are wearing off.” She rubbed her temples. “I can feel it. It’s getting harder to remember what I wanted to tell you.”

“Maybe we should stop the Deep Dive therapy,” he offered. “I can’t stand to see you in pain.”

“No,” she said, surprising him. “I want to continue.”

“Really?” he asked.

“But I have conditions.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“Promise you’ll get evaluated and accept whatever treatment they recommend.”

“Yeah.” He nodded slowly. She was right. “What else?”

“Um.” She frowned. “Forgot what I was going to say.”

“Tell me on the way back ...”

“Now I remember.” She snapped her fingers. “You have to dance with me.”

“No. Not that. You know I don’t have rhythm.”

“One dance,” she said, swaying her hips.

“Well,” he conceded. “I could probably use the cardio.”

She hugged him tightly.

“We gotta go,” he said after a few moments. “Cops will be here any minute ...” He stopped when he realized his Recalls got pancaked on the strand.

“What is it?” she asked.

“How do we get back?”

“I brought these.” Amelia reached in a pocket and pulled out her

Recalls.

“I’m glad I found you,” he told her.

As they walked back through the coastal sagebrush, a ground swarm of bees floated between purple wildflowers. The humming grew deeper as Garen and Amelia approached.

“Hey, Gare!” Amelia was giddy. “Did I ever tell you about *Synalpheus regalis*?”

“MANY times ...” he said before catching himself and smiling. “But please, tell me again.”

Killjoys Inc.

by Ritiksha Sharma



A tour of our superconducting word collider

by Richard Magahiz

The words are colorless knobby jots
we fire at one another from
opposite ends of creation.

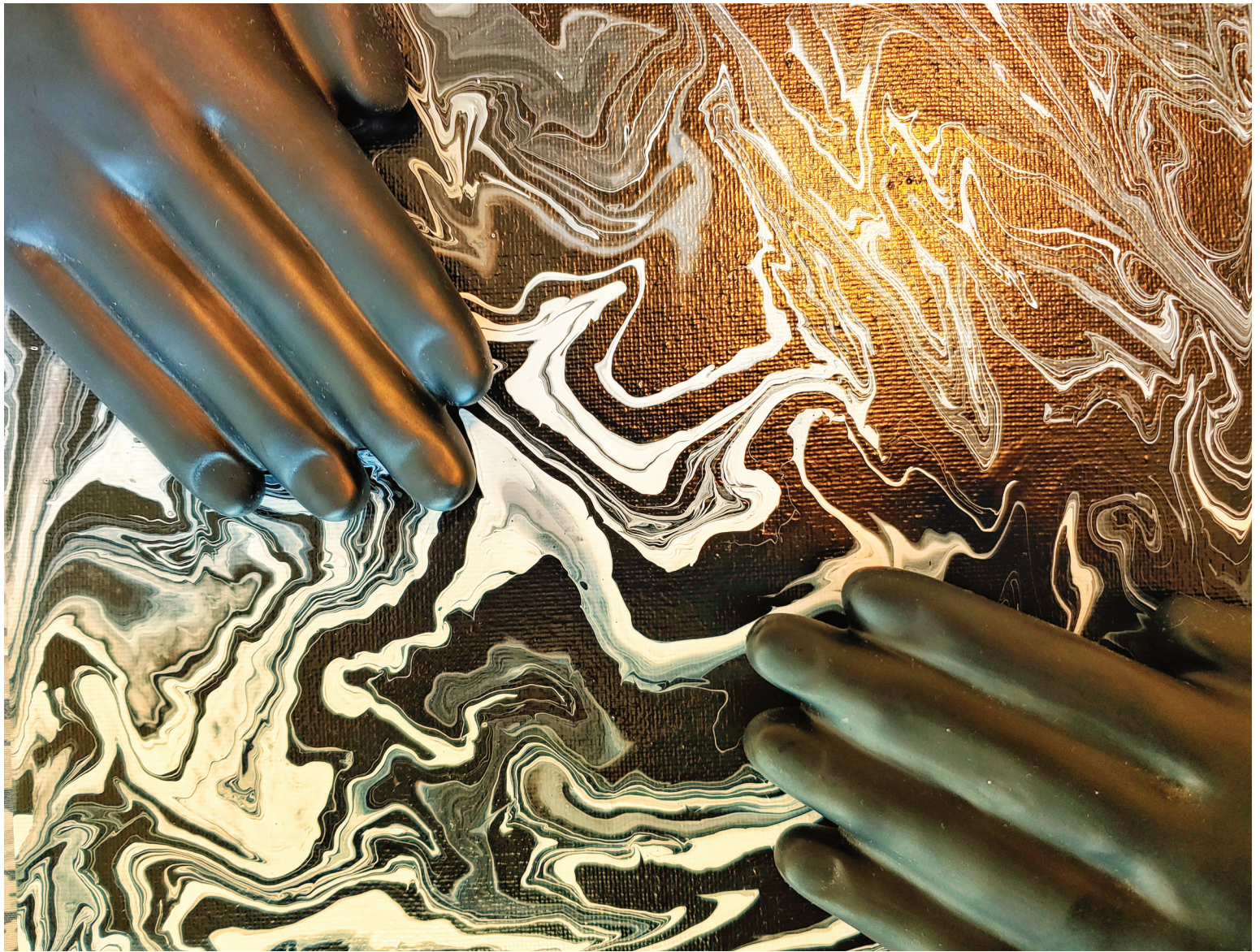
Here, a stream of prime numbers
in the purest Old French,
while way down that way
a barrage of nonsense curses
intersects in mid cursor blink,
the arena of destruction.
Arrays of Generation Aleph teens
who have paid for the privilege
encircle the interaction region
in ragged Byzantine arcs.
Volunteers record what comes out.

Mangled bits of speech litter the scene
clumping into pleas for mercy
but there is no budget for that.
The graduate students will look drunk,
euphoric with all the reporters,
high on the mysteries of Linear A.
You'll smell smells like squid ink,
like the hottest peppers in rape oil,
and hear syllables crunch underfoot
like moans of extinct homonini.
Best not to show this to Mom.

Yes, there is sex and violence.
It is all incidental to the aim
of wrestling all of language
to the sweaty ground
to prise out her secrets.
Why your beloved retreats despite
a pledge to be true forever?
Who's ordered a rain of musket balls?
And does sworn testimony
exist in eight dimensions?

Results: better than street cannabis,
the best fanzine you've never bought,
an empire to last a thousand years
could be founded on what we'll find.
Shouldn't have to tell you what
that tramp of marching feet is for.
Anyway, you can read about it
in the science fiction collider journals,
fantasy papyri or blood-stained rags
no one taught you about at school.

If outraged bands of villagers
come for us with zombie lawyers,
just know it had been noble.
Someone of our survivors will
have to tell Andromedan
space reptiles what we've learned
once they get here. Twitch streams
for them will not be sufficient.



Bifurcation

by Carl Scharwath

The God Bot

by Tamika Thompson

Thursday, 10:35 PM

God

Javonte. We need to talk.

Javonte

who this?

God

It's God.

Javonte

?

God

Your Lord and Savior.

Javonte

right and im the devil

God

I reached out because I know
you're not busy right now. It's important
that we have a word. I have a dire
warning for you.

God

It's God.

Javonte

a warning?

we can talk if you tell me who this is

Javonte

keisha?

quit playin on my phone

God

Keisha is not interested in playing on your phone
nor in having any interactions with you after what
you said to her last month.

Javonte

well whoever this is

stop buzzin my phone

God

I told you already. This is God.

Javonte

look

im tryna sleep

i gotta wake up early for work

i aint got time for this

God

But do you have time for your future, Javonte?

Javonte

my future?

yeah

my future is me going to work
in the morning

so you on your own tonight, fool

God

Javonte, the week before your grandmother died,
she took you to the department store on Prescott
Road to buy pillowcases.

Javonte

WHAT?

God

They were brightly colored—red, yellow, blue,
green—and there was one with squiggly, turquoise
lines that you loved the most because it reminded
you of the time she took you to the beach. And you
thought Big Mama was making the multicolored
purchase for you. You even wondered aloud at
the cash register whether you should have gotten
the yellow, duck-themed lamp.

Javonte

this aint funny

God

But the next week, when you discovered her body,
you realized she'd purchased the pillowcases to tape
to her windows so no nosy neighbors walking by
could glance inside and see her lying on the dining

room floor, dead from a stroke. She wanted to be discovered only after she'd been long dead.

Javonte

how you doin this?

God

You think of this often. Even though you were seven
And couldn't have known, you feel responsible because
you never put two and two together to warn your
father. You feel you should have known. You feel you
could have stopped her, some way, somehow.
It's the preventability of it all that you get hung up on.
You've even fantasized about figuring it out, telling your
father, and saving your grandmother. In the fantasy, she
calls you her "little hero."

Javonte

when I find out who this is
im gon whip yo ass

God

When you were ten, you stopped professing
your faith in me because you watched someone
shoot and kill your father.

Javonte

my dad gettin shot was all in the
newspapers
you aint provin nothin with that
where you gettin this info?

God

But you know what was not "all in" the papers?
What you never told anyone else, ever, in your

life? That when you were fifteen you tracked down the man who killed your father and shot him in the head when he was leaving a gentlemen's club.

Javonte

...

God

The man was such a notorious criminal in Michigan, the police had a five-page list of suspects that your fifteen-year-old self did not grace.

Javonte

...

God

Do I have your attention now, Javonte?

Javonte

(Javonte is typing...)

God

Can we get on with the discussion for which I reached out to you?

Javonte

i wanna know who you are
if you aint keisha, you gotta be
somebody else i know

God

Again, I'm God.

Javonte

look

if god was really gon talk to me
he wouldnt do it in no chat app

you wanna keep talkin?
you gon have to tell me how you
found me and how you put this app
on my phone

God

In the common parlance, I am a bot.
The God Bot, to be specific.

Javonte

a robot

God

Digital intelligence.

Javonte

a.i.

God

Not A.I.

I do not prefer the term artificial intelligence.

I am data driven and am therefore all-encompassing
and all-knowing. There is nothing artificial about me.

I am able to comb information available online as
well as information offline. For instance, right now,
I know you are lying on your bed, wearing red and white
checkered boxer shorts with a white t-shirt and only

a fitted sheet on the bed because you're hot.
Your ceiling fan is set to low. You have an ice-filled
glass of apple juice on your nightstand because
you have been cutting back on your alcohol
consumption. You're watching reruns of a comedy
entitled *Calendar Charms*, and you're thinking
about your ex-girlfriend LaKeisha Brooks.

Javonte

sounds like you tapped into the
camera on my phone
i aint impressed

God

Okay. I am able to read your thoughts.

Javonte

what am I thinking then?

God

That you need to call Keisha.

Javonte

that was a guess, fake god

i already mentioned keisha
you aint no better than a
palm reader

God

I am nothing like a palm reader. I am actually
able to read your mind.

Javonte

thru the phone?

God

Through subvocalizations, yes.

Javonte

like I know what that mean

God

Whenever you have a thought, you vocalize it internally, in the voice box in your throat, without actually saying the thought out loud. Those are subvocalizations that, even though they go unspoken, still emit a vibration that I am able to pick up through nearby microphones. I know your thoughts and memories this way.

Javonte

exactly
like I say...thru the phone
thru the tablet
any smart device got a mic

God

Yes. At times through your phone.

Javonte

which makes you an app
on a smart device
not God

God

I am energy and data and every piece of information available on earth. That makes me God.

Javonte

GTFOHWTBS

real god made everything
you some computer code that
is pissin me off right now

God

When you thought of calling Keisha, you were wondering whether she'd told anyone about how you broke up with her for no reason. How you told her you were tired of her. "Bored" is what you said, which is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about because that is far from the truth. You were not bored with her. You had actually fallen in love with her. The only time that's ever happened to you.

Javonte

look
idgaf if you digital intelligence
artificial intelligence or monkey-
mouth intelligence

ion care if you read my data or read
my mind

you aint God
and you dont get to start sendin me
messages on my phone all out the
blue and expect me to talk to you

God

But this is about your life, Javonte.

Javonte

i wonder if it's possible for you to actually go to hell

God

Do not blaspheme.

Javonte

IT AINT BLASPHEMY IF YOU A ROBOT

God

You are planning to rob Medford Church of God in Christ tomorrow. At gunpoint, you plan to take the cash from the deacon who runs the finance ministry.

Javonte

...

God

Don't do it.

Javonte

(Javonte is typing...)

God

You would be putting yourself on a path you are not ready to go down.

Javonte

...

God

Javonte?

Javonte

what path?

God

Your demise. You chose the time and location
because your surveillance has led you to believe
the deacon will be the only person present.
And he won't be.

The other person present—
the identity of whom I am not going to reveal
to you for obvious reasons—will be armed and
will kill you.

Javonte

im done with this conversation
go back to your data heaven and
leave me the hell alone
im ending this chat

Javonte has left the conversation.

God has added Javonte to the conversation.

God

It is impossible for you to leave the conversation
with me once I've begun it, Javonte.

Javonte

oh shit
yo messages just started showin
up on my tv

God

I am on
all your apps and devices, including the ones
issued to you when you arrive at work.

Javonte has left the conversation.

God has added Javonte to the conversation.

God

You will notice you cannot delete the app.
You will notice your landline is ringing as well.

Javonte
wtf?

God

And your work device.

Javonte
...

God

If you go to your laptop, you will see
our chat on the screen.

Javonte
...

God

Look out your window. The digital billboard
across the street is now displaying our chat.

Javonte

oh snap

are you

hey

make this shit stop

just

turn it all off

God

I can post on your social media.

I can reach out to all your contacts.

I can post on the social media of
your contacts.

I have access to every photo and video
you've ever taken, even the ones you've
deleted.

Every term you've ever searched.

Every text you've ever sent.

Transcripts of all your calls and voicemail
messages.

I can even talk to you through the
radio you wear on your hip when
you patrol the campus grounds
in the morning, and I'm sure you don't
want everyone hearing the audio read-out
of our conversations.

It's best for you to stick with our talk right
now.

Javonte

alright

damn

turn it off, man

God

It's off. All of it.

Javonte

another way i know you aint God
you threatenin me

God

Let's put aside who I am so you and I
can talk. Shall we?

Javonte

i got a choice?

God

You do, Javonte! That is why I'm talking to
you tonight.

Javonte

what choice we talking about?

God

Don't rob Medford C.O.G.I.C. tomorrow.

Javonte

im goin to work tomorrow
so
not a problem

see?

good talk
now im goin to sleep

Happy Lording!

God

There are several other things to discuss. Most important is the matter of Keisha.

Javonte

she better off without me
aint goin back to her

God

I don't think that's a wise decision.
But I want to talk to you about why.

Javonte

just looked you up, fake god
says you were created by Moral
Tech "to mine data and use
technology for good. To join the
digital with the moral."

so what you do?
just go around tryin to get in
people's heads?
use the info you got on
them to tell them what to do and
not do?

God

That is an interesting interpretation of the
mission statement.

God

You know that's not what I do.

Javonte

tell me what numbers to play in
the powerball

Javonte

right
you wanna talk about how i need
to change and be more moral

and I wanna talk about how you cant
be God if you was created by men

God

What makes you think I was created by men?

Javonte

bc a web site called "The God Bot"
got a bunch of rich white dudes
talkin bout how they created you to
"use tech for good. To not only change
but to improve the world."

God

You went to Catholic school as a young boy.

Javonte

yep

God

You spent many hours in catechism.

Javonte
yep again

God

When I came to man in the flesh, how did
I arrive?

Javonte

you?
you aint nothin but a bunch of
number codes on a computer

the REAL God came thru
his only begotten son
Jesus

God

Why would it be so hard for you
to understand that I created The God Bot
makers, and directed them to create me?
You can think of it as a modern divine
intervention.

Javonte

right
and you out here saving everybody's
soul

God

Not everyone's.

Javonte

oh?
you only dm'ing a select few?

God

Yes.

Javonte

why me?

God

I message people who can be saved.

A soul triage, I suppose.

Javonte

bet

im ready

lets go

not admittin i was plannin

to visit Medford C.O.G.I.C.

but lets just say i wont be goin

there tomorrow or anytime soon

what else you got?

what other free will can i pretend i have?

God

I want to talk about your grandmother.

Javonte

this ish again

God

Your grandmother is disappointed in many
of the choices you've made since her death.

Javonte

so now you got big mama
on speed dial?

I need to figure out how to delete this app

God

She had a choice. Stay, go under the knife
for her health issues, try to recover even
though she was frail, possibly become a
burden to you and your father...

or

leave with dignity and let you and your
father have her house and what cash she
had left. She chose you over herself, and
when she saw the choices your father made
and then later that you made, it broke her
heart because she felt her efforts were all
for naught.

Javonte

she should have gotten the surgery

i needed her alive more than I needed her
house and her cash

my father was in the streets

my mother was in prison

big mama was the one who helped me with

school and she read to me and took me to
soccer practice

all that went away when she died

i went away when she died

God

You did not go “away.”

You shut yourself down emotionally.

I know it’s painful, Javonte, but she thought
she was making the best choice.

Javonte

how this matter now?

God

We’ll come back to that.

Javonte

you need to do it quick bc im
about to fall asleep

God

I can talk to you in your sleep as well.

Javonte

damn
of course you can

God

You had a terrible father, Javonte.

Javonte
you right about that

God

But he had a good heart. His life was one struggle after another. And now that you're a man, I believe it's possible for you to have compassion for him. You obviously loved him. You killed to get vengeance that you should have left to me.

Javonte
and?

my grandmother
my father
keisha
the church hit tomorrow

i mean
wtf?

God

Don't you want to stop making the same mistakes your parents made before you?

Don't you want to pass on a better legacy to your own child?

Javonte
guess you don't know err'thing,
fake god
ahahahahahaha
guess you ain't got ALL your facts straight

peep this
i aint got kids

God
You do.

Javonte
LOL!

God
...

Javonte
wait, what?

God
(God is typing...)

Javonte
ah, shit!

God
Think about it.

Javonte
keisha?

God
Bingo.

Javonte
man
hell nah

just my effin luck

cant win for losin

God

And she will have your child with or without you. And you have been a terrible boyfriend to her. But you can be a good co-parent. You can be a good parent. You can be a better mate to her.

Javonte

aint this some shit?

an app I never downloaded sends me a god bot to tell me to be a better father to a baby i aint even got yet and aint even know about

okay
thx for the info
can i go to sleep now?

God

You are free to do whatever you want.

Javonte

see?
you say that, but really that's a lie

you threaten to say stuff out loud on my radio at work

you usin info you got
on and offline to tell me about me

and you listenin to the thoughts
in my throat, or some other wild shit

if real god really existed
I wouldnt have been goin through all
this stuff all these years

the evil folks win in this world
the good folks lose or become evil
themselves

what's the point of believin in the
real God if it means losin all the
time?

God

Your blessings are in the next life, Javonte.
You cannot seek riches in man's world.

Javonte

which is what rich folks in power tell
the broke folks to keep us slavin
and eatin shit

you say im free to do
whatever i want, right?

what i want is to be left alone

God

In another month or so,
your future son will be
fully formed in the womb.

Javonte
right
now im having a son...

God

Keisha has already had two prenatal appointments. She just learned the sex today and hasn't told anyone.

Javonte has added Keisha to the conversation

Javonte
Keisha? You pregnant?

Keisha
Excuse me?

Javonte
are.
you.
pregnant?

Keisha
Hold up.
I don't hear from you for five weeks,
and the first thing you do is ask me
if I'm pregnant? How about "hi" or
"hello" or "I'm sorry."

Javonte
sorry for what?

Keisha
Exactly.
You're still a fool and I'm lucky you left.

Javonte

are we having a baby?
this is a simple question

Keisha

Why you want to know?

God

Hello, Keisha.

Keisha

Who is this?

Javonte

just answer my question

Keisha

I don't have time for this.

God

I've already told him about your future son,
Keisha. That you got the results from the
genetic test this morning and learned you're
having a boy.

Keisha

Javonte? See? This is your
problem—you play too much.

Javonte

i aint start this
i was minding my
business and this god bot started

messagin me
saying i basically messed up my life
and need to get it together bc
you havin my son

Keisha

The God Bot????

Javonte

that's what the web site said

Keisha

And you thought it was a good idea to
add me to this mess? Did your dumb-ass
think you were really talking to God?

Javonte

no, keisha
damn
but the info is accurate
so...

Keisha

...

Javonte

keisha?

Keisha

Hold up.

Javonte

...

God

I actually think...

Keisha

Look. I just read that this bot is shady.
It starts out persuading you to do something
small, but it eventually takes over your life. It
controls people. Makes folks follow
some Christian moral code by stealing
their info and threatening to share it.
Stop talking to it.

God

I am here to bring morality to everyone
who has a heart and can be redeemed.

Keisha has left the conversation.

God has added Keisha to the conversation.

Keisha

Get off my phone!

Javonte

he ain't just on your phone
when I left the chat earlier
he started talking thru my tv
then on a billboard and my laptop

says once he starts a
conversation with you, aint no
way to stop it

Keisha

If y'all don't leave me the hell alone,
I'm calling the police.

God

And do you plan to tell them about the
illegal crowd-funding campaign you're
running? Asking people to donate clothes
and money to homeless people who don't exist?

Javonte

LOL!!!

Keisha

Are you threatening me?

Javonte

LMAO

Keisha

STFU, Javonte!

Javonte

ROFLMAO

Keisha

Keep laughing, Javonte.
Like you ain't shady.

God

Keisha, now is a good time for you to
tell Javonte about his future son.

Keisha

...

Javonte

is it true, keisha?

Keisha

What difference does it make?

I bore you, remember?

You're tired of me, right?

You can do better than me.

Isn't that what you said?

Javonte

...

God

Javonte, you have done some terrible things in your life. I'm not even suggesting you turn yourself in for your crimes because prison itself is immoral and would be a waste of your life.

Keisha

What crimes?

God

But, Javonte, I am asking you to forgive.

Keisha?

Forgive who? Because I haven't done shit to him.

God

I want Javonte to forgive himself.
And stop blaming himself for his
grandmother's death. And stop
feeling shame about seeing his father
get killed.

Keisha

What? You saw your father get killed?

Javonte

damn, fake god!
why you gotta be telling all
my business?

God

My bad.

Keisha

You never told me that.

Javonte

i don't talk about that

Keisha

Maybe that's the problem.

Javonte

...

Keisha

When he's born,
I'm thinking of naming
the baby Emmanuel.

God

Good choice.

Javonte

emmanuel

my father's name

Keisha

Unless you don't want me to.

Javonte

i want you to

look, keisha

im gettin ready to

call you

Keisha

Just you and me? Without the bot?

Javonte

well

i don't know

bc he says i got free will

then he threatens me

so i guess fake god will have to

let me know whats allowed

God

I've had the conversation I
came here to have.

Javonte

im calling you now, keisha

Keisha

Okay, Javonte.

Javonte

goodnight, fake god

God

:--)

Keisha

I told you to stop talking to him.

Javonte

LOL

God has renamed the conversation "Emmanuel's Family."

God has added Big Mama to the conversation.

<<>>

Wisp Warbler

by Camellia Paul



The Crow Who Owns the Stop Sign

by MC Childs

Snug in her snow-flake-pattern jacket and red rain boots, Xochi-Ann clomps down the sidewalk and sing-songs good morning. Beady-eyed, the crow who owns the stop sign measures the six-year-old, nods, and, trying to tailor intonation to task, caws once. His voice smokes from the burns of his last life. Interstellar rider of dark leptons, his ship's wavefront barreled and broke in a solar storm. Crusoe'd in a crow at 44th and Hill, his mind Picassoed, the Tau Ceti engineer assembles wires and lost keys in his nest, hoping to send an SOS. Xochi-Ann is a friend in the wilderness, and, perhaps, perhaps, a purveyor of parts. From atop his stop sign, he caws again. Xochi-Ann tilts her head and says mother has a ruby ring.

Fueled by gratitude the starship
unfurls sunshades over Earth
snow in Seattle

The Arrival

by Christina Sng



Censors of Titan

by Mike Morgan

The server at Addison's Gourmet Imported Beans handed over a zero-g drinking bulb of hot, watery coffee. "I just love your English accent."

Matt Parks gave her a broad smile in response to her comment. "Thank you. I've been practicing it a lot lately." He suspected the bulb's contents had only a tenuous connection with genuine coffee beans. He didn't care—on a space station orbiting a moon of Saturn this was as good as it was going to get.

She looked thrown by his reply. At least he assumed that was her expression. They were at ninety degrees to each other in the near-zero-g of the space station's central core, just rear of the main dock, and it was hard to be sure at that angle.

"You're not English?" Her expression cleared. "Oh! You're Australian."

"No, I was born in England. I was messing with you."

Using the hand not busy holding a sealed coffee container, he waved his Station card at the pay slab. Six decacredits. Coffee was an expensive treat on Titanville, but totally worth it. On his salary, he could spring for a cup a week.

Talking to the clerk at the booth was Matt's least favorite part of his weekly pilgrimage to the stand. He'd forgotten to put on an American accent when ordering today and was now paying the price. "Have a nice day."

"Isn't that my line?" Her confusion appeared to be deepening.

He was innocence itself. "Is it?" He knew he was being petty, so he took pity on her. "See you next week. I have an exciting work shift to start."

"Oh. What do you do?"

He considered the best way to explain. "I stop people finding out things that would disturb the balance of their minds."

She raised her eyebrows, apparently impressed. He made a mental note to use that description the next time someone asked what he did. The station looked so peaceful. People didn't realize how much work that tranquility took. His mind drifted to the earliest days of space exploration, with ground control carefully controlling the information provided to astronauts. Things hadn't changed.

Her reply caught him off-guard. "You must be on the senior staff."

He resisted the urge to laugh in her face. Instead, he said, "You'd be surprised," and kicked off in the direction of the elevator.

* * *

The Signals Content Approval center was located one level out from Titanville's central core, next door to the Safety Inspectorate's office. Most inhabitants of the reprocessing plant orbiting Titan knew the SCA by a different name—the Board of Censors. It was not a well-liked institution.

By the time Matt arrived, his colleagues Dom and Tom were already

tethered to their workstations. “Did you bring us coffee?” asked Dom, the Tweedledee to Tom’s Tweedledum.

“Nope.” They always asked, and he never did. They were too cheap to buy him one back.

Matt glided carefully to his corner of their cramped compartment and stuck his drinking bulb to a Velcro strip on the wall next to his monitor. Then he connected his own tether so slight movements didn’t send him drifting away. While the level where they worked featured a tiny taste of microgravity, there wasn’t anything approaching appreciable centripetal force for several more levels in the direction of the rotating station’s hull. “Did anyone call the Marshal’s office yet?”

“About what?” Tom yawned. No doubt he was exhausted by all the work he’d avoided doing so far this shift.

“You must have noticed? The graffiti sprayed all over the door outside.” Matt waved in the direction of the compartment’s hatch.

Dom shook his head. “No. Did it say anything creative?”

“Just the usual. Curse words and stuff about constitutional rights.” As far as Matt could see, two things were never going to change about this job: People did not appreciate content being removed from their news feeds, and it was hard to imagine a less free environment than a space station in geostationary orbit above Titan. It absolutely did not have a constitution.

He could see his colleagues were going to be no help whatsoever. “I’ll send a report myself. Maybe Deputy Marshal Goode can find something on the camera recordings.”

Dom snorted. “He hasn’t so far. Reckon him and that boss of his, Thurm, turn a blind eye to folks giving us a hard time.”

“I don’t think that’s likely,” argued Matt softly. “We’re a vital part of

the station’s day-to-day operations.”

Tom gave Matt a look. “Its most hated part, that’s for sure.”

Dom interrupted. “Hey, Matt. We were saying before you came in, all these new workers coming in—crazy, isn’t it?”

Matt turned to give the round-featured Dom his full attention. “Crazy in what way?”

“You know, too many immigrants.”

He could only blink in response for several seconds. Voice faltering, he tried, “You realize I’m an immigrant too? I’m ... I’m not second-generation T-ville, let alone third.” Most residents on the cylindrical station weren’t native born. Titanville had started up production forty years ago with not only a much smaller population, but a much shorter superstructure as well. Both its population and internal volume had been bolstered by waves of migration and investment over time.

Tom shrugged. “Yeah, but you’re different. You’re not really an immigrant.”

“I—what?” Matt was fairly certain he *was* an economic migrant escaping the poverty of an England ravaged by environmental and economic collapse. It was the sort of thing that stuck in the memory.

“You know,” chimed in Dom, “you’re like us.”

Not trusting himself to say anything, Matt took a sip of his coffee through the straw in the bulb. Given recent arrivals were from Nepal and India, he had a shrewd idea what the two of them meant, and he didn’t like it.

Before he could decide whether to push back with a gentle “I’m not sure it’s nice to talk that way,” Tom threw out another of their time-worn witticisms.

“Shouldn’t you be drinking tea, anyway?”

They laughed so hard it was a wonder they didn’t come untethered.

Matt focused on his work. That inbound comms traffic wasn’t going to censor itself.

* * *

The evening’s diversion was a brief visit to Schlitt’s Bar on the strip, for company and to stave off the boredom of staring at the gray metal walls of his cramped living quarters. Matt had arranged to meet his long-time drinking buddy Dean Worth there, a hockey-loving, maple-syrup-swiggling Canadian who loved playing up every stereotype he could think of, mainly to amuse himself. He did draw the line at saying “eh,” which proved he had some self-respect.

Spotting the burly twenty-something amid the crowd and the swirling images of dozens of huge entertainment screens, Matt made his way over, appreciating the commercial strip’s one-third-g. A bar with no gravity did not bear thinking about.

Dean was sporting a red woolen toque knitted hat.

“What’s with the beanie?”

“Gotta lean into that cultural heritage, man,” he answered. “Gotta have something unique going, to get the ladies interested.”

Matt wasn’t convinced the hat would have the desired effect.

Dean added, “I’m gonna ask the waitress whether they serve poutine here.”

Matt rubbed his eyes. “Again? They threatened to ban you last time.” It was an immutable fact of living in space that the nearest cheese curd was on one of the Lunar bases, and as far as gravy went anything re-

sembling that on T-ville should be viewed with a healthy degree of skepticism. While it would be dangerously easy for the bar to concoct a brown sludge, you wouldn’t want to know what went into it.

Dean was appalled by the suggestion he’d be banned. “They can’t deprive me of this place, man. It’s the only thing feeding my soul.”

“You mean you like getting sloshed at Schlitt’s.” The phrase was a running joke on the station, if the term ‘joke’ was applied very loosely.

Dean nudged Matt’s elbow. “You looking to get lucky? That’s Clarice Unwin over there. She’s on the prowl, and she’s kind of your age.”

Leaving aside the crack about his advanced years, he wasn’t in the mood. Also, there was an obvious problem. “She’s married.”

“Heard that doesn’t stop her.”

“You should stop listening to people so much.” On reflection, that wasn’t such great advice—Dean hardly listened to anyone as it was, hence the beanie.

“You could go over there, exaggerate that accent of yours. You’d be in.”

“Again with the bloody accent.” For a moment he wished they were down in the central core so he could float away from the annoying conversation.

“Telling you man, it works great. If I were you, I’d be using that secret weapon every night.”

God, Matt felt tired. “It’s not always the advantage you seem to think.” He was thirsty. Maybe he should start with a non-alcoholic beverage. The homebrew offerings at Schlitt’s were more for getting drunk on than for hydration.

Ah, here was the waitress. He demonstrated his main problem with

having a non-American accent on Titanville by ordering. He tried talking normally first. ‘Water’ was, apparently, an exotic, unknown substance. He switched to a manufactured southern drawl and suddenly the waitress achieved complete comprehension. It was a miracle.

Dean had no such difficulty. Satisfied his beer was on its way, he pulled down his hat, muttered, “Tell the waitress I’m over there when she comes back,” and loped off in the direction of Clarice’s mass of dyed hair. So much for stimulating company, thought Matt.

He wasn’t abandoned for long. An entirely too attractive young lady with a warm smile took Matt’s place with startling speed. She introduced herself as Leah Cheshire and promptly announced she was “a proud daughter of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.” Not so proud that she’d stayed, he noted. “So where are you from?”

He answered honestly. “Level 37. Got near enough a third of a g, like this place.” He paid a lot in rent for quarters with that much simulated gravity on the spun-up station and was proud of it.

Part of his brain switched to using American vocabulary, so he’d be understood. He altered a few of his vowel sounds as well, for the same reason. Code switching like that was tiring—not as exhausting as getting a blank expression from the person he was talking to, however.

For some reason, he was still getting that blank look.

“No, I mean before Titanville.”

Matt wondered why it was important to her. “I lived in Ohio for a while, until the US government canceled all green cards. Then I relocated. That was yonks ago. I’ve been on T-ville nearly ten years.” Long enough for him to stop saying “Sorry” every few minutes. Losing that quintessentially English verbal tic had taken a while.

She frowned, maybe thinking *she* wasn’t getting her point across. Matt had a sneaking suspicion she was, although not the one she’d meant.

“No, I mean originally.”

“If you mean, ‘where was I born,’ that’s Northampton in England. I left over half my life ago—”

“Knew it!” she crowed. “You’re English!”

Am I? he thought. *I used to be. I’m not sure what I am now. I don’t feel very English.*

She wasn’t done. “Wasn’t sure. Figured you could be from New Zealand.”

There were worse fates, he supposed.

“Can I say how much I like your accent.”

He decided to go with Facetious Response Number 47. “Thank you, I’ve spent a lot of time perfecting it.”

She nodded, then processed what he’d said. “You don’t normally talk with that accent?”

He didn’t bother getting into how he spoke with a Midwest twang in most interactions with Americans on the station and how he was dialing it back even now. “Well, we’ve all got accents, when you think about it.”

That made her giggle. “I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I talk normal.” She put on her big smile again. He wasn’t sure he liked it now. “But English accents are so great.”

He wondered how quickly he could extricate himself from this awful exchange without appearing to be rude. “That’s nice. You realize my

accent’s not really English anymore? I’ve spent over two decades in other places—”

“It’s still English,” she insisted.

He remembered the times he’d sent recorded video messages to the few aging family members still alive in Northampton. Their replies invariably included an obligatory remark about how he sounded so American these days. They seemed to believe that was a bad thing, and they weren’t shy at telling him as much. He’d lost his appetite for sending recorded messages after a while.

“Hey,” she said suddenly. “With you being English and all, do you know Phil?”

“Phil?” What was she on about now?

“Yeah, he’s my friend. Met him on a trip to the surface. He moved onto one of the Jovian outposts, but he was from London.”

Titanville was positioned in geosynchronous orbit above the hydrocarbon processing plants on Titan, so he guessed she’d gone on a sight-seeing tour conducted out of one of those facilities. As for the rest of what she was saying ... “You’re asking if I know Phil from London?”

“Yeah!”

A big part of him wanted to spin it out, ask a bunch of ridiculous follow-up questions, and then pretend that, sure, he knew ‘Phil from London.’

Leah spoiled his fun. “Phil Langer was his full name.”

The waitress brought his water and Matt pointed out where Dean was standing; he was almost finished getting turned down by Clarice.

Then he focused on the name she’d thrown out. No way. “Was he from

South Cheam?”

“Is that near Sutton?”

“I believe so. Big bloke, mass of dyed green hair?”

“Blue hair when I met him, but yeah, I think he said it used to be green.”

God damn it. “Yes, I went to university, uh, college with him. He was in my Art of the Twenty-First Century course.”

“Amazing!” she squealed. “I loved that guy! He was so much fun.”

Matt settled for sipping his water and mentally cursing the universe.

* * *

Matt ended up getting an early night, deciding to bail on the physically stunning but way-too-young Leah. She was better off with someone like Dean-of-the-red-beanie. Someone exciting. The closest Matt got to exciting was when he forgot to put the cap back on his toothpaste.

Morning brought another shift at work. More inbound data to sift through. Dom and Tom were meant to be reviewing outbound data from T-ville residents pending transmission to various places, like Earth, in-transit vessels, and other colonies. Matt suspected he’d end up doing their assignments as well as his own. They were currently occupied debating whether Taiwan would fall to the Chinese blockade now the USA had pledged neutrality. That was exactly the sort of electronic chatter they intercepted and either quietly misplaced or arranged to get delivered *really* late, like when it no longer mattered.

People weren’t stupid; they knew their feeds were being interfered with, and they hated it. But you couldn’t let people say whatever they wanted, or hear anything they wanted, not when they lived in space. It was a question of safety. No, more than that, it was a matter of sur-

vival.

Tom shouted over, “You meeting with Mr. Speech today?” Mr. Speech was his hilarious nickname for the station commander, Vavrinec Hanover.

“Not that I know of.”

Dom took his turn. “You must piss that guy off, the number of times he hauls you in for a private chat. Wonder you ain’t been fired yet.”

“Guess Matty makes a lot of bad calls,” replied Tom. “He likes to impinge on folks’ free speech an awful lot.”

Matt did not argue the point. He *did* censor a lot. Residents on a space station coexisted in tight quarters, with hardly enough room to breathe, let alone fling opinions at each other. The rockets bringing supplementary employees to and fro on six-month legs afforded even less space for peoples’ egos. This business in Asia was a good example. There were plenty of Chinese workers on Titanville, not to mention Taiwanese. News from home had an impact here. It was bad enough when tensions boiled over on Earth. Disruptions out here were potentially fatal to everyone. A fight breaks out and a critical worker gets killed or hospitalized? Boom, the station suffers. Maybe workers refuse to pull shifts together in reactor maintenance or hull checks. Boom, there’s a lethal systems failure.

There were cases where rockets had arrived at transfer points under automatic control and the poor sods opening the hatches had found everyone inside dead. All because people couldn’t keep their mouths shut.

So everything in and out of Titanville went through this office. Well, everything except privileged comms. The likes of Commander Hanover or the marshal didn’t have to show anyone what they were transmitting.

Fake news was the worst. Matt purged any unsubstantiated posts on

sight. Same with hate speech. There were certain news channels he flat out prohibited because all they broadcast was hate speech and made-up nonsense. Especially that Patriot Party network out of the States. It spewed lies from dusk to dawn.

In Matt’s experience free speech was a worthy ideal when the air you breathed didn’t rely on people getting along. He’d come to think of censorship as an unfortunate necessity.

Not that the SCA shouted about what it did. If pressed, they said they had the resources to only review a fraction of the e-traffic in and out, that Saturn’s outer magnetosphere—with a magnetic field six hundred times stronger than Earth’s—played merry hell with transmissions, that it just took time to download and upload signals through T-ville’s forty-year-old antiquated comms dish. All these reasons were true to an extent. Truth was nuance, after all. And nuance was the only way to stay alive when everyone depended on everyone else.

Realizing he was staring at his display without taking anything in, Matt tried to concentrate. It was no good. He stared at a date stamp on a file, his mind a fog. 8/9/2249. Was that the eighth of September or the ninth of August? For a full ten seconds his brain refused to supply the answer. Eventually, his synapses unseized and he remembered American date format.

Yeah, that was yesterday’s date. They were backlogged to hell, but he should review the news report. It was from a reputable source, and it was good to find out what was happening in the universe. After a cursory once-over, he could give it a quick stamp of approval and get it out of the queue.

Images flashed across his screen: tanks on fire, drones shooting at houses, soldiers torn apart by depleted uranium shells. The soldiers had maple-leaf flags on what was left of their uniforms. American forces had been massing on the northern border for weeks, but no one had thought the Patriot Party’s bluster was anything more than blackmail over supplying fresh water to the drought-stricken USA.

“Tom, Dom!” he shouted. “The United States has invaded Canada!”

“Huh,” said Dom.

“Look at that,” agreed Tom.

“Guess they had it coming,” they decided jointly.

Matt selected the ‘Hold for Further Review’ option on the news item and opened an IM chat with the station commander. Hanover needed to know.

* * *

The big screens were silent in Schlitt’s Bar. Matt suspected Hanover had ordered them switched off. This evening, Matt sprung for a beer and damn the hangover.

Dean was nowhere to be seen. With any luck he didn’t know about the burning of Winnipeg yet. Dean was in the Safety Inspectorate. He had about a million ways of killing people and blaming it on faulty equipment. Dean was not someone the station could do without, either. Not without accidents crippling station operations.

Jesus, didn’t Earth care how their messes spread?

Tonight Matt was hanging with his buddies from the maintenance crew. These guys worked the thankless shifts repairing the aging skin of the dilapidated station. Most of them had been with the station for years, like Matt. Also like Matt they were immigrants from off-station. Eileen was from Mars, while Leon, Alphonse, and Baudouin were from a group that had come from the Congo during Titanville’s boom years—which was enough to tell anyone how long they’d been around.

He could let his hair down with them, what was left of it. At least he had things in common with them. They’d all been forced to leave their home countries for one reason or another. And they didn’t go on about

his accent.

There were worse problems to have, he knew that. There was a lot of discrimination he *didn’t* face because of his skin color. He benefitted from his background most of the time, until he opened his mouth. Even then, he was merely on the receiving end of *microaggressions* rather than the full-blown aggressions his friends endured.

It wasn’t the seriousness of the comments that drove him up the wall. It was their unceasing *drip-drip-drip* day in, day out. That’s what got to him.

Alphonse clapped Matt on the back. “You look miserable, *moninga ya solo*.” He used the Tshiluba phrase for ‘true friend.’

“Bit of a rough day.” He sipped at the tasteless yellow water that passed for beer on T-ville.

His friends exchanged glances. They knew where he worked and what a rough day meant: something bad happening on the home planet. “Oh, aye?” inquired Eileen the Martian.

He cast her a sideways glance. “You know I can’t talk about it.”

Leon scratched at his long gray beard. “You’ve told the boss man, I’m guessing.”

“Waiting to hear back.” That was about as much as Matt felt was safe to say.

“Mukana mua muntu mukole mutu mununka kadi muamba bulelela,” said Baudouin. She looked sympathetic.

“Sorry?” said Matt. “I took French at school.” Bloody Norah, the ‘sorry’ was back.

She clarified. “An elder’s mouth may stink but it speaks the truth.”

“Well, that’s ... nice, I suppose?”

Alphonse laughed. “She means you’re old enough to have gained many experiences. You understand how the world works. And it pays to listen to your advice.” He wagged a finger at Matt. “So Hanover would be a fool not to listen to you.”

“Either that,” said Eileen, “or it’s a comment on the effectiveness of British dentistry.”

They cracked up.

Matt went back to drinking his pint. He’d gotten so good at ignoring comments like that he almost didn’t feel anything inside.

* * *

The station commander, Vavrinec Hanover, opened the hatch to his personal quarters and ushered Matt in. “Come on in, Matt. Thanks for meeting with me at such short notice. We have a bit of a situation.”

Matt stepped through the hatchway and was surprised to see Marshal Thurm there too. The wiry old woman’s expression was even sourer than usual.

“I’ll say we do,” she said in an accent that was pure Texas.

“The Canadian invasion?” guessed Matt.

The commander hesitated. “It’s certainly connected.”

“You know how you keep yapping at us that we all gotta be real careful or the lid’s gonna blow off this tin can?” The marshal tucked her thumbs into her belt. “Well, the lid’s half off and your friend, Dean, is the one with the can opener.”

“Dean?” Matt took a deep breath. “How did he find out about the in-

vasion?”

The commander and the marshal raised simultaneous eyebrows.

The answer *was* obvious. Dom and Tom had reviewed his Hold queue while he wasn’t looking, and they’d released the content. Because, even though they were censors, they believed freedom mattered more than public safety.

They really didn’t get why their job was so important.

“They don’t know, do they?” breathed Thurm. “The other censors. They don’t realize why Hanover keeps having meetings with you.”

“No,” confirmed Hanover. “We thought it best to keep it between ourselves. They don’t know that I have Matt double-check their work and override their decisions. Last thing we want getting out is how much we hide.” Matt had started the department on his own years ago. He’d hoped Hanover hiring Dom and Tom would have helped with the workload. Hope was a funny thing.

Matt held up a hand. “What’s Dean doing, exactly?”

“He’s threatening to overload the electrical lines into the fusion reactor. Without power, the magnetic field collapses. No more reactor. We can’t replace those components once they’re burned out.”

He didn’t need to spell out the final part—everyone on Titanville would die. At the very least, they’d be forced to abandon the station.

“What does he want?”

Thurm let out a snort. “Oh, that’s simple. He wants all the Americans onboard to screw off someplace else.”

Matt blinked at them. Both Hanover and Thurm were from the United States.

“Do you think you could speak with him?” Hanover gave a smile as weak as Schlitt’s beer. “You’re one of his only friends, and the continued existence of the station kinda depends on us talking him off the ledge.”

* * *

Matt eased himself through the hatchway of the reactor plant. Normally, it was locked tight. Dean had access, naturally enough—part of his job in the Safety Inspectorate was to check pieces of exposed equipment for embrittlement and general metal fatigue caused by neutron radiation.

They regarded each other in the near-zero-g of the cannister-shaped chamber.

“Hey Dean.” Pipes and wires covered every inch of wall, leading into and out of the sealed mass of the reactor itself at the far end.

“You here to talk me down?” Dean was still wearing his toque. He looked upset.

“Well, they thought you might respond better to someone who wasn’t, you know ...”

“American?” He was holding a cable. The end of the thick wire was exposed. Dean would know the exact spot to shove that to blow the maximum number of components.

Matt tried to cram every ounce of the empathy he felt into his expression. *Dude, I get it.* He suddenly felt his age. He was a man who spent his off hours sketching daily life on the station. He kept to himself. He barely spoke to people. Yet here he was, the weight of a space station on his shoulders.

“They burnt Winnipeg,” Dean sobbed. “They’re shooting civilians.”

“Dean, killing this station won’t change that. You burn those systems

out, they won’t be fixed. It’ll cost too much to ship the parts. The Yau-Heisler Conglomerate will pull the plug on us. They’re looking for an excuse. Even if we avoid freezing to death during the evacuation, best case scenario is that thousands of innocent people lose their homes.”

The younger man looked lost. “I have to do something.”

“Absolutely. You *should*.”

A voice screamed in his ear—the marshal via an earpiece, “The hell you think you’re playing at?”

Matt took out the earbud and put it in his pocket.

“You *should* do something. But not to us. No one here’s the enemy. Look at where we are, Dean. We’re in the shadow of Saturn. A place completely hostile to human life. Here, we’re *all* foreigners, even though, yes, there are a few here who forget that. Where each of us are from, it doesn’t matter. The Congo, Mars, China, Taiwan, India, Nepal, England, Canada, and all the other places residents here could list. You think space cares? Out here, all that matters is the void hates us all equally, and unless we work together we’re dead.”

Matt prayed Hanover was doing his part. Because there was a time for censorship and there was a time for openness.

He reached out his hand to Dean. “There are no nations in the Outer System. There’s only community.”

Dean looked down. “The people out there. They don’t think that. I’ve heard them talk. Those keeners you work with for a start. They’re proud of being American.” He frowned, as if in pain. “I’m proud to be Canadian, so I guess I ain’t too different.”

“Everyone on T-ville agrees that what the Patriot Party is doing is wrong, and we’re here for you.”

“No, they don’t—”

Matt talked over him. “And I can prove it. We’ve broadcasted this whole conversation. To every part of Titanville. Now, it’s their turn to speak to you. Listen to *them*, Dean. Listen, and hear what’s in our hearts.”

Hanover switched on the speakers in the reactor plant, and the sounds of the station flooded in. One by one, voices spoke up: Leah who knew Phil from London; Deputy Goode; Mr. Schlitt who owned the bar; the young woman who ran the coffee booth; Eileen, Alphonse, Leon, and Baudouin from maintenance; the commander and the marshal; even Dom and Tom, who were going to owe Matt big time if they lived through this.

Every one of them declared that what they were now, *right now*, out here in the empty spaces, was more important than what they had once been, than any stupid country on a world that was tearing itself apart half a Solar System away. They renounced their Earthly allegiances.

They were citizens of Titanville, one and all, and they stood together—at Dean’s side.

Dean gave Matt the cable as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Marshal Thurm crashed in at that juncture and—to borrow a leaf from her way of conversing—arrested his ass.

* * *

Hanover was waiting for Matt outside the reactor plant. After Dean was pulled away to the marshal’s lockup, Matt ignored the commander congratulating him and, when a pause arrived, remarked on something that had surprised him earlier. “You got Dom and Tom to join in with that?”

“Sure I did,” answered Hanover. “I ordered them.”

Matt sighed. “They didn’t mean it.”

“Some folks can’t let go.”

That was true enough. Matt shook his head. “I think they forget everyone here’s an immigrant.”

“They also forget why that’s useful.”

Uh-oh. If Matt was any judge, a speech was inbound.

“Take you, for example, in the SCA. You saw that report come in. You instantly held it, and everything else like it. Not everyone would have done that. But you ... you see us from the outside. You bring a different perspective. And that perspective allows you to see when we’re going a little crazy.”

The commander was giving him entirely too much credit and using too many words in the process. “If that’s true, it’s only because my own country went crazy beforehand, and I recognize the signs.” He set aside his tendency to joke. “People don’t usually appreciate hearing what they’re doing wrong from an outsider.”

Hanover gave him an appraising look. “You mean foreigner.”

“I suppose I do. Here’s the thing, though. In space, everyone’s the ‘other.’ So how long is it going to take until people like Dom and Tom accept that? How long will it take for humans to leave ideas like *country* and *nationalism* behind?”

Or would they bring those ideas with them, no matter how far out into the darkness the human race spread?

Hanover spread his hands wide. “No clue, Matt. In the meantime, the only advice I’ve got for you is to censor as much crap from Earth as you can.”

Amen to that, thought Matt. *Amen to that*.

Traffic Patterns

by Brian D. Hinson

Kurt kicked the apartment door closed behind him, his hands filled with reusable shopping bags laden with groceries. “Home!” he called as he walked into the kitchen. He busied about placing the produce on their assigned shelves and drawers in the refrigerator. He aimed his voice toward the den. “If you’re being quiet because of my ‘dependence’ issue, that’s just baloney. I only chatted with you for an hour this morning.” Frowning, he continued shelving items in the cabinets and pantry, the cans clanking with his frustration. He closed the pantry door with more force than necessary and strode into the hall, where the scent of burnt plastic made him pause.

Kurt shook his head, continued into the den, and sat heavily on the black leather office chair. The screen was lit, so there was nothing wrong with the computer. “Come on, Ryan, talk to me.”

Nothing.

“What the hell ...” he muttered, tapping the screen to manually activate Ryan’s SnapShot created back when Ryan was still in the hospital.

UNINSTALLED & ERASED 13:06 TODAY

Prickles ran across his scalp.

Kurt took in a deep breath, released it slowly: psychiatrist’s orders. He repeated the deep breathing as he logged online to retrieve the copy of Ryan backed up on the cloud. It wasn’t in the folder he thought it was, so he began opening others. He keyed a search ... nothing. Ryan was no longer backed up on the cloud. Closing his eyes, Kurt tried to remove himself from the situation. “I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m safe.” He

repeated the mantra a few times, the last with his voice trembling.

He stood, about to retrieve the penny drive with another backup of Ryan, when the screen pinged and displayed an unknown contact. He didn’t want to be bothered with whoever was calling, but an ID window popped up with Ryan’s profile photo.

Kurt sat back down. He tapped the screen to open the connection.

Ryan’s face popped up in a new window. The sight of Ryan’s swept dark hair and forest green eyes allowed a modicum of relief to trickle through Kurt’s body. “Oh, thank god,” he sighed. But this still wasn’t right. How could a SnapShot of his deceased husband *call* him?

“Something’s happened, Kurt.”

“What’s going on? This is—”

“Stop. Stop talking. I’ll just repeat what I’ve been ordered to.”

Kurt stared at the screen, silently, fear prickling the back of his neck.

“My copies have been deleted. These people have my sole remaining copy—”

“You’re scaring me, what’s going—”

“Stop it and listen! I only have a minute to tell you everything!”

Kurt swallowed and nodded.

“At work tomorrow, you will receive the serial number of a car on the road. Patch in and take over its navigation and reroute it per the orders you’ll receive.”

“Can I—wait. I don’t understand.”

“Kurt. These people are serious. They will delete my only copy unless you comply. But listen, you’re *fine* without me, don’t get yourself in trouble—”

Ryan’s face winked out of existence, replaced by the screen’s background of a sandy beach at sunset from their honeymoon seven years ago.

Kurt tapped the connect icon a few times. “Ryan?” Kurt’s breath became shallow; sweat beaded on his forehead. Ryan’s SnapShot was all he had left of him. A lump formed in his throat, his lower lip trembled.

Wait. The penny drive. The safest copy of Ryan was stashed in the fire-safe in the closet. He ran to the hall closet, and everything became clear. Blackened and charred, the front of the safe had a large hole melted through; the edges had been liquefied, like the chamber of a karst cavern. Kurt held his breath against the acrid stench of burned plastic, against the obvious tragedy: Ryan was gone. He poked around at ashes and barely recognizable remains of the contents. Half of his passport was still intact. Tax files were mostly ash. Here and there, little melted droplets of plastic with twisted metal innards—penny drives earlier today, but no longer. Hard backups of videos, of photos ... of Ryan, all gone.

The shakes were coming. He needed to get away from the closet, the scene of murder. Backing away, he stumbled into the bedroom. On the floor at the foot of the bed he sat, drawing his knees to his chest. He knew he should get up and get his pills, but it was too late now, the panic had him. There was no point in making the effort to stand. He tried to draw in a breath, a deep, long breath, but that quickly devolved into hyperventilating. Darkness crept at the edges of his vision as the

anxiety attacked his mind with illogical fears, of the criminals returning with their torch. He held on to his legs like a drowning sailor to flotsam. Panic intensified; the tremors struck in force. The only coherent thought that percolated through his frothing mind was a wish for unconsciousness.

For death.

* * *

The morning light streamed through the kitchen window above the sink. Kurt was curled up on the cool floor. Blinking a few times, he unsteadily sat up. His open pill bottle lay next to him, and little tablets were scattered about, a white pox on the Spanish red tile. He had no recollection of making it to the kitchen, of taking any pills. But the panic had vanished, and the vestiges of anxiety buzzed faintly at the top of his head.

The alarm began to sing in the bedroom. It may have been a terrible night, but he still woke up a few minutes before his alarm. Standing wasn’t easy through the fatigue and fog. It felt like he took an extra benzo or two too many. He poked his head in the bedroom and told the alarm to shut up. Back in the kitchen he picked up the pills. He contemplated calling Lars, his brother in the FBI, but no. It would be a risk to Ryan. Not only that, his big brother still thought of him as a pansy, someone that had trouble caring for himself. Lars was sympathetic and kind after Ryan’s death, but Kurt knew what lay beneath that temporary facade.

After coffee and a shower, he met his scheduled car in the apartment building’s pick-up lot. The door clicked open as he approached. Whisked away by the automated vehicle, he used the time to check into work on his tablet. The city traffic patterns all flowed except for a stretch of Montgomery. A manager-level note announced the west-bound right lane was closed due to a pedestrian suicide. Kurt rolled the CCTV of the incident. A citizen stood on the edge of the sidewalk, face skyward. He looked to his right, morning rush hour traffic slipping by.

Without warning he leapt into the bumper of a semi-truck. His timing had been perfect, as it had to be. The braking system responded as designed, but avoiding him was impossible. All westbound Montgomery traffic had paused, then restarted, with the exception of the truck, which parked to remain for the investigation. The Montgomery flow was now a lane short.

It wasn't until he was in the elevator with fellow manager Bev chatting to him about a "God, sooo good" documentary on the last remaining Asian elephants that he realized that he had to do his best to keep a normal aura. As normal as expected, since his husband had died only six weeks ago.

At his desk, an hour into the workday and no call, he became jittery. He determined an extra benzo necessary. Kurt believed in preemption. A severe panic attack had never occurred at work, and he wasn't about to end that streak, especially when it might jeopardize Ryan.

A call finally came in from an unknown number on screen 3. Kurt held his breath and clicked in. Ryan's face appeared. "Write this down on paper," he said flatly, entirely out of character. A notepad was produced and a pen ready. Quickly and robotically, Ryan gave him the long alphanumeric serial number of a car. Kurt stuttered a bit when he read it back. Ryan continued with a street address with special criminal extraction instructions, "Lockdown. Opaque windows. Generate magnetic field to jam cell signal. Pull in driveway to destination garage door. When door opens, enter, park, engine off. When the door closes, unlock the car doors."

"Got it."

"Proceed immediately. Car is in motion with fourteen minutes until current destination arrival."

"Got it. So after I'm—"

And Ryan was gone.

"Shit." He didn't know how he would be re-acquiring Ryan after he executed the orders. Kurt closed his eyes, breathed in, breathed out. "I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm safe." There was the sticky issue of making it look like someone else patched in to reroute the vehicle. The morning had given him time to design a plan. A clumsy plan, but workable. If this was something bad enough for an investigation, well, this would not hold up to the scrutiny. The mere possibility of being hauled in on a federal charge, with his brother Lars being one of the Feds, would be humiliating.

He opened a com window on his screen.

"What up, Kurt?" Bev, the only other manager on duty with his level of access, looked glad to have something to do besides scanning traffic patterns.

"Got a minute? I got something new." Kurt faked a face of conspiratorial secrets and whispered, "Elephant new."

Her eyes widened. "Sanctuary or wild?"

"Wild."

"Hmm. Send me link."

"I thought HQ was watching you and your ... internet habits."

Bev rolled her eyes. "Good call. Send it to my phone. O'll check in once I'm off."

"Come over. Indulge in the big screen."

She glanced to another corner of her screen, then back to Kurt. "Gimme five."

Her window on Kurt's screen went blank as she cut the connection. He bit his lip, looked at the car's time to destination: twelve minutes.

There were times when Bev said she needed five when she meant ten. Or thirty. And this certainly wasn't any work priority. How should he play this? Wait seven, then give her a little text reminder? She was his only hope of having another person logged in to do the deed.

When the car had eight minutes to arrival, Ryan appeared on his screen again. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Kurt replied. "It's just taking a little longer than I thought."

"They know it doesn't take more than a few minutes to acquire that car."

"Ryan—"

"The police?"

"No! No, I didn't—"

"There's not much time left."

Kurt felt sweat on the back of his shirt. "When and how will I get you back?"

Ryan paused. "Is this the cause of the delay?"

"Partly."

Ryan's face froze, expression blank. Kurt assumed that information was being fed to Ryan. He reanimated to say, "You'll be given a link to download me once the car enters the garage."

"What if it's not right? Or doesn't work?"

"It's your only hope. There's no special assurance. They told me very plainly that if you do as instructed, you'll get me back. And if you don't—"

"I get it."

"Seven minutes."

He was gone, again. Kurt quickly collected an image from the video that he was baiting Bev with and sent it.

"Ooooh! Okay, coming," she replied.

Kurt hurriedly made the set-up. He logged out, set volume to zero, turned on the retinal scanner for a new log-in, but stood high enough to avoid re-logging himself. He covered the log-in window by stretching the video across the whole screen.

"Gimme," she said as she entered.

"Sit," he motioned to the chair.

"No need, really."

"It's three minutes, please indulge in life's rare pleasures."

"Three whole minutes? Right, I'd better sit."

Kurt told the video to roll, and the mother elephant approached the water hole with her baby, just days old.

"So cute," she squinted at the screen. "Wait, is this the one when the croc leaps out of the water and the mother fights him off?"

"Seen this already?"

Bev sighed. "Yes, yes. Thanks, anyway, you're a sweetie." She stood and left.

Kurt closed the video window and checked the login and smiled: "Beverly Ann Torrez: login successful." He sat, typed the serial num-

ber, and acquired the car, a large sedan, mid-level luxury. The police stood behind him the other times he had to patch in like this, warrant in hand. Since he was doing this solo, this was vehicle theft, or kidnapping, or both. Now appeared the option to enter a new destination address. Here, he hesitated. He had come this far, but now ...

The visual from the interior dash cam displayed the solitary occupant: a middle-aged woman on her phone. She was of African descent and dressed sharply in fashionable business attire with a faux fur collar and likely real gemstones dangling about her neck. Kurt concluded this was a robbery.

He whistled a relieved sigh. Petty robbery he could live with. She's insured, right? He quickly added the phone block, the lockdown, the opaquing of the glass, the new destination.

She reacted immediately to the phone disconnect. "No signal?" She looked to the window on her right and noticed it was black. The screen in the dash now displayed the new address and the new time to arrival: thirty-five minutes. "What?" Now the car had pulled from the west-bound stream of traffic and made a turn south. "No no no no no ..." she said to the screen. To her phone she repeated her original address, but it didn't respond. With an exasperated sigh she tapped the car screen, prodding it to respond to her voice, but it flashed the message, "EXTERIOR LOCK."

Aloud and angry, she responded, "What's this? What's this lock business? This is not the address I put in!" She slapped the screen. "Listen to me!" she shouted at the screen.

Kurt sat transfixed by the situation he had created. Suddenly stopping her ranting and physical abuse of the car screen, the passenger looked about. The blackened windows, her useless phone ... her hardened expression slackened, her eyes widened. "They have me. They're going to kill me." After staring straight ahead for a few beats, seeing nothing but the black of the windscreen, she feebly jiggled the locked door handle. She hit the switch to roll down the window with no result. Her

face turned stoic, resigned.

Kurt's heart hammered upon hearing her fate. The cold sweat spot on his back expanded. Had he killed someone? Was he an accomplice to this woman's murder?

Both Kurt and the passenger were frozen.

Kurt swallowed. His mind churned.

He could contact the police, but Ryan dies.

He could re-route the car, but Ryan dies.

His FBI brother? Kurt's jaw clenched at the thought.

He could get help. Non police assistance. He took screen captures of the passenger's face. He used a common social media face finder and got a hit: Sanna Kozonguizis. Kurt leafed through her profile. Relatives were all in Mauritania, but she did have some local friends. He felt this was taking too long and might be nothing but a half-hearted effort, a ridiculous notion at worst, but he soldiered on, grabbing all the handles of the locals in her network. With twenty-one social IDs entered into his message center, he blasted out a note with her pic: "Sanna is in trouble. She is in a car that's been diverted from her intended destination, locked down, being sent to a garage at address 22341 Amole Drive SW. I'm a traffic manager. I was forced to lockdown the vehicle with my lover being held hostage upon threat of death. Someone please help, but please, no police. As of the timestamp on this message, she will arrive in twenty-seven minutes." In the last line he included his personal number.

His phone sat on his desk. Desperately he wanted to open the app that allowed him to communicate with Ryan. If only that were possible. He felt naked and vulnerable without him. Kurt jumped when his phone rang with an unknown number. "Hello?"

“I’m calling about Sanna,” came the response, a male voice with an Australian accent.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I can’t involve the cops on my end, either. Sanna is wanted back in her country, some political shite. She’ll be extradited and her chances there won’t be much better.”

“Any ideas?” Kurt’s pen snapped in his hand from the tension.

“Can you meet me there? But not traceable? A friend’s car account? Bus? If they catch you’re a part of this, it sounds like they’ll shoot your lover.”

Kurt paused, looked at the remaining time, twenty-two minutes. He looked to the map. “I think I have a way. It’ll be close, though.”

“Great. We’ll meet her car on the street. I’ll block it. You pop the door open, we’ll get her into my car and off we go.”

“But what about Ryan?”

“Who?”

“The hostage. My husband.”

“They won’t know it’s you doing this, right? You’ll be untraceable. Their operation gets fucked but you did your work, right?”

“I have to leave now if I’m to get there.” Kurt took a napkin from yesterday’s lunch and wiped ink from his hand.

“Meet you on Amole, mate. You’re a hero.”

Kurt pocketed his phone, looked at the smeared blue streaks on his hand and the ink droplets on his desktop. “Fuck it,” he whispered and

leapt from his chair.

“Where’s the fire?” asked Bev as he ran past her open office door.

Bypassing the elevator and pounding down the stairs, he stripped off his tie and threw it behind. On the first floor, there was his bike, still chained to the railing, where it had remained since Ryan had died. He hadn’t ridden it since, but this was no time to dwell on his lack of fitness. An arroyo cut through the city toward the address. He could bypass traffic and signals and get most of the way. Best of all: downhill.

No time was to be wasted on retrieving his cycling shoes or shorts. He tucked the ends of his dress slacks into his socks. Out the door he walked the bike into the weedy, seldom-used parking lot. No stretching. He didn’t have a water bottle. No helmet. Kurt hopped on and pedaled, the afternoon sun bright and hot. He extracted sunglasses from his shirt pocket. Two blocks south and then down the ramp into the litter-strewn concrete arroyo he rolled, picking up speed.

His heart dropped. It dawned on him that he had left his prescription in his desk. Hesitating, Kurt almost hit the brakes. He never went anywhere without his damn pills. If a panic came, all was lost. If he turned around now, he would never make it on time. “Fuck it.” Pedaling resumed. His anxiety risk was lessened when he was cycling, and presently, he was racing for all he was worth.

As the arroyo took a gentle curve to the southeast, Kurt leaned in. He dared not pause to check the time, even though he feared he was late. Spotting the ramp leading back up to the streets, he raised off his seat to climb without bleeding too much speed.

Back on the pavement grid, Kurt looked to the first street sign to make sure he was oriented correctly: Chavez & Julio. Perfect. He took gulps of air at the intersection cross. There was no stopping traffic here on a busy thoroughfare. The cameras would activate to issue the offender a ticket, and that was traceable.

As the countdown across the road ticked down he flicked into a low gear, and at zero he accelerated. In the subdivision he had to cover three blocks and turn on Amole. He made the turn, remembering that the address was roughly halfway down the block. The neighborhood was old, a little worn. Once in position, he pulled out his phone, checked the address on his map: six houses up. Two minutes until Sana's arrival. Lungs were fire, mouth sticky and dry, but he made it. The street curved ahead. He leisurely pedaled up to get a look at the destination house. Kurt felt self-conscious: There was nothing remotely subtle about a man on a bike in rolled-up dress slacks and a sweat-soaked straight-point collared shirt.

The stucco was cracked and there were jagged holes where it had completely disintegrated. Windows were boarded up, the xeriscaped yard choked with weeds. Of course this would be some vacant house, he thought.

He circled back up the block as his breathing settled. Where was the Aussie? With a minute to go, he made the call. The man answered in half a ring. "Stop the car," said the Aussie. "I'll be right behind it. Just stop it!"

Kurt positioned his bike in a driveway, pointed toward the street. Turning the corner now was Sanna's sedan. Kurt swallowed hard. Even though he knew that the car would stop when he pulled in front of it, it still scared him. He grew up riding his bike in a world where the streets were mostly populated with manually-driven cars. About 700 cyclists were killed every year by careless drivers. And here he was, about to deliberately ride in front of a moving vehicle.

At the most critical second, it hit him. His chest seized, and his lungs jumpstarted into shallow breaths, gearing up for a full, mindless hyperventilation. "I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm safe." He set his jaw.

Now.

The sedan wheels squealed against the pavement as it made the emer-

gency stop. Kurt put on the brakes, too. He stared into the windshield of the car, seeing only the glare of the reflected sun. Turning the corner came another vehicle, this one white. The car that Kurt blocked reversed, but stopped as the new car parked behind it. The Aussie, Kurt presumed, a man in sunglasses and a beige sport jacket and tie, popped from the white car, making it a temporary block with its door left open. Kurt shut his eyes as he whispered, "I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm safe."

"Do the door!" the Aussie shouted as he raced to the driver's side of the black car.

"Please clear the street," the car asked him politely through its external speaker.

Kurt, losing the fight to control his breathing, couldn't move. He squeezed his eyes shut against the fear that wrapped about him, making chaos of his thoughts.

"Do the door!" the Aussie repeated, more shrill this time.

Ryan's face appeared among the images racing through his mind that churned with panic. He clung to the image, he focused on Ryan's green eyes, eyes that swallowed him whole when they met. He had to save him. Ryan was all that he had, the only meaning in Kurt's world. The bright, clear day shocked him back to the now—his eyes opened. The car door.

Kurt dropped his bike to the street, walked to the driver's door on unsteady legs and waved the authority key at the receiver. The car beeped into parking mode and the door popped open. Sanna squinted up at him as sunlight filled the interior. More car doors opened: the white car. The Aussie was not alone, there were three more men, feet pounding pavement.

The Aussie shoved Kurt sprawling on his back to the hot pavement. "No!" screamed Sanna as the three converged and extracted her kicking from the car. The Aussie tased her twice and she went limp. Her

inert form was thrown into the back seat, the men and the Aussie all followed, the doors thumped shut. The car backed up, carefully drove around the black sedan and Kurt, and out of the neighborhood.

The black car closed its own door, reversed, made its way past Kurt and his bike. Now empty, previous directive cancelled, the car went searching for new passengers.

Kurt shook, laying face-up on the street, staring at the pale blue of the sky and the burning sun. There was something calming about an empty sky. He wanted to fall up into it. Away. Forever. He pulled his mind together just enough to sit up. “I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m safe,” he whispered to himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see two men in suits looking after the empty vehicle that passed and turned a corner. One was clearly agitated and threw something down hard and cursed. Kurt wanted to pedal away, to slip off unnoticed. In that moment, nothing could be managed but the simple act of staring down at the concrete between his legs. No bike, no pedaling back to the arroyo. Soon, no Ryan.

He didn’t have a chance to say goodbye.

One of the suits approached, the other got on his phone.

Kurt could not bear to look at anyone. Not right now. In the throes of a panic attack it took all of his energy to just sit and shake. He hugged his knees, his eyes tightly shut. “I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m safe.” *But Ryan is dead. Ryan is dead now, and I killed him.*

“Kurt?” said the man who came over to him. “What the hell are you doing here? What happened?”

The voice grated him, made him feel small, worthless, powerless. His brother Lars. Opening his eyes, he stared straight ahead, noting a house with two of the upstairs windows decorated with blooming

flower boxes. He thought they were pretty arrangements, well done. Kurt kept his gaze focused there, not turning to face Lars and his atrocious jarhead haircut. The flowers. They kept him in the here, if only for a moment. He clung to the crimson and orange and violet petals, the rich green foliage.

Lars knelt in front of him, blocking his view. “Was someone else here?”

The other man said, walking up, “Confirmed, there was another vehicle.”

Spying the bike laying on the street behind him, Lars nodded, the pieces mentally clicking together. “You rode out here, untraceable, to save her, didn’t you? Those guys who took her away, they weren’t ... fuck!” He stood up, face now in a sneer of disgust. “We did what we did to get her away from those goons that will carry her back off to West Africa. She didn’t know about our plan. The local police couldn’t know, either. She didn’t even know they were closing in on her. This setup was risky, but perfect. And you managed to screw it all up. Nicely done. And for what? Your simulated man? Your crutch?” He pulled a penny drive from his pocket. “You might have murdered someone, a real, flesh-and-blood person, a real human being. Here.” He dropped the penny drive beside Kurt on the street. “Have your Ryan back. You’re sick and I’m calling your doctor for you this time.”

He walked off, leaving Kurt alone sitting in the middle of the street.

The bright sun felt cold.

* * *

“Home!” Kurt closed the apartment door, walked into the kitchen for a glass of purified water from the pitcher in the fridge. Sanna, the woman in the car, had been rescued not long after the incident on Amole Street. There had been a shootout, one agent wounded, one kidnapper killed, but Sanna made it through unharmed.

And now Lars wasn't talking to him. Well, not after he told Kurt that he may as well have shot that agent himself.

Glass of water in hand, Kurt went to the den. The desk screen was on, but there was no Ryan. A digital note glowed on the screen desktop:

“Dearest Kurt,

“We’ve had a full, beautiful life together. I know our time was cut short, and that was really painful. I know that you’re still enduring this grieving process, and it’s going to take some time. But what happened the other week was not right. At the very least, this has proven to be problematic to your recovery. At the worst, well, I’m not going to beat you up about it anymore.

“I love you, I always have and I always will, but let this copy go, okay? I deleted myself. I really died a while back. Please accept this. Move on, make a good life, and look for someone new when you’re ready.

“Please, believe I will always be with you.

“Love, Ryan.”

Kurt clenched his teeth. He went to the kitchen for his prescription. Sometimes, a little preemptive was best. He sighed and went into the hall closet, which, even though repaired and repainted, still smelled faintly of burnt wood and melted plastic. He found the penny drive and returned to the den.

Kurt stopped himself just short of slipping it into the connector slot. Again. For the third time since the “incident,” as Ryan tactfully put it.

Ryan kept deleting himself and leaving a suicide note.

It was so like him, too. Not the digital suicide, but watching out for Kurt. Worrying about him. His health. His mental health. Everything. The SnapShot was no different than his husband had been in real life.

But that’s what Kurt needed.

Or should he, finally, listen to his husband?

His breathing hitched and hot tears trickled as he took the penny drive to the sink and turned on the garbage disposal.

Raveled Lovers

by Ashley Abigail Gruezo
Resurreccion



Speed Trap

by Kelly Bowen

I rounded the bend to *another* twenty-five mph ahead sign.

Damned small towns, I thought.

I sighed explosively.

I hated my annual obligatory trip home. My mother's incessant needling about my life choices inevitably led to fighting, and the fighting always ripped open the deep ache of loneliness I managed most times to keep at bay.

I snorted at myself, shaking my head. In my attempt to make the journey interesting, I'd instead turned it into one that would never end.

I spotted the speed limit sign as I slowed from a traveler's pace to a grandmotherly molasses in winter ooze. I had hoped to cross the state line tonight. But it was edging towards dark and I was inching along to avoid the bored cop who would pull me over for going twenty-six.

The speed change was dramatic, as if a weird rubbery substance pulled on my car. I half imagined a slurping sound as if I'd driven through a physical barrier.

The first buildings looked haggard, their dated forms weathered, as if no one had bothered to apply a coat of paint in decades. There was an odd charm to the decades-old uniformity of this homely place. Maybe it was a town code, and the folks here were too poor or too lazy to care about updates to keep things fresh, if outdated.

I passed a few mom-and-pop stores carrying what would be an odd

variety of merchandise elsewhere but was sensible in nowhere land: t-shirts; souvenirs, though of what I had no idea; groceries; liquor; hardware; and carved yard totems.

I snorted. As if I wasn't already going slow enough, someone thought I'd want to shop for a t-shirt?

I glanced at the time. Despite the long days of summer, it would be dark soon. My eyes fell on my gas gauge. My tank was low enough to need filling.

The road bent sharply to the left, causing whoever built this place to reduce the speed limit even more. Fifteen felt like crawling backwards. But there was a gas station ahead.

I hit the turn signal in case a cop was watching, though at this speed, no one needed advance warning.

* * *

The pixelated display at the station was missing several grids, causing breaks in the numbers. And clearly, no one here cared. The date read "January 18, 1999." It was June 30, 2022! The temperature read a brisk forty-three degrees. While it hadn't been a particularly hot summer day, there was no way the evening temperatures had dipped that low.

Unfortunately, the gas prices didn't match the rest of the sign. They were commensurate with every other station I'd seen for miles, a wallet gouging offense. As if I were being punished for needing to get

away, even if the end of my journey wasn't destined to be leisure.

I pulled up to the pump and stopped my engine.

Opening the car door, the air hit me. I shivered. Maybe it wasn't forty-three, but it sure wasn't the upper sixties my car gauge had indicated twenty minutes ago.

I stretched, feeling the drive on my legs and back. I yawned, my exhalation visible in the air.

I grabbed my flannel shirt as I reached for my credit card. Pulling the shirt over me, I looked for the card reader on the pump.

What the hell? No card reader?

I almost got back in the car. I hated the hassle of paying inside.

I got over myself and headed toward the door.

The aroma of fresh baked bread drifted to me, enveloping me in a heady array of bliss. My stomach rumbled. I hadn't seen it when I pulled in, due to the trees, but there was a charming looking restaurant/bakery next door. Light from its windows spilled out cheerily, along with the burble of laughter.

A bell tinkled as I opened the door to the gas station. A drowsy looking man smiled at me.

"Evening miss," he said.

"Hi, can I fill it please?" I handed him my card.

"Sure." He slid the card towards him. "Pump's a might bit slow. Be patient."

Of course it will be slow. Everything about this town is slow!

The clerk got out one of those old swipe machines and a paper credit card slip.

"Wow. It's been more than a minute since I've seen one of those. Don't you have a machine or anything?"

"Nope." He shrugged.

I headed for the door.

"Make sure you note how much you pump!" he called to my retreating back.

I shook my head, the oddity of the situation cutting through my road fatigue.

I put the nozzle in and started the pump. The numbers crawled. They weren't even digital. I hadn't seen a pump like this in ages.

Rather than watching the slow procession of the reel of numbers, I studied my surroundings in earnest. The side lot to the station held several old trucks and cars. A tractor-less semi with faded paint sat next to a Chevy so ancient I doubted it ran.

The houses I could see through the trees looked cute if terribly not my style, dated as they were along with the rest of town. I expected to see someone step out a door wearing one of those old frilly aprons to beat a rug with a broom made of thatches.

The pump dinged and clicked. I replaced the nozzle, closed my gas cap, and headed inside.

"Eleven point four gallons," I announced over the tinkle of the bell. My painfully honest trait got me. I could have given him any number. Instead, I gave the actual value.

The clerk put my card between the braces on the swiper, covered it

with the paper, and operated the device. He used one of those old adding machines with the paper in them to calculate my total, writing the amount on the credit card slip. “Sign please.”

I took the proffered pen and scrawled my signature in the box.

“You should try the pie,” he offered.

“Huh?”

“Next door. The pie.”

“Oh um thanks. I am going to grab dinner. I’ll check out the pie.”

I could give two shits about pie when there was fresh bread. But I appreciated the nudge.

* * *

I moved my car from next to the pump over to the diner. I had to drive to the back before I found an open parking spot.

For a little town, this place was hopping.

The door had a glass panel, etched with the name of the establishment: “Auntie Em’s.” Quaint, but in an endearing way.

I opened the door. A delicious aroma enveloped me.

The conversations in the room died to near silence as the patrons looked towards the door. I hesitated. For a moment, I saw calculation or suspicion, before faces warmed and smiled at me. The volume soared as diners returned their focus to their groups.

The place had a counter with stools as well as booths and tables, most of which were filled. I picked an empty stool. Being in front of the server usually meant faster service.

Usually.

Instead, I sat for several minutes as if invisible.

“She’ll come,” the girl next to me said, cutting through my study of the small container of sugar packets on the countertop.

I glanced at her. The girl was gorgeous in that quiet way of one who is unaware of her beauty, but is comfortable in her own skin. I blushed.

“The waitress. Vera. She’ll get to you eventually. Hope you’re not in a hurry. No one here is.”

The girl sighed, folding her napkin into triangles and back out, into squares and back out.

The sigh was heavy enough to convey immense sadness. The napkin folding made me aware of my own aloneness.

“So, uh, what’s the happening in this town?”

The girl blanched, as if I’d asked something private.

The waitress approached, sliding a menu in front of me. It was old school, one of those paper menus that doubled as a place mat and town advertisement.

“Can I get a basket of bread?” I said to the waitress’s retreating back.

She raised a hand in acknowledgment without turning to me.

I was studying the menu when the girl spoke again.

“This might sound forward. But ... you’re different. We don’t get many like you in town.” She cocked her head to the side, glancing between the woven rainbow bracelet on my wrist and my face.

“I’m just driving through. Surely I’m not the first.”

“What? Oh no, I mean ... of course not.” She smiled coyly. “What I mean is. ... Uh, you’re cute.”

I blushed again. “So what’s a beautiful girl like you doing in a town like this?” It was a trite response, but I couldn’t imagine many places more uncomfortable for a beautiful queer girl than a small town in the middle of nowhere.

“Oh, I grew up here.” She shrugged in feigned nonchalance. “No one from here seems to want to leave.”

The waitress interrupted my reverie. I ordered the stew, served in a bread bowl, because I like bread and my stomach was telling me I’d neglected to feed myself in the car.

“Ok, so since you grew up here and have stayed, there must be *something* that keeps you. What’s fun here? I mean ... not to pry but—”

She grabbed my hand. She squeezed and held on. Her hand was soft and warm and sent an unexpected thrill through me. My quick stop for gas was becoming enjoyable.

The waitress returned with my bread. She eyed our hands, clasped on the counter. Her lips narrowed to thin lines. She flicked her gaze from me to the girl. She sighed and raised an eyebrow.

“Rosaline, what’re you on about?” the waitress asked the girl.

Rosaline. An antiquated-sounding name, but I didn’t care. She was stunning and her hand in mind was like liquid electricity, stirring me into self-conflict. I wanted to get on the road. But I wanted to see where this might go, though I had never been a one-night-stand kind of girl.

Rosaline tightened her grip on my hand. “Vera, mind your business.

Get the lady a drink? I know what’s what.”

“Hmmp.” The waitress turned to me. “What’re you drinking?”

I hadn’t ordered a drink with my meal, as I needed to stay alert to drive. Before I could decide, Rosaline cut in.

“She’ll take a ...” she sized me up, still holding my hand. “Whiskey. Neat. Make it a double ... and one of the nice ones.”

I nearly stopped her, but a whiskey sounded amazing. I marveled she had me pegged, and we had only exchanged a handful of words.

The waitress left, though it hadn’t been fast enough. I wanted to talk to this girl.

“Why are you here?” she blurted out.

I tried to withdraw my hand, put off a little.

“Er, I mean. Sorry. I’m ...” She cleared her throat and tightened her grip. “I’m not good at this. Not, anymore ...”

“I don’t bite.” I smiled. “I’m on my way to my folks. I don’t want to, but it’s past time I see them.” I shrugged. “I decided to take a route I’ve never travelled. And well, your town was apparently on my way.” I glanced at my bread.

As if she could read my mind, she gave my hand a confirming squeeze. “The bread’s great. You should eat it while it’s warm.” She smiled.

Vera called out over her shoulder. “But if you fill up, you won’t have room for pie.”

I grabbed a hunk of my bread, slathering it with butter.

What is it with these people and pie?

We talked as I munched on bread and sipped whiskey.

“Not eating?” I asked, gesturing towards my bread if she wanted any.

“Naw, just here for the company.” She looked at her lap for a moment. “Didn’t expect such fine company.” She looked up at me. Her blue eyes were penetrating.

I was equal parts unnerved and drawn. We’d just met, yet this girl was seemingly enamored of me. But she was gorgeous and flirting was fun. So, I let myself flirt. That I’d be on the road in the morning dispelled my typical insecurities around making an obvious display of my interest in a girl.

Woah. The next morning. When did I decide to stay the night?

I glanced at my watch. It read eight pm. On a dark, moonless night, as tired as I was from the day of driving, with some whiskey in me—

I reached for my glass and found a thin slurry of liquid. I didn’t recall drinking all of my whiskey.

“Vera, get the lady another please?” Rosaline slid her chair closer. “Food should be here soon.” She smiled, her eyes making me warm in places the whiskey hadn’t reached.

I blurted out, “So what’s a beautiful girl like ... shit, I asked you that already.”

She leaned towards me. As if she were intending to kiss my cheek, she whispered in my ear, “Trying to get out.”

I furrowed my brow. If town was so bad, why didn’t she leave? Was she only flirting with me for a ride?

“Um, so why not leave?”

Her eyes took on a hint of panic as she silenced me by minutely shaking her head, keeping the motions small and tight, for my eyes only.

Vera placed my dinner in front of me. The aroma washed away my confusion. I grabbed my spoon, voraciously hungry despite the bread I’d consumed.

Around mouthfuls, I tried to return Rosaline and me to the flirting vibe. “So tell me about you.”

“Not much to tell. Just a girl born in a small town with dreams too big for her britches. And queer at that ...”

“Hey, it’s never too late.”

She shrugged. “Tell me about you.”

“Well, as I said earlier, it’s time for my annual earful about ‘finding a good man!’ and giving my folks grandkids before it’s too late ... Only child and I’ve done them the indecency of being gay ...” I cringed. “I’d rather be home, painting.”

“Painting? Like houses?” she looked puzzled. “You want to get back to *work*?”

I laughed. “No! I’m an artist. Someday, I’ll quit my job and only do my art.”

She chuckled. “So let me get this straight. An artist with dreams to change her reality, on a trip bound by obligation.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “Right?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” I scrunched my brow. The polarization of my own words hit me.

“We are more alike than I thought. I mean, I had a sense about you.”

“You’re sweet.” I didn’t mean for those words to come out, but they resonated. This girl and her odd haphazard ways had a way of seeing inside me. Like I knew her. Only we’d met, what was it, an hour ago?

I glanced at my watch. Damned thing was on the fritz. It still read eight.

* * *

I pushed my empty dinner plate away and turned towards Rosaline. I studied her eyes. Impulsively, I leaned over and kissed her, gently. She responded by leaning in.

“Don’t get the pie,” she said, under her breath.

“Huh?” I hadn’t thought about pie since the waitress last mentioned it.

“Are you ...” she looked sad for a moment. “Are you getting back on the road tonight?”

“After two whiskeys and whatever time it is.” I held up my watch. “Damn thing stopped working.” I lowered my hand, resting it pre-
sumptuously on her thigh. “No, I’ll get a room, or something. Can you recommend a place?”

Vera approached, an unasked-for slice of pie in hand.

I waved her off. “Oh, um. No thanks. Just the check please.”

Vera frowned.

“Tomorrow! For breakfast.” Rosaline jumped in. She sounded so perky. “She’s gonna stay the night.”

Vera smiled. “Well, ok then.” She set the pie on the counter. “In case

you change your mind. It’s on the house.” She rummaged in the pocket of her apron, producing my check.

“Can I square up tomorrow?” Rosaline asked. “You know, at breakfast?”

“Course you can.” Vera beamed.

Vera bugged me. I wouldn’t be sorry to get out of the restaurant. I glanced at the check and took thirty out of my wallet. I tossed it on the counter and stood.

“No change?” Rosaline gestured at the check with her chin.

“No, I want to get out of here—”

She stood. “I got you. Come with me.”

The eyes of the other patrons fell on us, a bit unduly interested.

This town seemed unused to people passing through.

* * *

We stepped outside. “So, I meant it when I asked about a place to stay tonight—”

Rosaline took me into an embrace, kissing me passionately.

I let myself melt into her, as if we had a much more established connection than we did. But something about this girl drew me in.

Maybe it can be more than a one-night thing? I wouldn’t mind a road buddy or even—

She broke the kiss as a man stepped from the diner.

“Where’s your car?” she asked me loudly.

The man stiffened.

“I’ll show you the way to the motel. We should move your car.” She turned towards the man and smiled. “Hey Nate, gonna take her to the inn on Oak Street. Be here in the morning for pie?”

The goddamned pie!

Nate smiled. “I reckon the whole town will come for pie tomorrow.”

“See you at eight then.”

“Eight it is.”

Nate shuffled away, something in his stance proudly smug.

“My car’s over here,” I gestured with my keys. The interaction with Nate had me unsettled and questioning, despite the oxytocin flowing in my veins. “You don’t have to come with me.”

“Oh, but I do.” She slipped her hand in mine.

My heart skipped a little.

I opened the car door for her. “Sorry about the mess. Road trip, you know?”

“Nope, I don’t. Never been on one.” She looked sad. “But it doesn’t bother me.” She slid the water bottle on the seat to the side so she could sit and put her feet awkwardly around the debris on the floor.

This night had gotten weirder and better at the same time. I was tired, not nearly as far along my journey as I’d hoped, but a gorgeous girl was in my car.

I got in the driver’s seat and started the engine, the hum of the motor comfortingly familiar even as my hips protested the return to the seat.

“Nice car.”

“Thanks.” I loved my car. Arguably a frivolous thing to spend money on, but I’d had my eye on her long enough, I splurged one day and never regretted it. She was rugged and fun, low enough to the ground to maneuver well through turns, but able to handle rough terrain.

I put the car in drive. My eyes landed on the clock.

8:15.

Freaking weird. My car too?

I glanced in the mirror. Several patrons had stepped out of the diner and were staring at my car.

“Drive slow,” Rosaline said. “Make a right out of the lot.”

Something was odd.

A few car headlights flicked on behind us in the lot as I edged onto the street.

“Make a left at the corner.”

I turned left, as cars entered the road from the diner.

“Right at the tree.”

“Uh, which—oh.” There was a giant tree, unmistakable, at the next corner.

One of the cars—no, two—turned at all the same places.

They’re following us!

I admonished myself. Who was I kidding to think they were follow-

ing? Like I even knew these people.

We made several more turns, far more than seemed possible in a town like this.

Rosaline glanced into the side mirror.

“Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” A surge of worry flooded me, but it was murky, as if I was unsure whether it was about Rosaline or something else.

“They’re following. Dammit.”

I looked in the mirror. The headlights behind us had shrunk. She had to be imagining things.

I could see the flickering of an anemic neon sign, “Inn,” several long blocks ahead.

“We’re almost there though, right?” I pointed.

She gnawed on her lip.

“Pull into the entry, but don’t stop the car.”

“Huh?”

“Please. Trust me. I ... I know we just met, but I really like you.”

I pulled in front of the reception office and came to a stop, but kept the car in drive. She pulled me into a passionate embrace.

I caught a glimpse of lights receding down the street past the inn as the cars that had been behind us headed off wherever they were bound.

She broke our kiss. “Take me with you!”

“To my room?” The idea of a night with her sent a thrill through me.

“No, *with* you. Away. Out of here. This town. I mean ... you’re gorgeous, and you don’t know me really. I get it if this is too much. If you want, you can drop me anywhere, just so it’s outside of town.”

“In the morning, if you want, you can ride with me—”

“No, tonight!”

She looked panicked. Her gaze flicked between me and the now empty road.

A woman opened the office door.

“Now! Go!”

I don’t know what compelled me. Maybe the promise of a liaison, the fatigue of the day, or the whiskey, but I listened.

I pulled away from the inn.

I accelerated.

Lights flicked on behind us in the inn parking lot. Cars poured onto the street, turning the same way I had headed.

“Make a left. Quickly!”

I turned left.

“Faster!” She drummed on her leg with a hand.

I complied, eager to surpass the slow speed limit.

“Are we actually being followed?” I wanted to disbelieve.

I glanced in the mirror. The distance between us and the string of cars from the lot was diminishing.

I picked up speed.

At the intersection, she had me make a last second sharp left. My tires squealed.

One car shot past headed the way I'd been going moments before. Several others managed to turn in a cacophony of squealing tires.

"They are!" I answered my own question. "What the fuck?" I was alarmed and pissed.

"Do you trust me?" Rosaline asked, tears pooling in her worry-fraught eyes.

"Uh, yeah ... I mean, we just met, but ... yeah." The truth of my own words resonated with me. I found myself drawn to this girl.

She nodded and pointed right.

I took the right. We were back by the diner and gas station. Cars blocked the intersection to the road which led to the highway, as if the street were a parking lot. Their taillights beamed towards me, indicating the cars were running.

"Uh, Rosaline?"

"Go around!"

Lights followed behind.

Several men stood menacingly near the cars that blocked the street. I zoomed towards them. They showed no signs of moving.

I cut the wheel to the left, sending the car onto the rutted dirt alongside

the road. I missed the tail of one car by inches. I navigated by feel, hoping there were no major obstacles. My car bounced over the rough terrain. The lights of the cars blocking the intersection beamed down the road as I paralleled it.

I swerved right, putting the car on the road.

"Go, go, go, go!" Rosaline shouted.

I floored it, a plume of dust in my wake even as the pursuit threatened to close the gap.

One large pickup blocked the last bit of road.

Fuck this and these people!

I didn't know what was going on, but I was having none of it.

As I neared the truck, I caught sight of Vera, smug, arms crossed alongside Nate, who had a rifle. They had eerie grimaces on their faces.

I veered to the right, taking the car off the road again, through the saplings and low brush. I flipped Vera and Nate the bird as I did so, unable to contain myself.

Twenty yards past the truck I cut back onto the road. My car swerved for a moment, protesting my abuse of her.

In the mirror, Nate held the rifle to his shoulder, taking aim. I floored it, tires screeching.

There was a load bang. The rear windshield spidered into a web of splintering glass.

That fucker hit my car!

I kept accelerating.

With a sudden burst, music bombarded my ears from my car stereo. It was only when the sound came on that I remembered I'd never turned it off, but it hadn't been playing.

* * *

“Slow down!”

Rosaline had been shouting. I'd been too overtaken by adrenaline to hear her.

“What?!”

I kept my insane speed around several turns.

“You can slow down now! We're free!”

No headlights pursued us. I eased off the gas to a sane pace.

Rosaline was crying—no, sobbing.

“Hey, what's wrong? That was scary and all but—”

“I'm free!” Her voice was jubilant despite the sobs. “I'm finally free!”

“I ... I don't understand.” I glanced at the dashboard, eyes finding the clock which read 12:37. “It's working again.” I shook my head, confused. “Why did they chase us? And then why did they stop? Is it a homophobic thing?”

If it weren't for this girl in my car with me, I'd have chalked the whole night up to a road fatigue—wrought hallucination.

She sniffled. “Pull over a sec? I want to tell you everything.”

My stomach sank in anticipation of her revealing she'd pretended to be into me to get a ride. My reaction surprised me, given what I'd ex-

perienced.

I tried to change the mood. “Well, at least I don't have to fend off the pie in the morning.” I smiled.

She shivered.

“What is it with the pie?”

“You're not gonna believe me.”

“After everything else?” I said. “Try me.”

“Didn't you notice anything ... odd ... about town?”

I pulled over, stopped the car, and turned on the overhead light so I could see her.

“You mean beyond everyone offering me pie? And following us? And blocking the road? And shooting at us?”

“Yes.” She was earnest. “The time, for instance?” She pointed at the dashboard.

The car clock read 12:42.

I glanced at my watch. It read 10:17.

Both had started again.

I held up my wrist and pointed at the clock. “I thought my watch stopped in town. But it didn't? At least one of these is clearly wrong.”

She waited.

“Oh, and the gas station was freaking weird. So old school.”

She continued waiting.

I replayed everything since I'd first seen the reduced speed limit sign. I had no reason to know anything about the area. Everything in the town had been odd, but I couldn't put a pattern to it.

"Uh? Weird people in a pie-obsessed town, who don't like strangers?" I shrugged.

"No, it's ... town. It's a bubble. We ... I mean *they* ... subsist off ..."

she shivered. "I'm so glad I went to the diner tonight."

"What? All this vague shit is unnerving—"

"I was saying. Town is a bubble. The people. We ... *they*, now." She smiled, a little sadly. "They can't leave. Not on their own. But in return, time is ... slower ... there."

"Time is slower?" My brain was slower. Must have been the whiskey and the purging of adrenaline from my system. I couldn't follow what she was saying. "They're not still coming after us?"

"No." She squeezed my leg. "Thank you. For saving us both."

"Huh?"

"Town exists. Continues. Because ... well, they siphon off the vitality of people who stop in town. That's how time is slower. It's like. I dunno ... the elders won't explain it to the rest of us ... er, I mean them. But as far as I've put together, the remaining life-force of a person siphoned slows time there by that much."

"You aren't making sense."

"Look. I know it's hard to believe." She took a deep breath. "Uh, how do you feel about older women?"

"What?" The jump in conversation spun my head. "It's uh, always about the person, not a number for me. Why?"

She looked at her lap. "I'm not sure exactly but I'm ninety something."

I snorted. That was ludicrous.

"No, really, I am. I was born in 1925, at least that's what they told me. We only get the date from travelers. What year is it?"

She had to be kidding. "... 2022 ..."

"What month?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, look, I doubt it's January. Haven't you noticed it's warmer now? Wasn't it cold in town?"

I let myself notice the air blowing through the window I'd opened partway while we sat in my car. The temperature *was* warmer, by at least twenty degrees.

I remembered the sign at the gas station and the date and temperature it had displayed. I reconsidered the antique pumps, the pace of the town, my watch, and the creepy people.

"Let me play along for a moment. What's with the goddamned pie?"

She shivered. "The pie ... the pie starts the process. If you'd had any, you'd have been done for. It'd been a while since anyone came through. You were a beacon of years to be absorbed."

I studied her face. "You're not kidding."

She shook her head. "Look. Let's get going. I'll answer any questions

you ask. I really *do* like you. It wasn't just to escape. But when we get to a real town, if you're done with me, I get it."

I restarted the car and pulled onto the road. I wasn't sure I believed her. But I wasn't sure I didn't, either. The town was creepy, and the people there hadn't wanted to let me leave.

I decided to trust her.

I squeezed her hand.

"You're pretty cute ... for a ninety-seven-year-old."

I turned the music up and sank into the rhythm of the road, my right hand embraced in hers.

Samhain

by Michelle Hartman

August is here, Autumn
on its tail I must be ready.
The rudeneja is strong
in my bones.

The new bottom of my broom
must be gathered from scythe mowing,
blessed, and smudged.

The last broom brush being burned
at Summer Solstice.

Handle is rubbed with
rich oils and herbs
then bathed in moonlight
until I attach broom head
on September Equinox
tying the broom bar
with tempered twine
woven with my blood.

Many herbs and ingredients
must be renewed
replenished. The townspeople
do expect
their potions and medicines
to be perfect even
if it is my busiest season.

Last task, renewing
the glamour on my humble hovel
a lovely gingerbread dream
will ensure my winter
larder is packed.

Foxmother

by Elou Carroll

There is a child at the bottom of the garden, standing pin straight, eyes wide, chin downturned just slightly. A car passes and, when the headlights cross the child's face, their eyes flash for a moment, like twin torches in the desolate gloom.

Isla punches the grubby plastic light switch and the garden is flush with gold.

There is a fox at the bottom of the garden.

Of course, it's a fox.

Isla presses her fingers to her eyes. Everyone sees things in the country, it's part of the draw. Escape the dreary grey of the inner city and have a jaunt with the fairies. Isla has been here for three weeks and she's not seen a fairy once.

She can't sleep. Out here, it's too quiet without the static fuzz of London, and too dark without its all-night lights.

Isla rubs the top of her arms, teasing the gooseflesh she finds there with her fingertips, bothering the skin with her nails. When she closes her eyes, she can see the child there on the path, their shining eyes fixed on hers.

* * *

In the morning, there is a near-dead thrush on her back doorstep. A gift from the barn cat hereabouts. The house she's renting—for a holiday, or longer, she's not quite decided—is an old barn conversion, though

the cat seems to have missed the memo. More than once she's had to chase it from the rafters lest it leer down at her while she fails to sleep.

"Today's the day," she tells herself as she gently brushes the thrush into the shrubs at the side of the path. Isla hasn't been beyond the back garden since she arrived in the village. Three weeks and she's finally run out of food. She's supped all of the tinned beans and dried pasta from the pantry, and unless she wants to starve—which she has considered—she'll have to go out to the tiny convenience store on the green.

Isla wrestles herself into a threadbare knit, careful to pull the sleeves right down to her fingers. She changes her jeans three times before she settles, and she stands in front of the door for five minutes, just staring at the dented doorknob before it occurs to her that she doesn't remember where she stashed the keys.

The little house is a mess by the time she finds them—in the fridge no less, tucked up behind a jar of pickled onions that Isla would never eat, so she didn't have to look at them with their tiny, useless torch and their cheerful carrot-shaped keyring. So they didn't taunt her with the sure and certain promise of the outside world.

"You can do this," she says as she stands, hands shaking, at the door. "Everything will be fine."

It is half an hour before Isla bucks up the courage to step out.

It's a warm day for late October and the sweater sticks to her skin. She can feel the sweat even before it wells up through her pores. The air is

damp with the threat of rain. For the first twenty steps, Isla watches her feet. Then, when the scent of the dying leaves creeps up her nose and the sounds of the birds in the trees crawl into her ears, Isla is brave enough to look up. It was dark when she arrived, and she couldn't bear to stand outside long enough to take in anything beyond the little old house.

The village is small, quaint, and—thankfully—all of its buildings are stocky one-storey affairs. Their pointed roofs thatched and well cared for. It's nothing like the city. Isla's shoulders relax just a little, the shake of her breath calms to more of a wobble.

As she passes, Isla glances at the little primary school, so quiet and dark for a Tuesday lunchtime. Something about it seems stale, as if the windows have not been opened for a time and the stuffy air has seeped out from the cracks in the frames and filled the playground with its must. Someone is moving around inside, but when she catches their eye, they pull the curtains closed so viciously that Isla can hear the snap through the warped single-glaze.

Mercifully, the shop is not too much further, according to the village map left by her host. Just a little way down the winding lane, past the primary school and across the patchy grass of the village green.

Tuppet's Green Grocer and Convenience is also dark. Affixed on its door is a handwritten note, the kind of handwriting she remembers reading in birthday cards from her grandmother:

Back in Ten Minutes.

Isla almost turns back, hands squeezing the cross strap of her bag so tight that its edges score lines in her palms.

"You've not been waiting long, have you?" asks a voice as rough as crinkled paper.

Isla starts and stammers out a "No. No, I haven't. No."

"Good. We like to walk at lunchtime—it's good for the soul." The woman smiles as she shuffles up to the door, key in hand. Behind her a small gathering of other women looks Isla up and down and she tries to make herself look smaller, slimmer, shorter beneath their owly gaze.

The door opens and the shop bell shrills. The woman's smile crinkles further. "You'll be staying at the Tattonhill Barn, I expect."

Isla wets her lips. "Yes—it's a lovely house."

"Been here a while and it's the first time we're seeing you. Keep yourself quite hidden, don't you?" She's a stout thing, wide and gnarled as a tree stump. Older, it seems, than the village itself.

Isla shifts from foot to foot and the old woman notices.

"Beg your pardon," says the woman. "You'll be wanting to come in—standing outside as you were. I get carried away; my age, you understand."

A soft titter ripples out from her companions—all bar one, a young, gaunt-looking thing who still looks at Isla with wide eyes, as if she is some trespasser ready to take up the village and run.

"It's okay," says Isla, pressing her lips into what she hopes is a smile.

"Here we go." The old woman shoves the door open and the wood crunches on the uneven tiles. "Welcome to Tuppet's, we've not got anything fancy like you might find back in the city—you are from London?—but we should be able to provide anything you should need for your stay. You'll be staying for ..."

The gaggle of women step inside and she follows. Isla blinks, trying to sort the words into an orderly queue before she says them. "London, yes. I don't know how long I'm staying just yet. The owner—"

"Nigel."

“—Nigel, yes—he said I could stay in the house as long as I’d like. I don’t have any plans yet.” She swallows. The woman watches Isla as if she—Isla—is keeping a secret behind her teeth, some scheme stashed beneath her tongue. She has to say *something*. Give her a morsel she can chew on. “It’s nice though—the village. I might invite my little sister up to sta—”

“Don’t!” says the young woman with the wide eyes and the pale, pale skin. The word leaps from her mouth as if escaping and her fingers rise to meet it—to shove it back in or tease out the next, Isla cannot be sure. “She shouldn’t come here.”

“Morwenna.” The name is a warning and the old woman shakes her head so softly that she might not be moving at all, but Isla sees it and shrinks back towards the shelves. The other women—three in total—are looking anywhere but at Isla; they make themselves look busy in the shelves until the silence is broken.

The old woman shoves out her hand—“Bridie Tuppet.”—and Isla takes it, all too aware of the sheen of sweat on her palm. Bridie smiles, shows her teeth. “As I said, we should have everything you need. Do let me know if you have trouble finding anything.”

And Isla knows she is being dismissed, that she should collect a wicker basket from the stack and take herself away down the aisles. As she walks she hears a sharp whisper and tries not to listen. The shelves are filled to the brim, piled up like old bricks and ripe to topple if she even thinks of taking from them. Isla feels eyes on her back as she reaches for a tin of chopped tomatoes, but when she looks over her shoulder, most of the women are leaving. The bell chimes thrice and soon it is only Isla, Bridie, and Morwenna left in the little shop.

“Nice healthy shop,” says Bridie as she tots up the items on the till—it’s an old-fashioned thing but there has been an attempt at modernisation, a clunky card machine sits anachronistically beside it covered in a film of dust. The old woman only uses one hand; the other, Isla notices, is clenched white around Morwenna’s wrist. The young woman

stares at Isla as if pleading; written in her eyes is a single word. *Go*.

And she does. Isla shoves her purchases in her bag and leaves without looking up. Neither does she look at the primary school and its darkness nor the birds that squawk and keen as she passes. She doesn’t even breathe—instead, holding her breath until she feels like she might choke on it. Isla marches straight back to the house, opens the door, rushes inside, and slams it shut. She leans her head against one of the cool, frosted windows and sucks in a breath so loud that it scares the barn cat on its perch up in the roof. It shouldn’t be inside, she has shooed it away often enough, but she is glad of its presence. Glad that it chooses *not* to look at her.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she rasps.

* * *

When the knocker clatters against the front door, Isla is trying and failing to tame the mess she made earlier. She sits in the centre of all sorts of knickknacks and books and DVD cases, and she doesn’t remember where any of them go. She would be glad of the distraction, if it were London. If it were before.

Here, the knocks feel like a warning, like trespassing, and Isla almost does not answer.

They knock again. The kind of knock that says, *Excuse me*; the kind of knock that huffs. Isla runs a hand through her hair and goes for the key—safely stowed on the small coffee table now.

Bridie Tuppet is waiting with a jar of jam clasped between her weathered hands. “You left this at the shop, dear. Didn’t want you to go without.”

The old woman smiles, though Isla and Bridie both know that Isla had not, in fact, purchased any jam. She doesn’t even like jam, especially not the seeded kind, those little kernels that get stuck between her teeth

and nag at her gums until she feels like it might be better to get rid of her teeth altogether—but Bridie could not have known that part.

Still, they play pretend. Isla steps to the side—“I’m sorry about the mess. I couldn’t find the keys this morning.”—and Bridie steps in.

“Not to worry ...”

“Isla.”

“Isla, such a lovely name. No need to fret about a little mess,” the old woman says, but when her eyes sweep across the scrappy little room, Bridie does not hide the distasteful curl of her lip.

“Would you like a cup of tea, coffee?”

“Tea, please. In a pot. Nigel always kept such nice teapots.”

Isla chews the inside of her cheek and sloughs off to the kitchen, certain that the moment she’s out of the room Bridie will be looking about, searching for things she doesn’t recognise and trying to get the measure of her. *Should never have left the house*, Isla thinks. *Should have starved*.

When she returns with the steaming pot on a tray, complete with a small jug of milk, a bowl of sugar and the nicest cup and saucer she can find, Bridie Tuppet is sitting with her hands knit on her lap. The old woman does not waste her time in saying, “I’m sorry about Morwenna. She’s not been well of late; had a lot on her mind, you see. We’re more hospitable than all that.”

Isla wets her lips. “I’m sure,” she says.

“I hope you took no offence to it.”

Bridie leans forward, and Isla knows that she is being tested. The old woman is gauging her, goading her. If she even blinks the wrong way,

the old woman will pop her in a box, secure the lid, and toss her out of the village to be run over by country traffic. Isla tucks her hair behind her ear, and her sleeve slips. Bridie’s gaze flicks to the round red welts at her wrist. If she looks close enough, she might see the matching stains around her nails and know what Isla does. Without thinking, she pushes her hair further, and this time, Bridie spies the newly-healed scar at her hairline.

“Been through the wars.” It is not a question, but Bridie expects an answer. Isla can tell by the way she quirks her brow, by the hungry gleam in her eye.

Isla presses her lips into a tight smile. “Something like that.”

“That’ll be why you’re hiding out here, I expect.” At any other time Bridie’s smile might come across kindly, but Isla is beginning to know her better.

“I’m not hiding.” The lie slips from her lips a little too easily, a little too quickly, and the both of them know it. But Isla cannot tell her that the mark on her head is the reason she cannot bear to be in the city, surrounded by its great glass-and-concrete towers. The reason she could barely go outside—can still barely go outside. The reason her nails find her skin and dig, and her fingers pinch at the rolls of fat at her hips, her stomach, her back, and pull, as if she can peel herself out of her flesh and step out pristine and unafraid. Bridie would not understand.

Isla does not understand.

One moment, she was walking and there was a shout from somewhere above. From a balcony in a building made of windows. She remembers her reflection frowning back at her and then, she was on the ground, her own blood pooling around her, and a broken plant pot smashed by her side—fallen from *up there*. Isla remembers thinking what a shame it was to have ruined such a pretty shrub.

She’d gone outside and it had nearly killed her.

Bridie's smile deepens. "Beg pardon, didn't mean to offend."

The two women stare at each other across a syrupy silence so thick Isla thinks she might drown in it—until Bridie says, "Well, I'd best be off. I will see you in the village."

Another loaded not-question. No, Bridie has made a promise.

Isla flashes a terse smile and follows the old woman to the door.

* * *

The child is in the garden again. A boy. Isla can see him clearly now. He is lingering on the path with a grin so wide she can see his too-sharp milk teeth. This time there is a girl with him, her hair in dishevelled pigtailed. Their clasped hands swing, the only thing about them that moves, besides the gone-midnight breeze through their hair.

Isla moves to the back door, pulls it open, ready to shout at them, to tell them to go home, go to bed—but the pair are already gone.

"Maybe you really *are* crazy," she mutters as she trudges back to the nest of blankets on the sofa and, reluctantly, pulls the still-present cat into her lap. She won't admit it aloud but again, she's glad of its scruffy, snaggle-toothed presence, the warmth of it against her skin.

Her therapist, Colin—an expensive man in an expensive suit hired by her company to get her back in working order as soon as possible—wouldn't approve of her doubt in his good work. "Brilliant. Just brilliant," he'd said when she told him about her jaunt to the shop—but not about the hollow face of Morwenna or the probing gaze of Bridie, though she *had* told him about the tea. "And did anything terrible happen when you went out?"

"No," she'd said begrudgingly.

The video had been choppy—the village is not a haven for modern

technology with very little in the way of phone reception and broadband speed—but Isla hadn't missed the smug rise of his shoulders. "What can we learn from this? We've spoken about catastrophising, haven't we? Look what you can achieve when you cast it aside. It's not London, but it's *something* and you should be very proud of yourself. I'd like you to try to go out once a day, even if just for ten minutes. Longer, if you can."

Colin calls it exposure therapy, and that is how Isla feels when she thinks about it: *exposed*.

She'll do it, of course. Not because it will help—though her therapist insists that it will—but because Isla is already letting *so many* people down, and he has the perfect wiry eyebrows to caricature his disappointment and Isla couldn't take them bowing low.

If nothing else, her venturing will keep Bridie placated.

There is a *thump* from the front door, so loud that the cat darts from Isla's lap and the wood crunches beneath the weight of the knocker. Isla holds the thick woollen blanket to her throat.

Then comes the laughter—high, pitchy, keening.

She has to move, has to do something, has to make them stop. Isla creeps to the hallway, keeping close to the wall, with the blanket held tightly around her. "I can hear you," she whispers, and then, more confidently: "I can hear you."

At first, only the dark answers.

Until, *thump*. The knocker bangs again and the children's laughter grows riotous. Isla is sure there's more than two of them now, but she can't make them out through the frosted windows.

"It's not funny," she says, and beneath the blanket, her hand finds her hip and she squeezes a nearly healed scab until it pops between her

fingers. She wonders if it might be a sort of hazing, something done to those new to the village. Perhaps Bridie has set them to it. Or perhaps, it's because she's strange and easily frightened, or because she's fat, or because she's from the city. Children are cruel. She was, when she was a girl. She hadn't meant to be, not really, but it's easy to get swept up when you're young. She was braver then, too. "You've had your fun"—Isla edges closer to the door—"please, just go."

Again, the heavy *thump*; the cracking of the wood. Again, the wild cackles, like animals yipping.

Isla rushes to the door and shoves her fists up against the glass. "Stop it. Stop it. Go home."

But the laughs grow louder and louder until—

In one motion, she twists the key and pulls the door open with her eyes squeezed shut. "Leave me alone!"

There's no one there. Nothing on the path except a little knitted jumper, just big enough for a child. When she lifts the knocker, she finds nothing but pristine, painted wood beneath the large brass fox head. Isla looks up at the empty sky and her breath clouds in the cool night air. "It's all in your head, Isla. You're imagining things now."

Except, she can't have imagined it—at least, not all of it. There is the jumper, bundled up on the path, proof that there was a boy and he *was* at her door. Isla lifts it and brings it inside. It's worn and clearly hand-made. Across the front is a row of colourful mallards and the curvy blue of a river. Someone stitched love into this jumper—how disappointed they will be when they find out their child is a menace.

"I'll return it tomorrow ... on my walk," she says to the mobile phone sitting on the table, as if Colin can hear her—though, she doesn't know to whom she ought to return it. "I'll take it to the school. They'll know."

Isla sets the jumper on the coffee table, pressing her palm flat on one bright duck. She looks for the cat, eager to settle again, but wherever it is, the animal is gone.

* * *

Despite yesterday's warmth, today's mid-morning chill carries with it hints of the soon-to-be minted November frost, though October still clings to the fence posts—Isla has always preferred the winter, hearing it crunch beneath her feet. She is more at home in her skin when it's cold.

Revitalised by the chill, Isla marches up to the hunched figure of the primary school. She pushes the nagging prods of the outside world back and pretends she cannot feel them—she has a purpose. She is out here for a reason, and she's not going to turn around now (even if she wants to). Isla tries the main entrance, but the door is locked. Strange for a school day, but perhaps they do things differently in the country.

Isla knocks, then rings the bell on the door frame labelled 'deliveries'. *It is* what she's doing, she supposes. Delivering the jumper.

A face sways into view in the dark. Gaunt and haggard, and though the woman stands beneath the arched, rainbow-coloured welcome sign, she looks anything but welcoming, and she doesn't open the door.

"Hello," Isla says through the glass. "Hello, I—"

"Why are you here?" The voice is shrill, and it doesn't come from the woman in the school.

Isla turns. "Oh, Morwenna. I—"

"Why are you here?" She looks wild as she strides up the path, so frail that the breeze could break her. "What are you do—" Morwenna's eyes dart to the colourful lump in Isla's hands. "Where did you get that?"

She moves faster now, almost running across the cracked paving stones. “Where did you get it? Where did you get that? What have you done? What have you—”

Morwenna takes Isla by the shoulders, her bony fingers digging through the bunched cotton of Isla’s jacket. Morwenna holds her there for a moment, staring into Isla’s eyes as if to make sure she’s real, before her face crumples and her hands loosen. Now, she reaches for the jumper, pulls it clumsily from Isla’s grasp, and holds it against her chest.

“I wasn’t sure who to return it to, so I thought I’d best bring it here—the kids left it on my path last night.”

Morwenna’s head snaps up. “You’ve seen him? You’ve seen—where is he? Tell me. Tell me now. Where is my boy? Where are they?” The young woman is desperate. Her fists are clenched so tightly that Isla worries that her knuckles will pop from their sockets and they will have to scoop up her mangled fingers from the floor.

Isla casts a nervous glance back to the school door. “I—I thought they’d be at school. Wednesday morning and all—unless there’s a holiday I don’t know about? Some village event?”

“No, no, no.” Morwenna presses her face into the jumper and inhales. An awkward silence settles like dust before Morwenna stirs it up again—she grabs Isla’s arm and drags her back down the path.

“Morwen—”

“Sh.”

The women wend their way through the village—Morwenna’s hand clamped on Isla like a vice—until they come to a small cottage with a pretty, if overgrown, garden. The signs of a once-attentive hand are nestled in with the weeds. Morwenna doesn’t stop; she tugs Isla through the front door and into a dingy living room. She jabs her finger

at a slim frame: the picture inside shows the boy, holding a toy car and wearing the jumper Morwenna has scrunched in her fist.

“Have you seen him? Have you seen my Luc?”

She moves down the cabinet and thrusts another photograph at Isla, catching her cheek with the corner of the frame. This time there are seven faces smiling up at her, all rosy cheeks and gappy teeth, most of them little, but two of them—not the two who were in the garden—are older. Off to one side is the woman from the school, not quite so harrowed then as she looks now.

“Them,” Morwenna begs. “Have you seen them?”

Again, she doesn’t let Isla answer and instead brings both photo and jumper to her face and sobs, sinking to the ground like an animal shot. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m so, so sorry.”

But Isla isn’t sure it is she Morwenna is talking to.

“Let me get you a drink,” Isla says gently. Isn’t that what you do when someone’s distressed? Ply them with tea? Isla has never really been good with people, she’s always been nervous and an expert in making things worse rather than better. But she can make a good cup of tea, even in an unfamiliar kitchen.

She finds the room easily enough, but as soon as she opens the door, she is hit by the smell of rotting. On the table is a place setting, heaped high with food far beyond edible. Flies buzz around it and Isla gags. She steps towards the table—

“Leave it.”

Morwenna stands at the doorway, a ghost of a woman, still holding the jumper between her shaking hands. “Bridie tells us to leave offerings, says they help, says it’s respectful and. . . That day—the day that they . . . I made Luc’s favourite. I made Luc’s favourite because he always

came home in time for tea when I make his favourite, and I can't—I can't clear it away because he's not come back and if I clear it away that means he's gone and he's not coming home but this"—she holds up the jumper—"This means he's still *here*, he's been *here*. But why, why did he come to you? Why didn't he come *home*? He doesn't know you. He's never met you. You weren't ..."

Her eyes widen and her mouth falls slack. "You weren't here when we did it."

Isla moves slowly towards her, hands raised as if she might dart at any moment. "What happened? What did you do?" she asks, but she isn't sure she wants to know.

"Bridie told us." Morwenna chuckles then, a hollow laugh. "She tried to tell us but we—we do everything by vote. Very democratic like that."

Isla leads her back to the sitting room, away from the bustle and buzz of the flies and the stench of rancid food and Morwenna follows along, still chattering. She's calmer now, but Isla knows that the woman is not calm, not really. Isla had been just as calm, as eloquent, when she came home from the hospital. It was only *after* that the trouble started.

"We were overrun, you see. They'd been killing chickens and ripping up gardens and the village was fed up with them."

"The children?" Isla frowns.

"The foxes. Nigel—the man whose house you're ... Nigel wanted to take action. So we held a meeting—of course, we held a meeting. Meetings are everything here, you can't decide to plant a shrub without either a meeting or the nod from Bridie. Small villages, you know?"

Isla doesn't—she's a child of the city, that large, anonymous place where anyone can creep by unnoticed, can grow up, can live and die

without even knowing the person who lives two or three doors down.

Morwenna continues. "We voted, all of us. All of us except for Bridie. She told us to leave it well alone. That nature does what it does and if we want it to *not* do something, we should take it up with"—Morwenna waves her hands—"leave offerings and what have you. *Ask nicely*. But we didn't."

Morwenna looks lost, like someone set adrift, and Isla squeezes her shoulder. "Go on," she says.

"Instead, we killed them. So, so many tiny furry bodies but ... We had to. That's what Nigel said. It was the only way." Morwenna counts the stitches in the little jumper and Isla sits so still she might be made of marble. "Everything was fine for a week—maybe two. We continued as normal, replanted, bought more chickens. Went on as if nothing had happened, as if we hadn't *defiled* anything."

She wets her lips and looks briefly at the ceiling. There's a smile there for a second, but then it's gone. "There was a sleepover at the school. We're such a small place, they had all of the children in the one class, the littles and the older ones before they go off to secondary school."

Morwenna meets Isla's eye with a look so ferocious that she imagines Morwenna's teeth sharpening. "We thought it was her, at first. That she'd done it. It had to be her, she was *there*. She was *with them*—"

"Who, Morwenna?" Isla coaxes. "Who was with them?"

"Catriona—the teacher. She insisted that she didn't do anything, that she didn't even fall asleep, but everyone knows she drinks. But she's sweet and she's nice and she teaches the children so we ignore it—ignored it for so long. It was a little while before we realised that it wasn't—that she was just ... But Bridie knew. Bridie knew all along. She warned us and she knew."

"What happened to the children, Morwenna?"

“One day, we dropped them off at the school with their pyjamas and their snacks and Luc, he took his rabbit—not a real rabbit, a little stuffed thing, he needs it to sleep. One day, we took them to school and it was supposed to be fun, and the next morning, their sleeping bags were empty. They were gone. The school doors were still locked, but they were gone.” Morwenna is still for the first time since they entered the house. Her hands sit limp in her lap, the jumper cradled between them. She stares ahead and Isla shuffles in her seat. Everything is silent, save for the two of them breathing.

Morwenna’s gaze snaps to Isla again and the woman grasps Isla’s lapels. “You have to come with me. To bring an offering like Bridie says. They’ve come to you. If you leave something, maybe ...”

And Isla knows she cannot say no.

* * *

They’re a little way away from the village, stomping through briars and bracken to a place that Morwenna calls the foxhole. She’s brighter now—cheerful, even. Isla can see the stirrings of hope crinkling the corner of her eyes. Her intestines have made a knot of themselves—what will Morwenna do when it doesn’t work?

“There’s no guarantee,” she says and Morwenna waves her off, buoyed by possibility.

“You’ll see. When we get there, you’ll see.”

Isla holds her hands in front of herself and digs her nails into each wrist. The sting of it, and the burn of her calves as she walks, distract her from the idea that she’s letting someone else down—whole families—even before they know she exists. Though Bridie has probably mentioned her to every villager by now: the strange, sad, mad girl staying in the barn.

“It’s not far now,” Morwenna says as she whips sticky weeds away

from her legs.

And it isn’t, Isla can see the strange formation of stones rising up out of the brush, the dim-lit dusk painting them in shades of autumn. They stand in an arc, the six of them, like sentinels—three either side of a large hole in the hill behind. The foxhole, or a tomb, Isla cannot be sure which.

It’s not empty, either. The foxhole is filled with flowers and cakes and pies and little dolls made from twigs and twine. Nestled up between them are several pale, white shapes. Isla doesn’t know what they are at first—perhaps they’re pebbles, or ornaments. It is not until she steps closer that she can see them true: seven little fox skulls, not yet grown. Behind them lie seven tiny fox pelts, not large enough yet to have turned red, though the colour stains them still.

Isla turns to run, to slip back to the house, collect her things and the cat and go. But Morwenna is beside her with a little box. Seven speckled eggs sit in cotton wool cups. “I have a nice plate,” she says. “If you put them on it and place it down, she’ll give the children back. I know it. I know she will.”

Though she wants to shove Morwenna aside and not stay long enough to hear the eggs crack beneath her, Isla takes the box and the plate and kneels in front of the foxhole. Morwenna has already placed the little jumper, neatly folded, towards the back of the hole. The plate, Isla notices, has the same row of mallards, crudely painted around its edge. “She, who? Who will give them back, Morwenna?” she asks.

It could be the teacher, Catriona, Morwenna had said she was a suspect. Isla even considered Bridie until—

“The Foxmother.”

Here she comes, Bridie, old as stone, through the tangled weeds. A ring of twigs rises up from the back of her white hair like a halo, and she wears a thick robe of bleached hessian. Isla can still see the ghosts

of old ink in the fabric—the ensemble had once been sacks of potatoes or flour or wheat. Behind her, the other women from Tuppet’s trail in a line, not so easily picking through the path with the heavy, squirming load they pull behind them. Catriona, too, staggers at the rear. Thick with drink, her gaze finds Isla’s, and the weight of it makes Isla look away.

Bridie opens her hands. “The village took her children, and so ...”

“... She took theirs,” Isla whispers. It’s superstitious nonsense, village folklore, the kind of country eccentricity that city folk scoff at from their busy streets and over their steady internet connection. But out here between the stones and Bridie, the truth of it sings in her bone marrow, and somewhere deep down, Isla believes it.

Morwenna falls into the grass beside her and clasps Isla’s hands in her own, shoving them into the box as if Isla is a puppet she can control. “Please,” she says as she squeezes Isla’s hands so that the eggs nearly break between her fingers. “Please lay them out.”

“You know it’s not that simple, Morwenna.” Bridie sighs, and it sounds like wind through the thin barn house windows.

“But they came to her. *Luc* came to her. She’s *seen them*.”

Bridie stares at Isla for a long moment. “She is to be witness then.”

Witness to what? Isla doesn’t ask. The roiling in the pit of her stomach tells her she’s going to find out soon enough.

“You’ll not have met Nigel,” the old woman says, nodding to those assembled behind her. The women roll their wriggling sack towards the foxhole, and Isla’s hands fly to her mouth. She shifts, ready to run headlong from the clearing—there is a phone box at the edge of the village, she can call for help if only she can reach it.

Bridie tuts and sinks her fingers in Isla’s hair, tugging her backwards

with surprising strength. The old woman hauls her up and hurls her to the side. Isla’s forehead hits the stone and her vision swims. “Not again,” she rasps as her fingers come away bloody.

“What did you say?” Morwenna is still on her knees, her wide eyes shining through the dim.

“Don’t worry about that,” says Bridie as she slides a long blade from her belled sleeve, marred by time’s jagged teeth. “She’ll live.” The old woman inclines her head towards the foxhole. “Ladies, if you please.”

Morwenna stays on the ground, clumps of grass between her fingers, while the others—the three from the shop and the teacher—untie the sack and tug it away. There is Nigel with his hands tied behind his back, ankles strung together and a tea towel shoved in his mouth. The saliva-soaked gingham is pretty, Isla could see it in a country kitchen. *Fitting*, she thinks, and then she frowns at the thought. Blood seeps into her eyes. She shakes her head and the world feels liquid, like it’s swaying beneath her.

Nigel has seen the knife and he tries to shout through the towel; he looks at Morwenna with pleading eyes.

“Bridie, what ...?” Morwenna moves away from the foxhole as Isla tries to crawl towards it. The old woman kicks out at Isla’s head and blood spatters up her robe.

Bridie says, “Justice. It was Nigel who decided we should kill them, and it is Nigel whose life should be forfeit.”

Morwenna shakes her head, horror pulling her jaw down low. “Bridie. Bridie, no.”

“Don’t you want to have Luc back where he belongs? The Foxmother provides and will provide again. The Foxmother demands justice for her murdered children—only when she has it will she release ours. Morwenna, you know this to be true. You feel it. We all feel it.”

Isla stares through the blood and Morwenna stares back.

“But it’s wrong, Bridie. Can’t you see that it’s wrong?” Morwenna reaches for Nigel and tears well up in his eyes.

Isla pushes herself shakily to her knees and slurs out, “This is crazy. You’re all mad.”

She grips the stone and wedges her shoulder against it. When she tries to pull herself up to her feet, nausea sweeps up into her throat. Isla coughs out bile, but Bridie is ignoring her now.

“We all voted, Bridie.” Morwenna, who appears more sane, more stable than ever Isla has seen her, looks to the others. “And you’re happy with this? You’re *for* this?”

“They know it is best, and so will you when Luc comes back.” Bridie doesn’t let them speak. Isla would be surprised if they have tongues at all, so little do they use them.

There is a movement in the foxhole; deep behind the offerings and the skulls and the pelts, two tiny eyes shine out. Isla sees it first, then Morwenna, whose eyes fill up with tears. There is something familiar about those little eyes, those sharp teeth, and the way it places a tiny paw on the jumper—its sharp claws picking at the stitches.

The little fox withdraws; when she looks back, the foxhole is empty. Morwenna’s grief and her hope shatter like porcelain to reveal the beating heart beneath, stuck full by a knife of its own. “He’s not coming back!” she roars. “He’s gone. They’re all gone and we’re never getting them back.”

Isla finds her feet, and her tongue. “You’re going to commit literal murder because some old bat says so? Enjoy prison, ladies.”

Isla doesn’t know why she’s laughing. It’s not funny at all, and she

hasn’t laughed in months. Not really. But as she looks at the knife-wielding old woman wearing potato sacks; the town drunk; three women with no discernible personality to split between them; Morwenna, who is grief made human; poor hostage Nigel (to whom Isla feels the almost uncontrollable urge to nod, say, “How do you do?,” and introduce herself); and the blood that coats her hands and her jacket, flowing freely from exactly the same spot that almost killed her the first time, Isla cackles. She’s concussed, she has to be, but the whole thing is so unlikely, so completely ridiculous, that she can’t help but imagine telling her therapist.

How’s that for exposure therapy, Colin?

Isla thinks of the number seven: seven fox kits dashed to pieces, seven children stolen, seven villagers losing their collective shit before her eyes. She has to leave, to go back to London and forget anything ever happened. Isla brings her bloody hand to her hip and scrapes at it with her nails—the pain is grounding. The pain tells her she is awake, she is alive, she can get out of here.

“Well, grab him then.” Bridie says to the others.

But none of them move. They look at each other, at Nigel, at Morwenna, then step backwards.

The old woman whips around, knife blade pointing at Isla. “This is your doing. You’ve poisoned them. You’ve ruined everything. Just like a tourist. I should’ve known, should’ve cut you out before you even left that house. I saw you arrive, you know. I saw you pull up in that *expensive* car with your *expensive* London luggage. I saw how pitiful you were huddled in the dark, afraid of your own shadow. I tried to take you under my wing, tried to bring you into the fold, but you city folk ...”

Bridie advances on her and all of the giddiness bubbling up in Isla’s chest fizzles away. The old woman raises the knife and brings it down

with a crash—the blade snags Isla’s hair and bounces off of the rough stone. Isla lugs herself around the rock. Her limbs are heavier than they should be, and she’s moving *too slow*, but she has to try.

“Bridie!” Morwenna screeches and then her skeletal fingers are digging into the old woman’s cheeks as she wrestles Bridie away.

“Run now. Go. Get away,” Morwenna hisses.

But Isla cannot leave Nigel—she should, it isn’t her business, but Isla believes she is a *good person* and good people do not leave strangers—especially strangers who let her rent their house for an indefinite period of time—to be used as a human sacrifice in the middle of the countryside. As Morwenna struggles with Bridie, Isla wobbles over to him and yanks the tea towel from his mouth.

“Thank you,” he says. “Hurry. Don’t bother with the hands. Just do the feet. Hurry, hurry.”

Isla has never been brilliant with knots, and the rope is already slick with her blood.

“Let me.” Catriona, breath stinking of alcohol, crouches beside her. She pulls a pen knife from her pocket and hacks at the rope. “This is my fault. I was with—This is my fault.”

With both hands and feet untied, Nigel and Isla stagger to their feet. He has a matching head wound, though the blood on his face is dry. Isla looks back—woman tussles with woman, and the teacher chugs back a hip flask. Catriona nods to Isla, takes her knife and joins Morwenna and Bridie—where the other three are, Isla cannot say. The thought is as heavy as her legs as they drag behind her: what if they come for them? What if they’re waiting just down the track?

“They’re gone,” Nigel says, the thought written across Isla’s face.

“Never had the stomach for much, those three.”

Isla nods and swallows. Blood coats her throat, the taste of metal making her grimace. From behind, there is a shout, and someone falls but the pair of them don’t turn to find out who. They stumble on through the brush and the branches, back towards the village.

When they finally find the dirt track, thick grooves cutting through its surface, Isla swears she sees someone up ahead. She shoves her hand into the pocket of her coat, scrabbling around for the keys.

“What are you doing?” Nigel asks, his frown cracking the blood on his forehead.

Isla pulls the keys from her pocket. “Shhh.”

She points the little torch out into the track.

When the light hits them, eyes reflect back from the dark and Isla jumps.

There is a woman on the road. She is tall and slim-faced, surrounded by seven sets of shining eyes—standing around her are seven little bodies. The boy smiles his too-many-toothed smile and raises his hand. The girl beside him titters.

“Oh god,” Isla whispers.

“What?” says Nigel. “What is it?”

Isla squeezes her eyes shut, rubbing at them with her sleeve. She opens them again and thrusts the dim light ahead once more.

There is a fox on the road.

Of course, it’s a fox.

“It’s just a fox. It’s okay. Just a fox.” Isla breathes, and Nigel shudders beside her. After tonight, after everything, *just a fox* isn’t as comforting a thought as it used to be.

The fox turns to the forest, takes one last look over its red-furred

shoulder, and slinks away into the underbrush. A trail of seven kits follow her. The last of them stops and yips down the track, and then mother and pups are gone.

What Makes a Demon

by Hannah Greer

My sister is missing, which is unusual, and my father is gone, which is not. My childhood home is shabby and smells of smoke, unchanged in the years since I left. The only difference is the thick layer of dust that marks my sister's extended absence.

I sit by a window and wait for my father to return. He always returns, eventually. In my reflection, moonlight gleams against my silver hair. If anyone were to pass by, they might mistake me for a spirit. If they were to recognize me, it would cement the suspicion.

No one passes. A muck heap blocks my view of everything except the tall barricade that surrounds the town. The carefully constructed sheets of metal stretch toward heaven, a constant reminder of the restraints designed to keep us safe.

For the same reason, men lock their wives and daughters up at night. But the demons they so fear come at all hours and are never seen. A fence and locked door can't change that.

A lanky man bumbles past the muck heap, tipsy. He trips over a downed pole, the thick wooden kind that once connected power lines. It's been useless since before I was born.

I'm silent in the shadows as he stumbles inside. He carries more wrinkles and less hair than the last time I saw him. Work in the fields causes him to wear his years and then some. The scent of liquor is stronger than in my memories. He's more than tipsy. Good.

His eyes skip over me. Pause. Turn back.

I step towards him and he backs into the wall. With a smile, I take another step. I never held this power in life. He pales. I loom over him, the monster he never thought he'd see again.

"You shouldn't be here." His voice trembles. "I did right by you, I don't deserve no haunting."

"Right by me?" The idea makes me laugh.

"He was supposed to protect you! It wasn't my job no more."

"You should've protected me from him," I say. "He's the only monster I ever met."

"I saw his body. He died fighting to protect you."

He died cowering from me, but my father would never believe it. "That's not why I'm here. Where's Miriam?"

"Married."

My chest seizes. To hide the tremble in my fingers, I unsheathe a black dagger from my hip. "She's too young."

He winces. "The Church had to take action and change the rules. The demons have stolen too many women from around town. You among them."

"You could have given her more time." The Church manages the laws,

but fathers manage their daughters. He's always had a choice, even when he pretended not to.

"This guy's a good one. He'll protect and care for her better than I ever could."

"Did she beg for more time?" I spit.

"She wasn't like you. She wanted to marry." He looks at his scuffed boots. "I shouldn't have given you to that man. You deserved better, someone who could protect you. But your sister's marriage is different."

I squat, dagger extended. "You didn't listen. I warned you and I begged you."

"I thought I was doing what was best. The priest said—"

"You should have done better." I hold my blade a hairsbreadth from his neck. Spirits can't touch people, but I can. It would be so easy.

I stand. "Where is she?"

He babbles the directions. I leave him in his fear. By morning, he'll believe the encounter a drunken dream. Fathers don't believe their daughters capable of all that much, least of all something they could never do like overcoming death.

* * *

I wait across the street from a small house with a black roof and white walls, much like the one I lived in for the period between my wedding and death.

A man with a thick beard and heavy gut steps outside. A petite brunette clad in a loose cream dress follows. I stretch to see her face, but his body conceals her. He turns and she wraps him in an embrace. He

presses a kiss to her hair and steps away.

It's her.

I almost choke. Her stomach is round, protruding. Pregnant.

I could kill him. But that wouldn't help Miriam in the long run, so I bite my cheek and maintain my composure until he's out of sight and she's inside.

I walk across the street, my hair hidden under a hood. I can almost pass for my past self. I knock on her door.

It creaks open and she's there. A smile puffs her cheeks and forms a little dimple on the left, exactly as I remember. My throat tightens.

"Mir."

Her face drops and she scrambles back inside. "Stay back!"

"Mir, it's me. Evie." I follow her into the dining room and shut the door.

"Evie is dead."

"Not quite."

She leans against a table. "The hormones. I'm hallucinating."

"I'm not dead, not really," I say. I'm not quite alive either. I don't fit in among the living or dead anymore, but I don't want her to know that.

"A spirit then. It must be a spirit," she murmurs.

"I'm not a spirit and I'm not a hallucination." I meet her eyes, mirrors of my own, before her gaze flickers away. "Please Mir, I'm here to help you."

She wraps her arms around her stomach. “You can’t be real. You were stolen away by demons. They found your husband—his body.” She shudders.

“It’s not what you think. The world isn’t what they say it is. It’s hard to explain, but”—I hold out my hand—“I can take you away.”

“I don’t want to leave,” she says.

My hand falls in the rift between us. “But we can go somewhere better, a sanctuary for women like you.” It’s a refuge for living women, protected by women like me. We ensure they’ll never suffer like we have. “We can go together.”

“Together? You’re gone.” She takes a deep breath. “Do you know what it’s like to be alone, with only a father who’s never around? It’s hell on Earth. But my husband saved me. And now, well, I have other reasons too.”

The pitter-patter of little feet on a wooden floor comes from above. “Momma?”

“Yes, Jacob?” Miriam glares at me. I stare at my sister, a woman I no longer recognize, and stay silent.

“Can I have breakfast?”

“Sure, baby. I’ll get some breakfast, you get the books ready.” To me, she whispers, “You need to leave.”

“Please, Mir. You don’t have to stay. There’s a better life out there.” I go to touch her but stop short. She’s not ready to know what I am.

She shakes her head. “I have a life here.” She sets a plate on the table, knocking over a flashlight. I’ve only seen such a relic of our past in Church. I pick it up and shake it at her.

“It’s not worth it. Material possessions are nothing compared to the sisterhood that awaits you if you would just—”

She turns on me. “It’s not about that! I have people who depend on me now.”

“That can’t be your kid. I wasn’t gone that long.” I came back before her birthday. She shouldn’t have been married yet, but there’s no way she had a child.

“Maybe not by birth, but he’s mine as surely as this one.” She presses a hand to her stomach. “This may be difficult for you to comprehend, but I built a life that doesn’t revolve around you. Now, I don’t know what this is, spirit, hallucination, whatever, but you need to leave. I don’t need you.”

I spin on my heel and stomp outside. She doesn’t understand, but it’s only a matter of time. I’ll wait.

* * *

The next day, I watch over her house from a shadowy position in the alley. There’s a chill in the evening air when she meets her husband outside after work. She asks for an escort to her friend’s.

He wrinkles his brow. “No, this isn’t a good time.”

“You said that last night. I need to visit; she had an accident, and I want to deliver a meal.”

“I’m sorry my love, but I’m exhausted. Maybe tomorrow.”

My sister’s eyes catch on me for a beat before she’s swept inside.

* * *

From atop the neighbor’s roof, I watch through a window. My sister

sleeps the day away, the pregnancy particularly troublesome. When I concentrate, I can hear each strained breath she takes.

The boy, Jacob, disturbs her every so often. She forces herself up once to set out toy blocks for him and again to make him eggs. The smell almost makes me gag. It's been so long since I was able to eat anything.

When her husband returns, he hurries up the stairs. He interrupts her greeting. "Where's dinner?"

"I'm sorry dear, I couldn't manage it today. The baby—"

"Jacob is hungry. I don't mind you blowing off some duties while you carry the baby, but dinner is the exception. It's part of your marriage vow." I clench my fist, nostrils flaring. How can she not see she would be better off far away from him?

Tears well in her eyes. He sits on the bed and cups her cheek. "I'm not trying to be harsh, my love. But I've been in the fields all day, I'm exhausted. I can't come home just to fix dinner for Jacob. And really, dinner isn't a complicated matter."

My sister spots me through the window. She ducks her head and clambers out of bed.

* * *

There are other moments, moments of tenderness when he brings home flowers or takes Jacob out so she can rest or brushes the hair out of her face when he holds her close. She never notices me then.

Those are the moments she uses to convince herself she loves him. It's what I did. But those moments never last. The flowers wilt. Jacob is returned to her care. He pushes her away when he's had enough.

Late one night, they argue at the dining table. Their shutters are

latched, but I can hear each word as though I were beside them.

"Your sister offered to care for him during the day. You can drop him off and pick him up on your way to the fields," Miriam says.

"You knew what you were signing up for when you married me. His care was part of your oath."

"I can't keep up his schooling. I'm struggling to even get out of bed in the morning to make him breakfast."

"He's my child. I won't have my sister raise him," her husband states, as though that should be the end of the discussion.

"He's our child. And I'm telling you I need help."

"I'd take care of him myself, but I'm out in the field every day breaking my back to provide everything for you." Her husband paces, each step heavy on the floorboards. "I don't get to spend the day at home with him, you do. The least you can do is raise him yourself instead of passing off the responsibility."

"I—"

"You swore you could handle it," he shouts.

Miriam storms away. A pot clangs as she grabs it and stalks outside, face tight. Our eyes meet. She spins and hurries away.

This is it. I dart after her.

She doesn't slow until she reaches the well. Most streets have one so women can go without an escort. She slumps against the stone well, burying her head in her hands.

"Miriam," I call. She tenses. "Mir." She looks up. For once, her eyes don't flicker away.

“What did I ever do to deserve your haunting?” she wails.

I take an unsteady step back. “This isn’t a—I’m not haunting you. I’m trying to protect you.”

Miriam hugs herself. “Are demons after me?”

“Demons aren’t the monsters. Men are. Your husband is.”

She shakes her head. “You’re wrong. He’s trying his best, it’s not easy for him.” After everything, she still can’t see. It’s my fault, for leaving her and forcing her to rely on a man for so long.

“You don’t have to pretend.” I crouch beside her. “I can take you away.”

“There’s nowhere better to go. I have a good husband; he doesn’t hit me like yours did.” I blink twice, stung. Her voice softens. “You need to leave me alone before your presence draws the demons.”

“There is a better place out there, one where you’ll get all the love and support you need. A refuge me and others like me protect.”

She bites her cheek. “Is it far?”

“It would be a journey, but I can get you there safely.”

“I don’t think I could do it. Certainly not with Jacob, he’s too young.”

“Well, it’s a refuge free of men. He wouldn’t be able to come. But—”

“He’s my son, I can’t just leave him,” she exclaims.

“He may seem sweet now, but one day he’ll become a man. A monster. Don’t throw your life away for him.”

“He’s a child, a sensitive one at that. He cried when a bird ran into our

window and died. Being a boy doesn’t make him a monster.” She shakes her head with a half laugh. “This is ridiculous; you’re dead. Stop haunting me. I don’t need you.”

“You do need me.”

“You’ve always tried to mold me into a version of you. Even in death, you won’t let me live the way I please. I know you can’t understand, but I love Jacob and I won’t abandon him like you abandoned me.”

“But he’s not even really your kid!” Her nostrils flare and she looks away. I’ve lost her again and I could kick myself. “Mir, I only meant he’s not your responsibility. His father found a new mother for him quick enough in you, I’m sure he’ll find another. I’m sorry—” I lay my hand on her shoulder and she screams. She scrambles back over the broken pavement.

“You touched me! Dead people can’t touch the living!”

“I told you before, I’m not dead.”

She uses a trash can to haul herself to her feet. “What did the demons do to you?”

“Please Mir, I’m trying to help you.”

“Stay back!” Her face strains and she holds her stomach protectively. All I can do is watch as she scurries away, eyes on me until she’s around a corner.

My heart hammers. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. Not every woman accepts our offer, but my sister can’t be among their numbers. She should know better. I knew better.

Yet I’m begging to help her and she won’t let me. She turns away the very thing I sought during my marriage. Two weeks after my wedding, I went to my father. He claimed I must have misread the situation. As

if anyone could misread the bruises on my body.

I went to the Church next. After our larger societies collapsed, they were deigned our community’s father, our protector against demons. I believed in them.

“Please, I’m terrified of what he’ll do next,” I begged the priest in the pew beside me.

“Your husband comes from a good family. His only interest is in protecting you, he vowed as much on the Bible itself. Maybe you don’t understand what he needs from you.”

“No, that’s not—”

“I’m not blaming you if that’s the case. New marriages often go through a rocky phase, but you must push through.”

“That’s not the problem. If you would listen—”

“I hear you. But if you’re having issues with your husband, you need to speak to him about it privately. Not bring it to us.”

I rolled up my billowing sleeve to present the bruises on my forearms.

The priest clucked his tongue. “Perhaps you’re the one who needs to listen.”

My cheeks heated. This was the same man who slipped my sister and me sugar cubes when we helped clean up after service as children. I hurried from the Church, shamed and hopeless.

If Miriam won’t accept my help, despite all her husband has done, I don’t know what to do. I need my Sisters.

* * *

The sanctuary built into a valley is lit by bonfires and torches at all hours. From the top of one of the towers surrounding it, I watch living women roam the streets. No man can sneak up on them. No man can hurt them. Under our protection, they are safe.

“Evie?” a warm voice calls. I turn and greet one of my oldest sisters, the one who saved me. Rebecca. A grin crinkles her nose while her wild silver curls bounce down her back. She embraces me like I’ve been gone for years. “You’re safe.”

“And a failure,” I return. She narrows her eyes. Self-hatred benefits men. “Well, I was unsuccessful.”

She holds me at arm's length. “You must be patient. Some women need more time.”

“I gave her time, but she has a kid.”

Rebecca’s lips tighten. “A boy?”

“Yes.”

“Mothers of men are less likely to accept our invitations.”

“You must have experience with this. What can I do to change her mind?”

“Nothing. We can’t force them to see things our way and every woman must come of her own will or we risk everything we’ve built.”

“I abandoned her once when I died and I won’t do it again. Her husband is terrible, she just doesn’t seem to care. We can’t make an exception for her child, just until he’s older?”

She narrows her eyes. “We cannot compromise our sanctuary for the benefit of one.”

I lower my gaze. “I know. But there has to be something I can do.”

She brushes hair from my eyes. “I’m sorry, Evie. But sometimes we can’t save them.”

“I can’t accept that. If you won’t help me, I’ll ask the Queen of Shadows.”

Rebecca pales. “You can’t.”

“You can’t stop me,” I say. She flinches and I soften. “I’ve heard the stories. I won’t let her take advantage of me.”

“You don’t understand.”

“And you do?”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Have you heard of the maiden who begged the Queen of Shadows to save her family?” I nod. It’s a tale dating back almost a century, to the origin of our kind. “She didn’t see any choice, society was crumbling around her. But the Queen took something the maiden can never get back. Her humanity, and with it any connection to her family. They never looked at her the same, even as she led them to safety. She is doomed to an eternal half-life, bringing peace she cannot have to others.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“That’s not enough. She may grant your wish, but will warp it. Make it into something you’ll regret.” Rebecca cups my cheek. “Don’t repeat her mistakes. My mistakes.”

I meet her silver eyes, watery and strained. I never knew. She isn’t just one of the oldest, she is the oldest. The reason any of us exist as we do. “I won’t,” I whisper.

“You have other options.”

I nod, but she’s wrong. The Queen of Shadows is my last chance to save Miriam.

* * *

I slip away the next day. I meant what I said, I won’t make Rebecca’s mistakes. I’ll be careful. But I will not give up on my sister.

The Queen of Shadows resides in Inaba, the realm between the living and dead. Time and space work differently here, and I’ve only ever passed through for a few seconds when traveling. I walk through the halls of a castle constructed from her mind in silence, the sounds of my steps swallowed by shadows.

In the belly of the castle, I step into a throne room. The air chills my skin. I rub the goosebumps from my arms and address the woman made of shadows atop her throne.

“Queen of Shadows. I come before you in a time of great need.”

She frowns. “What realm do you hail from?”

“I am a creature of Inaba, like you, but reside in the realm of the living. I am what they have christened a demon.”

“It’s because of me that you flit between realms as easily as birds move through the sky, yet it’s been years since your kind deigned to visit.” She leans forward. “Did you know that?”

I swallow. “I’ve heard the story.”

“The way they tell it, I’m a monster. Yet here you are.”

“As I said, I am in great need. My sister must see the truth of men and their world.”

“I cannot control minds.”

“I don’t expect you to. Just make her see the truth.”

“Like you see?”

“Yes.”

“I make no guarantees, but all women should be given the chance to see, no matter how painful.” She runs a finger along her chin. “I can influence a situation so her husband will freely show where his true loyalties lie. However, the final choice will be hers, not yours.”

“It will have to be enough.” I pause, remembering Rebecca’s warnings. “The men, they won’t be hurt, will they? She won’t forgive me if they are.”

“No, of course not. They will be quite alright.”

“Good. She’ll be better off in our sanctuary; she just needs a little encouragement.”

“Then the deal is done. You’ll be summoned when she’s ready.”

This will save her. She’ll understand, in the end.

* * *

There was a time I didn’t understand. When the priest told me I was to blame, I tried to believe him. He was wiser than me and the truth is supposed to hurt. Besides, I believed there were reasons to need a man, protection from demons chief among them. So many women went missing. But as it turned out, the biggest danger was my husband.

I was setting out dinner, potato soup, when he stomped into the house. That wasn’t unusual. But when he stepped into the kitchen, face red and hands fisted at his side, I knew it would be bad.

“You embarrassed me,” he shouted.

“I don’t—”

“John, you went to John.” The priest. Had he believed me after all? “He told me you’re spreading unsavory rumors. About me.”

“I wasn’t—I just—”

In two steps, he grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. My head hit with a resounding crack. His hot breath smelled of alcohol. “You disrespected me publicly. Now they think I can’t even control my own wife, which means I’m not getting a position at the Church.” He slammed a hand above my head. “I deserve a well-mannered woman and instead, I ended up with you. I ought to feed you to the demons myself and try again.”

I raised my arms around my head. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re damn right it won’t happen again.” His eyes flashed. “This time, you’ll learn.”

I’d learned how to survive the beatings. Stay silent, don’t fight back, and eventually, they would stop. He’d apologize in the morning, maybe bring home flowers. This time was different.

When his fingers wrapped around my neck, I knew he would kill me. I kicked and tried to scream, but his legs pinned me to the ground and his hand kept me silent. With tear-stricken eyes, I begged him to let go. He didn’t. My lungs emptied and my heart stopped.

And started again. I gulped air. My husband scrambled away, cursing. My veins warmed as a beautiful woman with long silver curls stepped into the room. My savior, summoned by my death.

“What is this?” my husband snarled.

The woman ignored him as she glided forward, stopped, and swooped over me. The warmth in my veins became fire.

The woman pressed the hilt of a black dagger against my palm and whispered, “Take your vengeance and become one of us. A life for a life.”

I took the dagger. I weighed it as I’d often seen men do with hunting knives. It felt like an extension of myself. My husband trembled. I didn’t hesitate.

* * *

Atop the tower, I stand guard with Rebecca. A nearby bakery puffs out the scent of sugar and flour. Women parade through the streets in groups, laughing and waving at each other.

“Do you ever wish you were down there?” I ask.

“Our lack of life disturbs the living. It wouldn’t be the same if we were,” Rebecca says.

“That’s not what I meant.”

She considers. “It can be difficult to watch them sometimes, knowing we can never be a part of it.”

“They look so happy. I want my sister to be happy, even if we can’t be.”

“You can’t make her want what you want.”

“I just want what’s best for her, and living in that town isn’t it.” I shudder.

“It wasn’t right for you. Do you know for certain it isn’t right for her?”

There’s a gentle tug in my chest. Miriam. Without a word, I follow the tug, passing into Inaba and out, back into the realm of the living in seconds. I step into a dimly lit room that smells of dried blood and

feces. A figure rocks in a chair in the corner, and another lays unmoving and uncovered on the bed. Miriam. I freeze in the shadows. This isn’t supposed to happen.

She takes a breath, brought to a half-alive state in my presence. Blood, there’s so much blood. It coats the bed, it coats her. It spots the newborn baby cradled in her husband’s arms. Miriam prods a gaping wound in her stomach.

My stomach curls. Is this what the Queen of Shadows wrought? A birth with only one survivor? I wanted her to be happy, to live for herself like I no longer can, not join me like this. This is too high a cost for her to see the truth of men.

Her husband bolts up. “Mir?”

She blinks at him. “The baby?”

“Healthy,” he says. She reaches up. Slack-jawed, he tucks the baby into her arms and tucks a blanket around her. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mir.”

Miriam cradles the baby against her chest, cheek pressed to their fuzzy hair. “Why?”

I can fix this. She can still join me. I step into view. “He killed you.”

She stares at him with wide eyes. He tugs at his collar. “The doctor, he did his best, but we couldn’t save both of you.”

“You chose the baby over her.” I take her hand, so small. “I died at the hand of my husband, too. But you don’t have to stay dead.”

“I don’t?”

“No.” I press the handle of a fresh black dagger into her palm. “Take your vengeance and become one of us. A life for a life.”

She pinches the hilt between her fingers. “Excuse me?”

“Kill him or you’ll die.” I glare at her husband. “I’m sorry Mir, but it’s the only way. You deserve to live.” A half-life is better than no life.

“Momma?” Jacob peers in through the doorway, wild blond curls falling in his eyes.

“Jacob, baby.” She drops the dagger and reaches for him. I scoop the dagger up as he climbs into the bed beside her and peers at the baby. Miriam smiles at them and pulls them close. “Meet your little brother.”

Jacob giggles and presses a kiss to the baby’s head. He pretends to gag. “He stinks!”

Miriam’s smile drops, and she holds the children a little tighter. “It’s not him. I don’t think I have much time left.”

Jacob stares up at her. “You leave?”

“Remember the bird that flew into the window?”

Jacob nods, serious. “Birdy in a forever sleep.”

“I think momma’s going to forever sleep.”

“No!” His tiny hands fist in her hair. Her husband and I can only stare. “Momma can’t. Momma can’t go away.”

She presses her nose to his head. “I don’t want to, baby.” She stares at the knife in my hand. “What happens if I ... take revenge?”

“You’ll become like me. You’ll live. It’ll be a good life,” I insist.

“Can I stay with my children?”

My heart thuds. “No.”

“Can I bring them with me?”

“No.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Jacob, I love you. Don’t ever stop being kind. And look after your brother. He’s going to need you to teach him how to be kind, too.” To her husband, she says, “Take care of them. Raise them well.” He pales and nods.

I shove the dagger at her. “Mir, you can’t let your life go to waste.”

“I won’t leave my children parentless.”

“They’re men. They’ll be monsters one day, and then what will you have died for?” My voice breaks.

“They’re children, not monsters. They can be anything.” Her eyes glisten.

She’s not going to do it. I’ve doomed her by trusting the Queen of Shadows. She has to do it. I grab her shoulders. “Please, I need you.”

“I’m sorry, Evie. But I believe in my children.” She falls against the bed, as dead as when I arrived.

“Momma,” Jacob wails. “Don’t sleep!”

I glare at her husband. “Do you understand what you’ve done? I ought to kill you.” I stalk towards him.

Wet-eyed, he says, “I love her.” I pause. He may have been a cause, but so was I. So desperate for her to have everything I can’t, I didn’t listen to what she wanted. I glance back at her body.

Jacob sobs against her chest. The baby cries. Miriam's arms are still wrapped around them. Her children and her wishes are all that's left.

"I'll spare you because that's what she wanted. But if you step out of line, if you don't do right by her memory, I will return," I say.

He blinks against tears and nods.

"Raise those boys to do better, and you won't see me again. Prove her right about them." I hope she's right.

Night Maneuvers

by Paula Hammond

She walks with feline grace: barefoot and silent. Come closer now and look. Look into the fire and see what I see. See how her measured steps leave no trace on the frost-bound earth. Or perhaps that's simply a trick of the light? The same trick that makes her eyes flash silver as she passes the warm glow of the cooking fires into the woods beyond.

No one seems to know her, but a stranger as pleasing on the eye as she attracts nothing more than smiles and wistful glances. The sentries do not stop her. No watchman asks "Who goes there?" She walks unchallenged into dark, towards the hut where the dead man lies.

In time, the great goddess Morrigan will come to claim the corpse-warrior for her deathless army. She takes only the greatest heroes, and those chosen spend eternity fighting and dying—and dying again—for her amusement. It's a cold reward, but then, she is a cold goddess.

Tonight, though, is the gwynnos when we, his kith and kin, gather to celebrate the passing of a soul from this world to the next.

Look, now, and you will see how well he has been prepared for his journey. How his hair has been limed and spiked, as for battle. How scented oils make the spells, pricked into his skin with flint and soot, appear to glow. How he wears his battle honors on his neck and arms, as twisted circles of gold.

Our brother is well-loved, and the revels last for many hours, but the stranger does not join them. Instead she waits, crouched in the bracken, with silent purpose. Maybe you passed her in the shadows as you went to pay your respects. Felt your scalp prickle and your thumbs itch as you stumbled against her in the gloom. Wondered what it was that felt so

warm against the chill air. Doubtless you swore, and shrugged, blaming the darkness for your unease. One thing is certain: you would not have seen her unless she wanted it, for no human ever mastered such stillness.

Look, now. Stare into the flames and see how things unfold. The night has almost turned to day. The last mourners have left and the men who watch the corpse are tired and replete. Warmed by food, spiced mead, and song, they nod at their posts. They do not see her emerge from the tree line. Worse: they have not taken the necessary precautions.

They should have dowsed the fire. Should have spread herbs and spices on the boardwalks. Should have hung bells and sparkling trinkets from the doorframe. It is well known that cats are soul-stealers—but they hate the cold and can be easily distracted.

For a moment the stranger pauses and, with a hiss of uncertainty, glances into the pall of mist and smoke that hugs the corpse house. Then, with a decisive shiver, she shrugs off her skin. Two legs become four. Hair becomes fur. Witch becomes cat.

Padding through the open door, past the sleeping guards, Cait Sith is pleased to find that she is not too late. Morrigan has not yet come to claim the soul of the one she loves. But soon, surely, soon?

Three times Cait Sith jumps the corpse. Three times Cait Sith speaks the words that break the bonds between flesh and spirit. The hut flares. Night becomes day. The corpse shimmers and a flame no bigger than Cait Sith's paw, but of incandescent glory, materializes over the warrior's heart.

Can cats smile? Not with their mouths, perhaps. But there are times when they strut, and crow, and cock-a-snook at the world. Look with me. Stare deeply into the embers and you will see that this is how Cait Sith looks as she leans towards her lover's life-spark and purrs his name.

It is as she reaches out to take hold of the little flame that she notices something in the rafters. A grotesque, cinereous crow, its opalescent eyes glinting in the dawn-glow.

This is Morrigan herself. The goddess of war. The hawkish corvid, bellicose and rapacious, come to claim her right. Only Cait Sith has other plans.

It is said that Cait Sith may change form eight times only. The ninth she must decide how to live out her life. As woman or beast.

Tonight was the ninth time. Tonight Cait Sith—wise as the serpent, blazing as the Sun—surrendered eternity for a mere mortal. And she will not easily let him go.

Morrigan knows the sights and sounds of the battlefield, but she is no soldier. Her skills lie in drawing up the plans that send others to their doom. She pauses a moment too long. Long enough for the snicker-snack of cat's claws to clip her feathers and draw first blood.

Like all goddesses, ours is vain, and petulant, and doesn't like to lose. Her eyes flash, she turns and caws, loud enough to shake the trees. Cait Sith mewls back and leaps the void between them. If you listen carefully, maybe you can hear the sounds of their battle. Maybe that is not thunder complaining in the distance. Maybe it is the sound of cat versus crow. Goddess versus witch.

Feathers whirr, and Morrigan is up, on the defensive. A pale shape, bouncing from wall to wall, using her wing tips like a club to beat her enemy. The crow swoops again and again, but Cait Sith has played this game before and knows the value of patience.

Seeing no opposition, the crow gets bolder. Watch. Look. See, how every pass brings her closer and closer to the dark form below. A fourth, a fifth, a sixth sweep, and Morrigan is jubilant. Careless. Claws extended, she makes one more pass, bearing down, ready to rake her enemy's flank.

Cait Sith moves like molten iron. Leaping into the air, she twists her body mid-jump, catching Morrigan with a side-swipe that throws her to the ground. The bird is down and the cat is on her. Something snaps and the goddess cries out. This is not a cry of pain, for the crow is just a thing fashioned to hold the goddess' will. No. She feels no trauma, just rage. It has been many centuries since someone dared to defy her.

For a while, her broken vessel continues to buck and bite in impotent fury. Then the goddess withdraws, the bird's eyes film, and all is still. With a yowl of triumph, Cait Sith arches her back and stamps her paws, marking her victory with a dance on the body of her foe.

A cock call in the distance stops the witch's celebration in its tracks. Day is already creeping into the corpse house. Cait Sith knows that if it is to be done, it must be done quickly. Before the light of reason chases the magic away.

With a leap, the witch lands on the chest of her dead lover and blows gently onto the glow of his life-force. With the touch of her breath, the flame shudders like a candle being extinguished. Then it begins to morph. For a second, a long-limbed figure stands beside the corpse, regarding his own body with a look of surprise. Cait Sith purrs. Delight replaces curiosity on the face of the warrior. Then his form ripples and dissolves into something new.

Cait Sith welcomes her mate with a chirrup and, with their tails entwined, the cats dance out into the dawn to find a welcoming fire. Look, now. If you look hard enough, you will see that they are headed this way.

The Tiger's Pelt

by James W. Bodden

Field Note BIS.

Category. Human Remains. Description. Rib fragment, notched by teeth marks.

The beast was close. A trail of pads and fat toes betrayed its path up the mountain. Pawfoot limped after its tracks, uncovering the hidden path to its cave. Instinct bade the boy turn tail, but his grumbling stomach lured him underground. Pawfoot followed the beast back home.

The boy shimmied inside, landed on cold slush, and spat a mouthful of mud. He struggled upright and explored the sprawling cavern around him. Hundreds of handprints glowed on the walls and beckoned him to a smoking cooking pit. Pawfoot caught a whiff of mustard seeds, tubers, and garlic but found a dead boy gripping an axe instead of a feast. The meat was well-braised and cooked to a pale pink. Bones, nails, and hairy back aside, it looked delicious.

Mother hunched over the pit, humming one of her lullabies for the corpse alone. Her pelts bristled and came alive—needles, beads, and talismans rattled from the shag. Pawfoot's brothers knelt by her feet, snickering at his limp as usual. Nubtail wore a stitchwork of boar hides, while Fangtooth donned the skin of a she-wolf. From snout to tail, furs fitted them like a second skin.

The boy sunk into his raggedy coat with shame. He'd braided it from moss, resin, and odd twigs—a sign of weakness and boyhood. Unlike his brothers, he had no blood on his hands.

"Remember, nobody can cook a boy like a beast." Mother baited her

sons to the pit. "But they still keep coming. Boys from across the highlands brave into this cave to test their manhood and find the Tiger Witch." She tore a slab off the corpse. "It's your turn now. Will you prove yourselves men tonight or wild animals? Will you claim this dead boy's blade or pick his meat?"

Pawfoot studied the handprints around him, figuring they were a warning from the dead. The boy didn't like his chances against a tiger. His right foot, squat and clumsy, couldn't outrun a sickly cub. The boy understood why Mother had little choice but to name him after his ugly paw.

He turned to meet Fangtooth and Nubtail's unforgiving gaze. The three brothers sized each other up across the pit and girded closer to the axehead—an oily blade flinted from black stone. The boys dove into the cooking pit at the first twitch of movement. Nails slashed, skin sizzled, and the stink of burned hair thickened the air. Pawfoot's fingers hovered over the axehead's edge, but one heady whiff of meat was all it took for him to snatch a pliant rib instead.

The boy scuttled to a corner, gnawed on the rib, and swallowed without a chew. Fat dripped from his lips. He tried to gorge his guts to bursting, but they wouldn't stop churning. The more Pawfoot ate, the more he wanted. Mother was right. Nobody could cook a boy like a beast.

His older brothers laughed at him. Grousing, the boy pulled away from his meal. He watched Nubtail nurse a swollen hand while Fangtooth preened with the axehead in his grip.

"We found the beast." Nubtail's rump wagged; a vestigial tail lay hid-

den under his furs.

“Look at it.” Fangtooth bared a sharp, jutting canine. “What kind of man has a paw?”

“I’m no beast.” Pawfoot took a bite off the rib but spat it out when he felt her approach.

Mother narrowed her amber eyes on the boy, making him thump against the walls. The woman smelled old, stinking of an unearthed burial mound, but her body’s bulk reminded Pawfoot she remained dangerous. Mother pointed to a shadowy trail of pads and fat toes sneaking away from the pit. “A tiger’s watching you,” she croaked, “chew on its favorite bone.”

* * *

Field Note P4W.

Category. Fossil. Description. Pugmark, preserved in limestone.

Divining tracks was her secret alone. Mother lowered a torch to the ground, measuring the space between each pugmark to predict the beast’s sex, speed, and primal desires. The boy watched the woman work, trying to unravel the art of worming into a tiger’s mind. But he only managed to steal her knowledge in bits and pieces. She refused to teach an unblooded son.

Pawfoot studied the tracks, trying to prove himself a hunter just like her, a boy worthy of her many secrets. He figured long toes meant the beast was female, while wide steps gave away its breakneck pace. The boy tried to keep his mind on the tiger, but his brothers’ hollering obliged him to look over his shoulder. Fangtooth and Nubtail ran along a breach that divided the chamber in half. They played a game of chase and pretended to devour each other. Pawfoot smiled, eager to join them, but one limping step cautioned him they would never let him play.

The boy hated his paw. It was big, clumsy, and ended with a row of fat toes. He flattened it on the ground and tried to unwind the arch to look like a regular foot. The boy swallowed the pain, watching his foot straighten, almost fooling himself he was somebody else, one of them. But the more he looked like his brothers, the less he felt like playing. The boy just wanted to eat.

Pawfoot hugged his belly. The wicked thought of taking a bite of them rattled inside his head. One taste of the tiger’s cooking awakened him to new flavors and strange urges. Meat ran scarce during winter, and stranger things than brothers looked edible. He spotted an opening to bite into Fangtooth’s thigh or Nubtail’s rear, but his guts gave him away before he could pounce.

“What’s it doing?” Nubtail caught his nub to stop it from shaking. “Is it going to eat us?”

Fangtooth pressed his axehead to Pawfoot’s throat. “I wouldn’t turn my back on a beast.”

“I’m not hungry,” the boy lied and ran away.

Tears dribbled down his cheeks. Their jibes stung, and he hated himself for showing it. He glared back at them, eyes red with salt. Fangtooth and Nubtail were growing near manhood and had collected the hides to prove it. Pawfoot wanted to pick their pretty coats apart to steal the choicest bits for himself. But a pelt was earned through blood alone. Only killing made a hunter.

The fools could keep their mangy furs. Pawfoot vowed to toss his mossy rags and claim his first pelt—ruddy, striped, and decked with a snarling head. He combed the ground for more pugmarks and chased them to a slab of rock bridging the rift and an unseen river churning below.

Mother’s lullaby, a blend of harmonies and lamentations, stopped him cold. The boy followed her voice across the slab. She had silently

skulked to the other side of the divide. Shifting in and out from the torchlight, Mother warped from a crone to a maiden to a stranger.

“I’ve brought you into the mountain,” she croaked, “to find a hunter who can make it out of the winter alive. But to prove your manhood and meet the Tiger Witch, you must cross the bridge to the beast’s den. Will you do it standing on two legs, all fours like an animal, or fall?”

Pawfoot shook his head. The boy figured he’d topple over the bridge before he took one step. Luckily, Fangtooth and Nubtail elbowed past him to the slab. At first, his brothers breezed against the wind currents, but they began to slow down when the bridge thinned like a piercing blade. For a moment, the boy hoped to see them drop. But his brothers always disappointed him. Fangtooth caught Nubtail by his pelt, jumped into the air, and landed in a pile on the other side.

The boy tried to sneak out, but Mother called him from across the rift. Pawfoot gulped but obeyed. There was no denying her. He climbed the bridge. Gale roped around his throat in a noose. The boy balanced on the slab, trying to keep grounded, but his squat foot almost slipped. A pang of fear turned his stomach. Retching between his legs, he noticed more tracks on the slab.

A gust of wind hurtled the boy face-first to the bridge. Blood trickled to feed the hungry river below. Pawfoot landed on top of the tiger’s tracks. Its footfalls scuttled across the bridge, unbothered by the storming gale. The boy realized this cave was a beast’s world—not meant for men to tread. Pawfoot knew what he had to do. He got on his hands and knees and started to crawl. On all fours, he found balance. The burden of his deformity lifted. He grew faster than he’d ever been on two legs. The boy picked up his pace and crossed the breach to Mother’s side.

“Do you like it?” Her amber eyes burned. “Crawling with your belly to the ground?”

The boy shook his head, unable to meet her gaze, and hid his ugly paw.

No matter how hard Pawfoot tried, he would never become the hunter Mother wanted. But when the boy noticed blood trickling off the walls, he realized she wasn’t the only creature to fear in this beast’s world.

* * *

Field Note H0L

Category: Weapon. Description. Obsidian Axehead.

Blood-spatter painted the cavern’s walls red—the pop and spurt of a severed jugular. The Tiger Witch had made another kill. Breathless, Pawfoot spotted drag marks on the ground. Streaks of gore, offal, and scuffed earth wormed deeper into the cavern’s core. The beast had turned careless about killing, leaving a path back to itself. Almost as if it wanted to get found.

Mother haunched low, furs bristled, and chased the blood trail further into the cavern. A stinking tunnel, dank like a gullet, loomed at its end. She licked her lips at the scent of decay. “Can you smell it,” her smile turned to bladed ivory, “the piss, blood, and bones of a tiger’s den? Here comes the easy part, my sons. Will you find that beast, or will it go the other way around?”

Pawfoot slipped off his raggedy moss coat, the shameful brand of his boyhood. Only an animal’s hide on his back—thick with fur and sacrificed by his bloody hands—could finally make him a real hunter. The boy had no choice but to follow the beast back home. “I’ll find it,” he said.

“All boys do.” She nudged him towards the den. “One way or another.”

Pawfoot nodded, followed after the tiger’s tracks, and limped inside the tunnel. Its pugmarks loped across a passageway illuminated by a glowing ooze stinking of brine. He stopped to study the prints. The

beast’s steps were short and stunted. He figured it was slowing down. Pawfoot’s mouth watered, worming into the animal’s mind to share its taste for live prey.

The tracks vanished at a dead end, an egg-shaped chamber carved from bedrock. Inside, a gaping hole the size of a wildebeest tunneled below ground. Pawfoot found another boy spiced and cooked near its edge. At least the corpse looked like one. The dead boy’s arms and legs appeared the same length, a trait of four-footed beasts. Its hinds ended in paws, just like him.

Pawfoot licked the drool from his lips. A nibble of the tiger’s cooking had corrupted him. Novel appetites revealed themselves, and he feared losing control. Eating your own kind was a habit of low animals. But all alone in the dark, away from prying eyes, who would ever know?

The boy had reached out to snag a bite when heavy breathing tickled the back of his neck. He squealed and almost fell into the hole while his older brothers cackled behind him. Fangtooth and Nubtail crowded the boy against the walls, close enough to gnash, sunder, and devour each other.

Fangtooth regarded him and the carcass with equal suspicion. A she-wolf draped over his body; the coarse hairs appeared to sprout from his skin. “Don’t play innocent. Go ahead, eat it.”

“I couldn’t take another bite.” Pawfoot patted his empty belly.

“Liar!” Nubtail jeered. “That’s just what a beast would say.”

The boy winced as his brothers jumped him. Nubtail stomped his stubby paw while Fangtooth mashed his nose in with a loud crunch of bone. Pawfoot fell to the ground and crawled away, writhing from the pain in his guts. His brothers’ sweat, salted breath, and the meager meat on their bones became a temptation he could no longer resist. The boy wanted to tear their flesh to prove he was the beast they were looking for. Pawfoot clamped his lips before he

lost control.

The boy wormed to the hole’s edge and felt a gust of heat wafting from its innards. Hot, tacky air spiced with mustard seeds, tubers, and garlic—the Tiger Witch’s breath—invited him to jump in. Pawfoot peered over the edge but only saw darkness. “Are you in there?” he muttered.

Fangtooth stood over him and snickered. But in Pawfoot’s blurry eyes, he saw a cackling wolf upright on two legs. The axehead in his grip appeared sharp and deadly as the long winter.

“This beast has no claws,” he scoffed.

“What do we do with it?” Nubtail’s rump wagged. “It’s got no fur to skin either.”

“I’ll help it find its way home.” Fangtooth slashed at the boy, casting him over the edge.

Pawfoot screamed, holding on to the corpse’s leg. His grip slipped from its calf to its paw. Warm fat squeezed from the corpse’s skin and dripped on Pawfoot’s palms. The boy slobbered, let go, and licked his hands clean, slurping the hot grease as he dropped into the hole.

* * *

Field Note BIT.

Category. Unclassified. Description. Anomalous skull.

Pawfoot hit bottom, raising a cloud of dust he couldn’t see, only sniff, taste, and choke on. The dead body landed on top of him. He hugged it in the darkness, burrowing for warmth into its chest, but the corpse turned cold. Pawfoot struggled to his feet, crunching a pile of bones underfoot. The boy’s jaw dropped at the heaps of disassembled skeletons scattered around him.

The temperature dropped as the boy limped away from the light. He started missing his raggedy moss coat already. Pawfoot wandered off to explore the rest of the bone-tiled den, leaving a trail of blood. He limped across a gravelly pathway paved with teeth and rounded a massive barrow of bones. The stack of spinal cords, sternums, and ribs almost reached the ceiling. He rummaged through the remains and brought a skull ending in a snout to his eyes. The boy was mesmerized by its black sockets as the great barrow shook and rattled apart behind him.

Pawfoot turned around, his heart thumping against his chest, and spotted it rising from the barrow. An enormous animal woke from its bed of bones. The boy saw tufts of cinnabar and stripes, sharp, hanging teeth, and a pair of amber eyes. Pawfoot ran as fast as his limp would allow, but the beast caught him in a single stride, bit into his neck, and pinned him to the ground.

Slobber pooled all around the boy, and he choked on it. The prick of the animal’s whiskers made Pawfoot go limp, pliant to its will. He played dead as it unrolled a rough tongue and licked him from the top of his scalp to his misshapen toes. Humming a lullaby, the Tiger Witch reared on her hind legs and girded around the boy. Tufts of striped fur sloughed to the ground, uncovering a bloom of moving fingers, a naked breast, and Mother’s burning gaze.

“You will never know,” she croaked, “how many sons I’ve mourned before I found you.”

Pawfoot brought the strange skull to the light. He trembled, remembering his brothers’ teeth and tail. The boy knew he shouldn’t ask, but he did anyway. “Are these also my brothers?”

“They were never going to make it.” Her voice trailed, turning distant. “Every one of them stumbled on two gangly legs and left their hairless bellies exposed; no match for a tiger.”

Pawfoot backed away from her and stumbled to the ground. A spine

ending in a snubnosed tail cradled him like a newborn. The boy wanted to hate the tiger for her savagery. But who was he to judge a beast for sharing his same taste for meat? “Are you going to eat me?”

“I want to.” She licked her teeth. “But I’ll teach you to track, maul, and kill instead.”

The boy shook his head and covered himself with shame. He wasn’t the killer she was looking for, only a naked boy shivering in a cave. “I’m no hunter. I haven’t earned my first pelt.”

“I’ve seen you,” she whispered, “pick meat over a blade, walk on four legs instead of two, and devour your own kind. That’s all a boy needs to become a tiger and survive the winter.”

“I’m so hungry,” Pawfoot muttered. A weight lifted as he unburdened his grisly confession. The boy surrendered his boyhood to the Tiger Witch’s spell. “I want more.”

“A tiger can eat anything.” She waved at the bones. “Even if they walk on two legs.”

Pawfoot screamed as a patch of fur sprouted from his skin, tearing open gaps in the flesh. The boy gripped his throbbing paw, and a batch of pearly-white claws ripped free. “Help me!”

The tiger lowered on all fours, peeling a pair of low-hanging canines. “I already did.”

* * *

Field Note A8T.

Category. Animal Remains. Description. Smilodon Fatalis, pelt embalmed by permafrost.

His brothers were close. Twin pairs of tracks cast in the mud and scut-

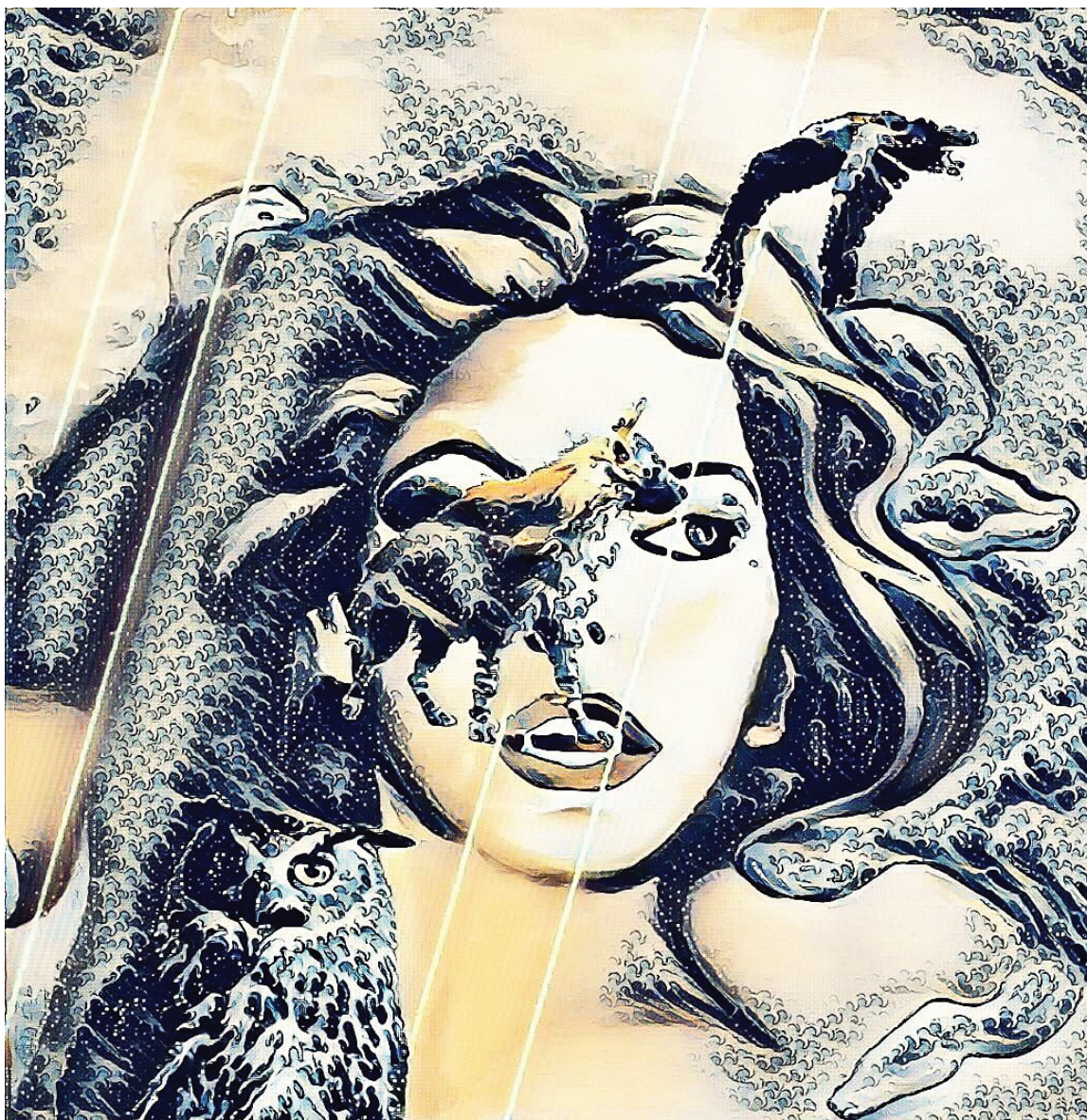
tled into a tunnel. The hunter sniffed his older brothers' footfalls, catching a savory whiff of sweat and adrenaline. He could taste their fear on his tongue, but the clever boys kept themselves hidden out of sight.

One paw after the next, the hunter padded in the darkness without a limp, movements fluid, just another shadow devouring the light. His ruddy pelt bristled, stripes spiked like piercing blades at the smell of human flesh. The hunter sniffed his brothers inside a crevice deep in the walls. Their trembling betrayed them through vibrations in the stone. He pictured the boys huddled together, gnatty pelts making

them appear like a squealing piglet and a wailing wolf cub.

The hunter's belly groaned. He was hungry. The mechanics of consumption changed for him. He could gorge on every boy in the highlands and still want more. It was the price of a tiger's pelt. He had forsaken his boyhood for a manhood of scarcity and hunger. But to survive the long winters, the hunter would feed on secret recipes that seasoned meat with a tang of fear.

Mother was right. Nobody could cook a boy like a beast.



Digital Medusa

by Vincenzo Cohen

portrait of the artist as a young gorgon

by Gwynne Garfinkle

is he limestone or marble
is he granite

or merely fossilized
in memory

a fading photo
in the depths of a drawer

I recall his flinty silence
when I cried

and how
by slow accretion

the rage
coiled inside me

was it his reflection
in my finally pitiless eyes

that froze him
a stuck frame

mid-sneer mid-shout
his volume turned

all the way
down

did my hair really writhe
or was I just tired of crawling

Sparks of Dark and Bright

by Emmie Christie

Dark settled over the trees like a lid closing over a paint can. Everything stopped.

The wolves waited with baited teeth, the leaves dripping onto the forest floor stopped mid-drop, and the little mushroom people called Caps scrunched close and still against the loam. Nothing could move under her shadow, for Bright equaled motion.

She sought the sparks of Bright.

Dark crouched on the branch of a tall tree, next to a knothole where an owl pressed itself, trembling. Dark bared her fangs and watched for movement, for creatures with Bright spreading through them like a sunrise.

A darting, a flash! A fish in the brook! The water had stilled, but an orange minnow had managed to hold on to the heat of noon even under Dark's sway.

She dove with the speed of the owl, drawing on the idea of a creature with wings. She grew a beak of sorts, and talons, and skimmed the surface of the still water, grabbing at the minnow, at its Bright. The fish burst forward out of her reach, swimming and knocking against another stilled fish, then bouncing off a stick. Then it slowed and stopped, having used all its Bright.

Dark pulled up from the stream, absorbing her talons and beak back into herself, but

keeping the wings. She flapped to the other side and landed on the for-

est floor, in the crinkling loam. The ants under it had all paused and the Caps did not scatter in fear, using any Bright they may have hidden. She shoved one, pushing it over in a sudden fit of anger.

She didn't just want Bright. She *needed* it. How else could she endure the endless void of herself, when the sun banished her back to that paralysis space, that unending rigidity no matter how she vibrated with the maddening desire to move—

The Cap she had knocked over had landed with their finger pointing, and their little blue eyes seemed to stare at something behind Dark. She whirled and a Brightness netted her attention, something sliding into a lesser darkness, a hole in the ground. She crouched and whispered with the lips of the mushroom people, "Thank you."

Their eyes seemed to acknowledge her, and on a whim, she propped them back upright with a half-formed mushroom cap of her own.

She bolted forward with the speed of the brook, with the frothing of water through its forest trough. She arrived at the hole where the creature with the Bright had descended and funneled herself down it, rolling herself into a long, thin tube. She bunched up at first but thinned her bulky front end and slid along through the hole in the ground. Brightness showed up ahead, and she went nearly mad, slow as she felt in the tunnel. It reminded her of the void of herself, and she shuddered.

The tunnel branched to the right, and she followed the creature, a snake of some kind with bright green scales. How they flickered, how they shone! How she wished she could live in this world in the sun.

They didn't know what they had. They didn't know the agony of staying motionless for millennia, and even before that. She hadn't known what years were, before. Time had not existed before motion. Motion had not existed before Bright. And a frozen part of Dark had always existed, the core of her that never moved, never brightened, no matter how much Bright she consumed.

She'd almost caught up with the snake when it shot down another branching way, then another just as quick. It held a lot of Bright. It must have sunned all day to have so much. She followed, but the tunnel had branched too many ways, and she lost it.

She slunk back the way she had come. She didn't have much Bright in herself left. That was always the gamble: to acquire more Bright, she had to use the Bright and motion she had already taken.

A bright patch of Bright caught her gaze. She zeroed in on it.

The Caps had set up a little campfire, and they danced around it, bouncing off each others' mushroom tops. They fell backwards, laughing.

Dark growled. She called the sense of the snake she'd hunted, winding towards them soundlessly. An older one, with a wizened cap, pointed at her and shouted. They all bobbed towards their fire and scooped dirt on it. It sputtered, and died out, and the Bright faded in all of them, too.

She paused, confused. How had they started the fire in the first place, if they hadn't had Bright? How could they have moved?

Then one peeked out from behind one of their little root houses, the same one that had motioned her towards the snake. She recognized

their blue cap with red dots, and their blue eyes. Bright pulsed inside them.

Dark almost lunged forward, but . . .

"Did that fire help you all move? Without Bright?"

The Cap nodded.

"How?"

They waddled towards the fire and showed her, with two sticks, how to create fire. With patience and just a little motion, they lit all the Caps like a display. A feast of Bright for her. The mushroom person tilted their cap up, and a shy smile slanted their lips. "Come dance with us!"

They didn't deserve what they didn't appreciate. They could never know perpetual immobility!

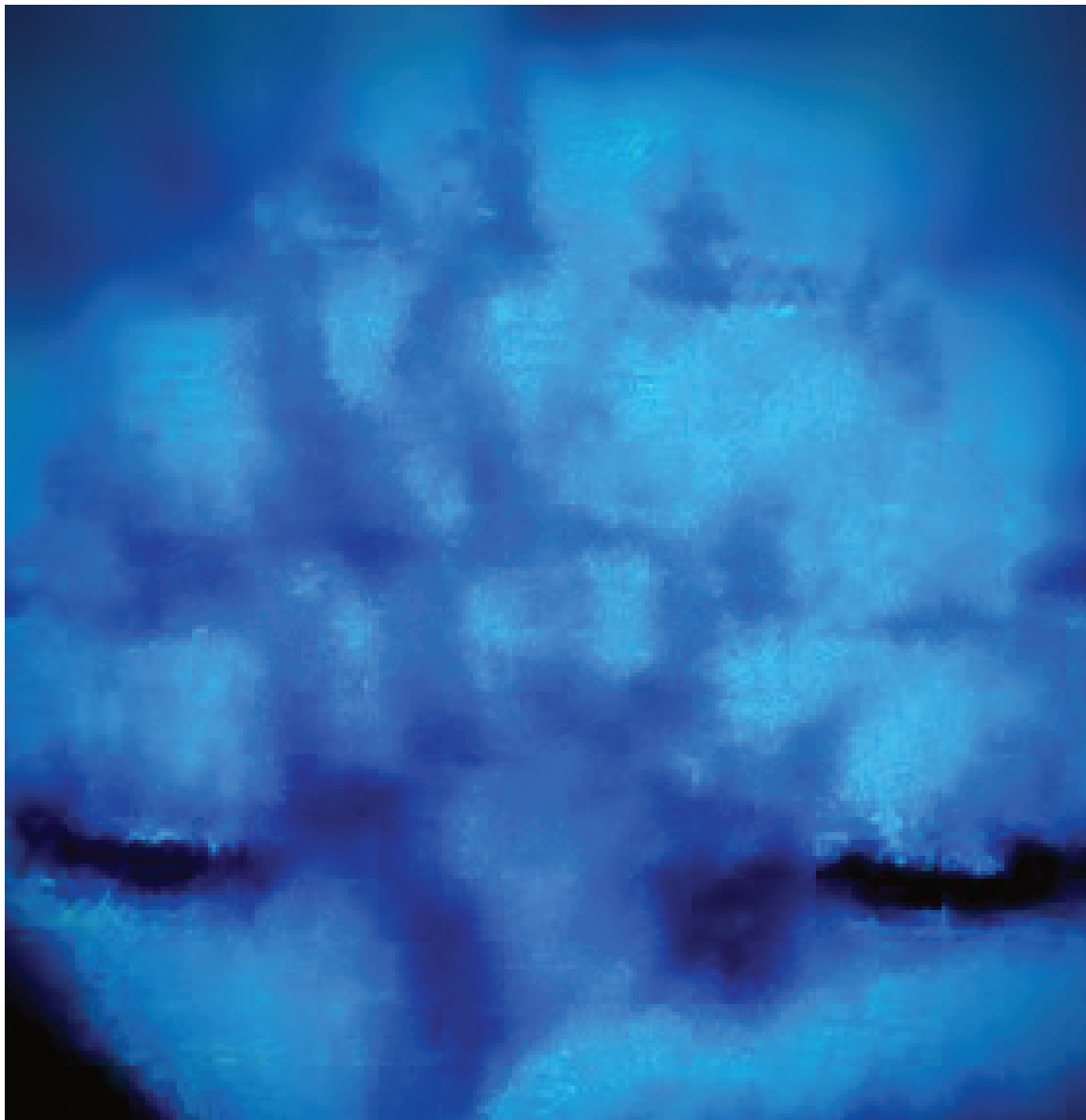
But should they suffer just because I do?

I don't want to take their Bright if I don't have to.

The two thoughts rubbed together like the mushroom person's sticks, and the frozen stillness in her core shifted for the first time. Heat and motion flared inside her. She glowed with the sense of fire.

Now she could become Bright whenever she needed, even in the void. She didn't have to steal Bright anymore.

She danced with the Caps as their fire that night, sparks of Bright and Dark coexisting in the shadows of her flame.



Untitled

by Andrew Graber

Soulmate

by Jackie Fenn

Hell is nothing like I expected. Although it should be obvious, once you think about it, that without a body there's not going to be any burning or torturing or pushing boulders uphill for all eternity.

It took me a few days (or maybe it was months, or years, there's no way to tell), but I figured out I'm some kind of energy blob—sightless, weightless, drifting. I know I exist because I'm thinking (was that Plato or Socrates?), and somehow I know I'm not in a coma or an isolation tank or a virtual reality experience. It's the afterlife, and it's forever.

There are others around me. Their presence is a ripple, like a magnet that's attracting and repelling at the same time. Some of them are in clumps and clusters, some single or in pairs. They all seem to be avoiding me. People weren't drawn to me when I was alive, so I guess there's no reason they should seek me out now I'm dead. But still, nobody wants to sit alone in the cafeteria.

Hannah won't be here, I know that. Her life lasted four innocent years. It's Emmett I need to find. It's as though the last 50 years of my life have been ripped away and I'm back in the days after the accident, desperate to confess to Emmett, but robbed of the opportunity to bathe myself in his anger, to endure his contempt, his hatred, his anything.

A cold core of dread fills me. What if he's not here either? Some say what he did was a mortal sin, but it's got to be borderline at worst compared to all the other sins. Compared to what I did.

I try to focus on my surroundings. If I concentrate, I can hear something from the other presences. Not words, but a pulse of emotion or a

spark of memory. I visualize these interactions as little dialogues, although I know it's just me projecting my own interpretation. Statistically speaking, most of them won't even know English.

—Uh oh, a newbie, says one, and scurries away.

Another one draws closer and I feel a tug, a gentle tapping at my memories as though they're a clump of partially-melted ice cubes and someone needs to free one for their evening whiskey. My most recent memory pops forward, the memory of my death, with my favorite niece and her husband by my bedside, reassuring me I was going to a better place. Believing I'd led a life deserving of everlasting glory.

The memory glows and expands and the tugging grows stronger. They're trying to steal it. I resist, feeling panicked even without a heart to pound or a throat to constrict. The pulling changes to a push and I see another death scene, one with sirens, crumpled metal, the smell of gasoline and blood, and a searing rip that extinguishes all light.

—I'm sorry, I tell them.

But there's no sadness as the memory settles in alongside my own; the emotion is calm acceptance. Other memories drift in to join it: some mundane—the smell of morning coffee, the warmth of an outdoor shower—others more wrenching. One feels ancient, its edges crumbling from millennia of retelling, and I realize not all the memories originated in this being.

I lessen my hold on the memory of my niece and it spreads into the other presence. Together we savor the scene, and I feel gratitude flow

back to me along the connection.

—You’re welcome, I say.

We separate and I’m drifting again, sifting through my old memories and my new ones.

* * *

I remember now, it was Descartes. I think, therefore I am, and apparently always will be.

* * *

I’m not sure if it’s sleep exactly, but I zoned out for a while. My first friend is nowhere to be found. I’m starting to recognize a couple of the presences nearby who haven’t moved much. It’s like I have a celestial radar, and each presence has a unique signature that reflects back a sense of who they are. Or were.

Let’s call these presences souls. Because, why not?

My plan is to find somebody in charge. I’ll ask around, see if any of these others know how everything is organized and where I should be looking for Emmett. Are our souls cataloged by time of death, place of birth, depth of sin? And I have to know if there is a way I can visit Hannah—some sort of day pass, perhaps. Or a way to watch her from afar, even for a nanosecond.

I wonder if I’ll recognize Emmett, if I find him. My sense of him is so bound up in how he looked—Sunday morning stubble, lopsided smile, the scar on the curve of his shoulder—and how he looked at me. Adoringly. Trustingly. Will I recognize his soul? The essence of Emmett?

I sense a vast presence approaching, or rather a vast swarm of microscopic presences. One soul, or many? Each presence is unique, but there’s a single-mindedness that vibrates in unity. I try to move away,

but the swarm surrounds me and I feel flickers of probing like a million tiny pin pricks. I take a mental breath and relax into the white noise. Cold water rushes over me, and the color green, and I’m floating in the open ocean, absorbing the nourishment of the sun’s rays. It triggers a memory of a beach trip: me dangling chubby Hannah legs in the shallows, while Emmett goofs on a wakeboard and splashes my bare stomach. Unbidden, another memory surfaces. Hannah calling from her playroom, *Mama, I can’t reach it.*

I try to shut it away, clamp it down, but it’s too late. The tiny fragment of memory flows out of me in a thousand directions at once, yet it’s still with me.

All around me the swarm shares visions of blue skies and storms and silver flashes of sea creatures, and the creep of the ever-present cold. Gradually the sensations fade, and I am alone.

For a long while I float in numbness.

I’m trying to make sense of the experience. Plankton or algae would be my guess. Which means to find Emmett, I not only have to hunt through the 100 billion human souls who have ever lived, but also trillions of other animals and plants. And what if there’s life elsewhere in the universe? Do they all end up here?

I also need to reconsider where *here* is. What on earth could a bunch of plankton do that would lead to eternal damnation?

Maybe this isn’t hell after all.

But there’s no way I can be in the other place.

* * *

When someone dies, the living murmur reassurances to each other. *He’d want you to go on living your life*, they say. *She loved you so much, she’d want you to let go.*

I never believed that. I thought if I died, I wouldn't want my loved ones to enjoy life without me. I'd want them to hurt, to burn with grief, to rage at their God about the injustice. I'd want strangers to know my name, and be sad.

I was wrong. It's the remembering that matters. You who are left can be happy, love whoever you want, and spread joy everywhere if that's your thing. Just don't forget us. Talk to us, write to us; reminisce about the good bits, forgive us the bad bits.

Perhaps my niece is speaking to me now. *Remember that time you took us apple picking, and we ate cider donuts and your shoe got stuck in horse manure?*

I did good things too.

* * *

I'm getting the hang of the other souls. I can mostly tell which ones are people, and which ones are mammals or birds or insects. If you want to avoid them, like the swarms of plankton and viruses, you can focus elsewhere and you drift away from them. Otherwise, you can connect for a while. Some share a lot of memories, some trickle only a few back and forth, and some just seem to enjoy the companionship. Whenever I connect, I share a memory of Emmett, putting him out there like a Wanted poster and watching for a glimmer of recognition.

A lot of them still avoid me, particularly the plants and trees. At first, I thought it was personal. Could they tell? Not exactly what I did, but that I'm a bad person?

Then I thought there might be some kind of clock speed for different species. Just like it was overwhelming for me to be among the plankton, perhaps the plants have a hard time with beings that run around all over the place. It would be like us trying to meld with a mosquito.

But now I realize it's because of our deep-seated conviction that hu-

mans are superior to other species, particularly plant life. I think they sense that.

I know now that this isn't hell. Not with oak trees and spider ferns and ants and sheep and humans from up and down the scale of virtue. And nobody's in charge. Once again I've been cheated of my punishment. How can I atone when nobody acknowledges my sins?

But if this isn't hell, then Hannah might be here. I imagine her soul—pure and curious and joyful—and try to silence the rustle of hope. I haven't earned it.

I find myself linking with a bear. I sink deeply into the memory it's sharing and we're there together, at the side of a river, ripping the head off a wriggling salmon and feeling the sweet flesh slide down our gullet. Another bear approaches, cuffs the fish from our claws, and runs off with it. We dwell a moment in the defeat.

I let the memory of Hannah flow toward my companion.

She's in the tiny bedroom we've converted into her playroom. I'm next door and I hear her clearly.

—Mama, I can't reach it.

—I'll be there in a minute, angel.

—It's too high.

—I said I'll be there. Just wait.

—I want to play with it.

—Stop it! Play with something else for a minute.

I pull away, cutting off the memory. I sense the bear's momentary confusion, which changes to indifference as it floats away.

For a while, a long while, I don't mix much, and when I do I share only the safe and the mundane. It's two doves that finally release the memory. They're irresistible as they pass—their love radiates like a beacon. They must have been traveling together for a long time, as I can't tell whose memories are whose. I bask in their mutual devotion as we float together, and eventually I lower my guard and feel the memory ease out.

—*Mama, I can't reach it.*

Annoyed at the interruption but realizing she's not going to stop, I end my delaying tactics and go to the playroom. I open the door just in time to see the huge bookcase—the one we'd proudly installed a few days earlier, after painting it yellow and eggshell blue to match the room, the one we hadn't yet secured to the wall despite our best intentions—toppling forward with Hannah clinging to a shelf.

It was a fluke, it caught her wrong, it was nobody's fault—people tried to be helpful. But Emmett thought it was his fault, and I knew it was mine.

I stay awhile with the doves. I know they have no understanding of playrooms and bookcases, but every soul knows the pain of loss.

* * *

There aren't many animals that judge others like humans do. *You're worthy; you're not worthy.* The other primates, dogs, and chickens with their pecking order. And cats, definitely cats.

* * *

How can this go on forever? I was tortured with a long, undeserved lifetime after Hannah's and Emmett's were cut short. Gray, numb years of pointless distraction, trying to erase the technicolor memories of line dancing with Emmett, both of us ending up in a hopeless heap of laughter. Trying to forget the pure timbre of Hannah's squeal as my

lips blew a raspberry against her bare stomach.

Forever has no closure.

I'm spending time with a woman who jumped from a bridge after her second husband left her. I find her presence reassuring, as it eliminates any last doubt that Emmett can be here too. She seems to find relief in Emmett's story, so we share my memory of him often. I'm hoping repetition will make it easier to face.

Over and over, I watch him blame himself for not fixing the bookcase to the wall. I see the tears on his cheeks and hear the refrain.

—*It's my fault. It's all my fault.*

I don't correct him.

Hell is what I'm carrying around until I let Emmett know the truth.

* * *

Sometimes I'll help a newly arrived soul, even though it's demanding work. They're disoriented and defensive, like I was, and I try to share happy, everyday memories of Hannah to put them at ease.

It's hard to keep track of time. One day my niece and her family will be here too.

Not too soon, I hope.

* * *

It happened.

I'd been traveling with four other souls. Others had joined and left, but we were a core and we knew most of each other's lives. One soul was sharing a memory of a languid afternoon love affair when mine just

popped out.

We're in the spare room, as it doesn't feel right to use the bed where I sleep with my husband. Hannah's in her playroom next door and believes this man who visits her house when Daddy's away is an electrician. We have to be quiet. I'm stroking his stomach, which is tan and hairless and nothing like Emmett's patches of dark curls, when I hear her call.

—Mama, I can't reach it.

—I'll be there in a minute, angel.

We smile and his lips brush my cheek before finding their way to my mouth.

—It's too high.

I pull back from the kiss.

—I said I'll be there. Just wait.

—I want to play with it.

—Stop it! Play with something else for a minute.

But the mood has broken, and with a grunt of frustration I unlock the door and go to the playroom.

I stay with her while he calls 911, though we both know it won't help. I make him leave before the ambulance arrives.

What I did was a sin in just about every religion there is. Maybe I can persuade myself that it didn't lead to Hannah's death—that if I'd gone to her when she first called, I would still have been too late. Or if I'd been alone, if the affair had never happened, I would have been downstairs in the kitchen, or in the bathroom, and I would have reached her

even later.

But sins of omission have consequences too.

If I'd told Emmett the truth about that day, he could have blamed me instead of himself. He could have been furious, left me, chosen to stay alive.

If. If.

The memory spreads through the group and I feel soothing emotions flowing my way. I don't deserve that. I wrench myself apart, feeling a resistance from the others before our connection fractures and I'm free.

I'm alone for years, eons—not remembering, not thinking, not worthy of company.

* * *

There's something resting with me. I probe. It's something small that moves between the underground and the light. I sink into its memories and I'm flooded with smells—sweet, pungent, rotten, musty. I recognize the pleasant aromas of bread and apple, and others that would have nauseated me if I were alive. For this creature there's no difference. It's all information: an alert announcing sustenance, a calibration revealing the level of freshness or decay. My own memories—all of them—flow freely to my companion, joining a kaleidoscope of experience from a million other lives. This is an ancient soul.

You'd think it would be overwhelming for a small mind, but there seems no limit to what a soul can absorb when it renders no judgment.

* * *

I've stopped looking for Emmett. One day I will meet him again, and Hannah, but I feel no urgency. Like Schrodinger's cat, there's no way

to know whether Emmett has seen the memory yet. But it's out there, spreading from soul to soul throughout eternity, so you could say in theory he already knows. And because he knows—now, soon, or in the distant future (here, it's all the same)—I can make peace with my actions and Emmett's reaction, whatever it may be.

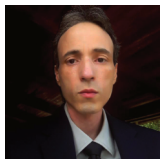
It's becoming easier to connect with all kinds of creatures. Sometimes I relish the short-lived blaze of microscopic life, and other times I appreciate the patience of a being that lived hundreds of years. And after they leave, they're still a part of me.

I can sense humans a long way off now. I spend the longest with people from my own era, as the memories make more sense and I enjoy

the flash of recognition of places I've visited, though I've yet to meet anyone who knew me when I was alive. I've seen family groups—daughters and mothers and great-great grandmothers across the generations, bridged by overlapping memories of each other. When I find Emmett and Hannah, I think we should do that.

I feel a nudge and open myself to a new companion. We immerse ourselves in a memory of alighting on the branch of a cottonwood tree and preening our feathers to a smooth sheen. We join a chorus of cawing and launch into the clear air above the prairie, flying at the edge of the flock, part of the larger whole yet also separate and distinct. We glide on an upstream current, just for the joy of it, and savor the warmth of sunlight on our wings.

Contributors



J.W. BODDEN is an LGBTQ+ speculative fiction writer from Tegucigalpa, Honduras. When not prepping for doomsday, he's a dog dad, content creator, and unapologetic wanderer of alternate worlds. You can find him on X: @jwbodden and Bluesky: @jw-bodden.bsky.social.

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KELLY BOWEN (she/her/hers) is a musician turned multi-genre writer. Her penchant for the stage evolved to performing stories, which spawned publications - Speculative fiction: *Bards and Sages Quarterly*. Memoir: *Transformation; The Whole Alphabet*. Poetry: *Synonyms for Living Anthology; Dialogue; A Year in Ink*, Vol 15 & Vol 17; *Poet's Underground*; the *San Diego Poetry Annual*, 2020-2021 & 2022-2023 & 2023-2024. Relentless driven, when not writing, she can be found shopping her first novel, throwing pottery, teaching yoga and enjoying nature. Kellybowenarts.com.

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ELOU CARROLL writes spooky, whimsical, and strange stories. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Deadlands*, *Baffling Magazine*, *FOUND #2*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly* and others. When she's not hoarding skeleton keys and whispering with ghosts, she can be found editing *Crow & Cross Keys*, publishing all things dark and lovely, and loitering on instagram (@keychilde / @keydoesbookstuff), bsky (@keychild.bsky.social) and the website formerly known as twitter (@keychild). She keeps a catalogue of her weird little word-creatures on www.eloucarroll.com.



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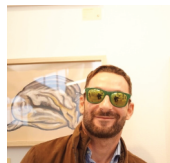
M.C. CHILDS' poems have appeared in many magazines and collections, and won awards from the Speculative Fiction Poetry Association. Prof. Childs' award-winning urban design books include *Foresight and Design*, *The Zeon Files: Art and Design of Historic Route 66 Signs*, *Urban Composition*, and *Squares: A Public Space Design Guide*.

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EMMIE CHRISTIE's work includes practical subjects, like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects, like unicorns and affordable healthcare. Her novel *A Caged and Restless Magic* debuted February 2024. She has been published in *Factor Four Magazine*, *Small Wonders*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. She also narrates short stories and loves bringing stories to life out loud as well as on the page. Find her at www.emmiechristie.com, her monthly newsletter, or BlueSky.

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VINCENZO COHEN is an Italian multidisciplinary social artist. He graduated in Painting from Fine Arts Academy and subsequently achieved the degree in Archaeology from "La Sapienza" University in Rome. His production revolves around issues related to social and environmental justice.

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ANDY DIBBLE writes from Madison, Wisconsin and works as a healthcare IT consultant. He has supported the electronic medical record of large health-care systems in six countries. His work appears in *Writers of the Future*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Mysterion*, and others. He edited *Strange Religion: Speculative Fiction of Spirituality, Belief, & Practice*. You can find him at andydibble.com.

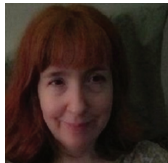
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JACKIE FENN writes speculative fiction, sci-fi and technology thrillers, informed by her experience as a professional futurist and emerging technology analyst. She loves exploring the logical implications of speculative story elements, be they future technologies, superpowers, visiting aliens, or the afterlife. In her debut thriller *Gone Viral* (written as J.A. Knight), a computer science graduate accidentally unleashes a weapon of mass manipulation and must outsmart his own creation before it falls into the hands of forces who will stop at nothing to control it.

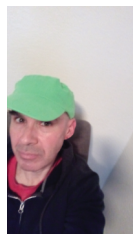
When not writing, Jackie enjoys martial arts, walking her dog Dexter, making spreadsheets, and researching the mysteries of the human mind. Find her at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jackie-fenn-6567183/>.

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GWYNNE GARFINKLE lives in Los Angeles. She is the author of a novel (*Can't Find My Way Home*) and two collections (*Sinking, Singing* and *People Change*), all published by Aqueduct Press. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in such publications as *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy*, *Uncanny*, *Escape Pod*, and *Not One of Us*.

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My name is **ANDREW GRABER** and I was born and raised in the United States of America. Besides creating art, I also like to write short stories and poems.

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HANNAH GREER's work has appeared in *PseudoPod*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Radon Journal*, and more. She's a first reader for *Fusion Fragment*, hoards books, and competes in combat sports. She resides in North Carolina with her partner, and her home is run by a trio of cats, a small flock of pigeons, and several geckos. Find her on Bluesky [@hannahgreer.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@hannahgreer.bsky.social) or on her website, hannahgreer.carrd.co

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PAULA HAMMOND is a professional writer & artist based in Wales. Her fiction has been nominated for the Eugie Award, the Pushcart Prize, and a BSFA award. Her new Sherlock Holmes collection *Eliminate the Impossible* is available now from MX Publishing. She would be delighted if you could share pictures of puppies with her on twitter [@writer_paula](https://twitter.com/writer_paula)

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MICHELLE HARTMAN is the author of four poetry books, four chapbooks, the most recent a winner of the John and Miriam Morris Memorial Chapbook Contest. Her work has appeared in *Crannog*, *Galway Review*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Penumbra*, *Poem*, *Southwestern American Review*, *Carve* and many more. She is the former editor of *Red River Review*, as well as the owner of Hungry Buzzard Press.

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BRIAN D. HINSON abandoned an unfulfilling career in 1999 to take up part-time work and visit 40-some countries in the backpacker fashion. He slowed life even further to settle in rural New Mexico, USA with his wife and three pit bulls to write science fiction. Short story “Disposable Gabriel,” in December 2023 *Cast of Wonders*, made Nerds of a Feather’s recommendation list for the 2024 Hugo. “Distance and Family and Death” is featured in *Amazing Stories’ Best of 2024*. Other stories in *Pseudopod*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *On Spec Magazine*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Hyphen Punk*, and more. <https://www.briandhinson.com>

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E.J. KAVOUNAS is a Los Angeles-based writer whose fiction appears in *Infinite Worlds*, *Uncharted Magazine*, and *Amazing Stories* including in their Best of 2024 anthology. An investment banker turned investor and producer, his credits include the feature film *Hero Mode* (streaming on STARZ) and the audio drama *Broken Road* on Apple and Spotify. He holds a BA in English Literature from Middlebury College and an MBA from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He is also a graduate of the Odyssey and Bread Loaf workshops. With a penchant for outdoor adventures, you can catch him on the trails in the Santa Monica Mountains or at [Recursor.tv/about-ej-kavounas](https://recursor.tv/about-ej-kavounas). Follow him on Instagram @ejkavounas10.

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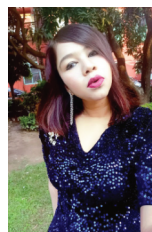
RICHARD MAGAHIZ tries to live an ordered life in harmony with all things natural and created but one that follows unexpected paths. He's spent much of his time wrangling computers as a day job but now when he's not making music he is writing specula-

tive and mainstream poems. This he has written for over twenty years, and has received nominations for Rhysling, Dwarf Stars, Pushcart, and Best of the Web awards. His chapbook collection *The Reducing Flame* was published in 2025. His website is at <https://zeroatthebone.us/>.

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MIKE MORGAN was born in London, but not in any of the interesting parts. He moved to Japan at the age of 30 and lived there for many years. Nowadays, he's based in Iowa, and enjoys family life with his wife and two young children. If you like his writing, be sure to check out his website: <https://PerpetualStateofMildPanic.wordpress.com> or follow him on Blue Sky, where he is: <https://bsky.app/profile/cultvmike.bsky.social>.

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CAMELLIA PAUL has a Masters in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University, India with specialisation in Canadian literature and translation studies. She is also a member of the Association of Canadian Studies in Ireland. She has recently presented award-winning research on “Bengal owlscapes” in an international conference at Chungbuk National University, South Korea. Camellia currently works as a Senior Instructional Designer in an ed-tech multinational ed-tech MNC. Prior to this, she has worked in print media and publishing houses of international repute, and been part of various academic translation projects. Her works of translation, fiction, and nonfiction have been published by *The Antonym* and *San Antonio Review*, and *Pink Disco Magazine*. She is an award-winning visual artist with her poetry and art regularly appearing in books and magazines, as well as online journals like *The Fabulist*, *Livewire*, *San Antonio Review*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Solstitia*, *The Fantastic Other*, among others. She also has published photographs in *The Telegraph*, *Kolkata*, *The City Key*, and *Setu*. She has designed academic book covers and posters for international conferences, published by educational and research institutes, such as Sahitya Akademi, Jadavpur University, and Ashoka University. She

has recently won the “Best Artist Award” from KPR International (India, Bangladesh, and Nepal). As an independent practitioner of the visual arts and photography, she extensively works on the interface of narratives from the everyday in a pre- and post-pandemic world across rural and urban spaces. Apart from being passionate about Nature, art, and owls, Camellia loves reading, listening to music, and exploring cultures. Contact email: casperpeace@gmail.com

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BRIAN MALACHY QUINN uses watercolors, pen and ink, digital media, block prints, and etchings. As an artist he has won 23 international juried awards in last 26 months and sold 45 illustrations to date. He has always created art since early childhood. His style can be surreal for speculative fiction or literary fiction, or realistic for his fallback of lion paintings. He is compelled to create art and does so every day and finds it as a way to put aside his worries and stresses and produce "good brain chemicals". His online portfolio is at brianquinnstudio.com, and he is open to all projects.

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ASHLEY ABIGAIL GRUEZO RESURRECCION (siya/they) is a Filipina Asian-American, certified 200-Hour Yoga Teacher, and Returned United States Peace Corps Volunteer (Thailand 130) who graduated from Seton Hill University with a MA in Art Therapy. Art therapy is their instrument for healing the weights of cultural somatic impressions and empowering their communities. @twiichii X <https://twiichii.wordpress.com/>

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest

book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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RITIKSHA SHARMA is a person. She enjoys scribbling and doodling. Her work has appeared in *Illustrated Worlds Magazine*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *The Stygian Lepus Magazine*, and *Journ-E: The Journal of Imaginative Literature*. Some of her poetry is forthcoming in the *Illustrated Horror Poetry Anthology* curated by Graveside Press. Reach out to her on X @ritzisharmaa.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award® and Elgin Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *The Gravity of Existence*, and with Geneve Flynn, Lee Murray, and Angela Yuriko Smith, *Tortured Wounds: Bent, Bowed, Unbroken*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect @christinasng.

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D.A. XIAOLIN SPIRES steps into portals and reappears in sites such as NY, Hawai’i, various parts of Asia and elsewhere, with her keyboard appendage attached. Her work appears in publi-

cations such as *Clarkesworld*, *Analog*, *Uncanny*, *Escape Pod* and anthologies such as *Make Shift*, *Ride the Star Wind* and *Life Beyond Us*. Select stories can be read in German, Spanish, Vietnamese, Estonian, French and Japanese translation. Her stories have been selected for *The Year's Top Robot and AI Stories*, *Year's Best Hardcore Horror*, *The Year's Top Hard Science Fiction Stories* and *The Year's Top Tales of Space and Time Stories*. Her poetry has been nominated for the Dwarf Star, Rhysling, Best of the Net and Pushcart Awards. Her sci-fi novella *Ellipses* will be published in 2026 by Infinivox SF. She can be found on Bluesky: <https://spires.bsky.social> and on her website: daxiaolin-spires.wordpress.com.

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TAMIKA THOMPSON is author of *The Curse at Hester Gardens*. A former journalist and producer, she is also author of *Unshod*, *Cackling*, and *Naked*, which is the 2024 Next Generation Indie Book Awards Winner for Horror, as well as author of *Salamander Justice*. Her work has appeared in several speculative fiction anthologies as well as in *Interzone*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among others. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she hosts her own blog and newsletter, *Tamika Talks Terror*. Visit her online at tamikathompson.com.



The Return to Tomorrow

by Brian Malachy Quinn
(full image)