

penumbric

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Interview with

Jamal Hodge

Rising writer, filmmaker,
and writer again

plus

Avra Margariti • Alicia Hilton • Amelia Gorman • Christina Sng • Mary Soon Lee • Joseph Carrabis • Gerri Leen • Donna J. W. Munro • Carl Scharwath • Gordon Sun • Toshiya Kamei • Andrew Rucker Jones • David A. Hewitt • Marge Simon • Peter J. King • Rickey Rivers Jr. • Denny E. Marshall • Andrew Gruber • SaQuan Ellison • Lenore Sagaskie • Jesper Nordqvist



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

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

AS WE APPROACH the holidays amidst the ongoing and reinvigorated Covid pandemic, some of us are surviving by adding equal parts hope to anxiety, countering fear with philosophy, and excising religious Far Rightism with spirituality. Some of us (ok, me, at least) find this almost works most of the time, albeit it is imperfect—the hope of vaccines and booster shots struck sideways by crazy new virus variants, the hope of a new US administration made helpless by its own self-serving members and the legacy of a far right Supreme Court, the advance of human rights ignored as parts of the US try to regress to a White White Christmas as only exists in imaginations, while immigrants, refugees, and groups within our own country fight to retain their rights despite the ghost of Donald Trump spitting on us all, a terrible parody where Scrooge never changes and cares not a whit about Tiny Tim or anyone else crushed beneath his golden carriage wheels. Yet, despite the darkness all around, hope and spirit and thought can light a few candles, and if enough of us light them, we can at least see one another in the night, can perhaps see that there is a path, a link between us that can help us win through.

To that end, somehow this issue's theme bends toward those very things—philosophy, spirit, and maybe a little hope—even though I didn't set out for any theme at all, really. I imagine the inspiration may have come from author/director Jamal Hodge, whom we interviewed for this issue and whose story is deep, intriguing, and inspiring. He tells us not only of how he got to this point (writing/directing award-winning films, including *Mourning Meal*, based on a Linda Addison poem, and creating his own written works, including poetry featured in this issue) but also his philosophy behind it all (or one could say philosophies, or certainly guiding principles).

We move on to the works in this issue, including tales that seem

almost legends in Mary Soon Lee's "The Dead" and David A. Hewitt's "The Canticle of Chak Thel" (there is perhaps a bit of hope in the one and none in the other ... or perhaps the other way round). We find new life in Rickey Rivers Jr.'s "Me-birth" and Avra Margariti's "All Our Mothers," albeit that life may be a little different than anticipated, as it is in Alicia Hilton's "My Son Breathes Fire." And where there is life, there is likely death and its ramifications, as in Lenore Sagaskie's "The Remaining One" and Peter J. King's "Longing," or literally in "Four Horsemen of the Happy Hour" by Donna J. W. Munro, or more metaphorically in Amelia Gorman's "Subsume/Submerse." There are religious overtones in Christina Sng's "One Dark Night," Joseph Carrabis' "Sema," Gerri Leen's "Slither," and Andrew Rucker Jones' "There Was No Apple When Mankind Fell," with consequences in all. And, again, hope, as in Toshiya Kamei's "Making Amends." We end with Gordon Sun's "Car Chat" and, of course, Jesper Nordqvist's *Mondo Mecho*, taking us back to a somewhat lighter world ... maybe.

The artwork presented in this issue follows the same themes. *The Light* by Carl Scharwath seems full of the hope of new beginnings, while Andrew Gruber's *Untitled* is more abstract and unsettling, and *Oval Mummies* by Denny E. Marshall speaks, perhaps, to the end, as does SaQuan Ellison's *Final Departure*. Marge Simon's *Adam and the Egg*, where placed, seems to reference both religion and beginnings (although what religion doesn't?). And Cat Scully's beautiful cover reaches for the stars, whilst both ending and (potentially) beginning again in *Dissolve*.

Of course, I may be minded to interpret these pieces in these ways due to my state of mind this particular year and this particular season—for you the puzzle may fit together differently, the themes explored

covering different ground. But on the whole, I think you'll find they fit together quite well, as a group both compelling and inspirational.

Enjoy, think, and hopefully the flawed perfection (to take a paraphrase from Jamal Hodge) of these works will give you the keys to exist well in this strange, imperfect world we're living in, and to

begin the new year with renewed strength, whether there be more bugbears around the corner or not.

Jeffrey Georgeson

Managing Editor

Penumbric

Flawed Around Perfection

The philosophy and life of speculative writer/filmmaker Jamal Hodge

WE FIRST MET JAMAL HODGE as an amazing poet who submitted work to us in the early days of the new Penumbric—but he's far more than that. He's been directing and producing award-winning films for many years, in addition to writing poetry and stories and generally giving back to his community. We spoke with him just after wrapping the production of Under Thy Wings, his latest film, and our interview starts there, but then goes deep into his past, present, and future ...

* * *

Yeah, just just just finished it. It's always a great thing to get one of those things done. It takes so



PICTURED: Jamal Hodge at The People's Film Festival

"PAIN BELONGS TO US ALL"



PICTURED: Awards poster for *Mourning Meal*

much, and it almost feels like ... it almost feels impossible. (laughs)

Yeah, when you start out, it can seem like an overwhelming project. There's this to do, and that to do, and another thing ...

It's magical, you know? It's a certain sense of completion that you just don't get from most other things. Even though the road is still long, [and] I'm going to have to live with this thing for a while, it's great to get it done and have something ready to put out into the world.

Are you done with the editing yet, or ...?

No. We just got out of production, so ... It's so weird, because it's so hard to get into production, but then it's so hard, once you're actually out of it, to finish the movie. But production's the hardest thing, because you're dealing with people, so many people, and if something goes wrong with any of those people, your project is fucked. So it's like you have to get out of the 'what if' phase, you know, where you're susceptible to all the fuckery.

So is it Necessary Evil that you just finished?

No, it's a different film. We just finished that, too, earlier this year. We finished a series of two or three other things.

So you keep yourself busy!

Yeah, always. I've got a book that I'm finishing up, too, a poetry collection about animals; it's also about col-

laboration, because nature's about collaboration, so all the poems in it I co-wrote with Lee Murray, Linda Addison, Michael Bailey ... a bunch of cool people. Christina Sng, Angela Yuriko Smith. All these people ... (laughs) I'm trying to get Josh Malerman, too, because I'm trying to make it ... there's a lot of poems we did in combination, and a lot of poems I did by myself, all about animals, animals as metaphor for something else in human society, and then I'm combining it with an essay or a quote from either a philosopher that uses animals, the same animal, that follows the poem, or a statement that I made about a fun fact that's really bizarre about the animal. So it's also shock value, horror-shock education ... it's really unique. It's weird, but it works.

Is that Life According to Death?

No. That is a very personal book that is built of the four seasons, but the seasons are my life; it's about my journey from darkness to light. Raw Dog Screaming Press is looking at it right now, John Morrison and them. We'll see if they say yes. They seem to be good supporters and they seem to like my work, so ...

Cool!

I have another one called *Worlds of Great Mortality*, which is probably the greatest thing I've ever written. It's a combination of short stories with poems, [and] it's a journey through the two great mysteries of space and death. It takes you from the beginning of the universe, to the sun, to Mercury, Venus, Earth, until you get to the outer planets, and then you go beyond. There's a poem for every planet, and a short story accompanying that poem for every planet. And the asteroid belt is a bunch of little poems that hit you at random with random themes. It's like you're going through some physical journey through the universe, but you're getting all these different genres. It's technically, I guess you would say, speculative. It's sci fi but it's also horror, it's also drama, comedy, and fantasy all in one, so it's a crazy book.

Wow. So do you have a preferred genre that you work in? I know that

the poems that I've seen of yours, they can be science fiction but also horror, or ...

Sci fi and horror, I would say ... sci fi, horror, and urban. ... Magical realism, I guess you'd say. Which is like saying speculative, but in an urban setting.

Yeah, that's why I tend to just call it all speculative.

Because I don't really know. It's almost like, I'm given things, and I just go with it. I don't see myself as being that in control of what I'm given. ... It's not me, I'm just a channel for things, and it passes through the lens that is my personal experiences, personality, and stuff like that. And then it comes out into the world flawed. Somebody told me something great about filmmaking that there's only one perfect film, but it can never be made, because everybody's flawed. So there's only one way to make a perfect film, and you can never really make it, because what makes your style as an artist is actually how you do things wrong; that's actually what creates your style. Style is just about how you do things wrong ... not wrong, but flawed, flawed around perfection. So I was like, hmm, that's interesting.

Yeah, that's really interesting.

It's kinda true. It's like, oh, if there's a perfect book, and you wrote the perfect book, it would be the exact same book. It's the flaws that make it. It's kind of like, some people believe spiritually we've come here so that we have limitations, because without the body there are no limitations, and that can become a form of stagnation, you know? And limitations are what make life special. The limits of life, the boundaries, the boundaries create identity, you know? So it's very interesting to explore.

That's why I say me, with my whole method, about how I approach ... I don't judge what I'm given, I just go with it, I try to do it without thought, and then once it's out on the page, when I do my edits, then I think about it. What's this, what's here? I do that because I realized, for me, it's better to know what you're not than what you are. It's

better to know what you're not doing. It's more important to know what you're not making than what you're actually making.

That's interesting. So sort of like the white space on the page is at least as important as what you're actually writing on the page?

Well, kind of. It's more like, when you try to dominate and control, you become blinded, you become judgmental ... it's better to know what you won't do than what you will do in any given situation. If I know I will not steal, then no matter what situation I end up in, whether I'm hungry, starving, whatever, I'm still not gonna steal. I don't know what I will do in every situation, I just need to know what I won't do. It really defines who I am. And it's the same thing with art, and with a film, with making any form of creativity. If you know like, hey, in this film, it's an intimate film, so we won't live on wide shots in this film. Now that we know we're not doing that, now we can be free within the boundaries of those limitations to do anything we want. So limitations create freedom. It's a paradox. I also find that in art, it's the same way. It's like ... I don't know what this poem is, I'm not gonna judge it, I just absorb it, and it's all about this horror stuff. I know I'm not making a love poem. I'm not writing a feel-good book. This book is about revelations, and making the audience feel a sense of accountability on life. So once I know that, I know what I'm not making, and I'm free to do whatever I want to within the context of that, and the story can go anywhere that it goes.

It sounds like a good philosophy.

Yeah.

So do you end up with the idea for a film or a poem and then write it all out and then go into editing it, or do you edit as you go along?

I think it's better to get to the end before you pass judgment. Especially with poetry it's better to do that. With screenplays I just write the dialogue first. I don't write what the characters are doing. I write the setting where they are, and I just write dialogue: what are they saying to each other? I don't elaborate on what they're doing.

The Big Chill

Entropy thins
the stars to atoms.

Heat surrenders
as the heavens dim.

Mind,
emancipated from body,
sprout shadow worlds
of a singular idea,

Orbiting concepts,
sung without lips,
to empty galaxies.

It's almost like a play: What are they saying? Because in film we can't see what's going on behind the curtain of a person. All we can see is what the character says, does, or doesn't do to define who they are. Everything else is based on the shots you use and on actual subconscious, which is what the art direction does. So a lot of the history of a character and who the person is is in their environment, and then that affects the subconscious mind, tells the story to them subconsciously.

On the written page, you can get into the mind and the soul. You can get into the inner life of the character. There's a level of intimacy you can't really have in film. You just can't. Stage even gets closer than film, because you have that human-to-human natural connection where you emote. While they are emoting, you can feel that physically. You try to create that artificially in film with shots, but it's never quite the same as when a human is on stage talking and you're watching them have these things, you are picking up their emotion, you can feel it more.

A book is the most interactive form of art, because people bring their own experiences to the book. Anybody who reads the same book is going to have a very different experience based on where they are in their life, who they are in life; they bring all of that to the book, to the character. They're very intimate. I feel like books are very special. I feel like in poems, if it's done right, it can be like an entire book in a moment, you know, and that's what I'm trying to achieve, that experience, that feeling, because when you finish a book you leave with a feeling, right?

Everything that I do, and you know this from my poetry, is I'm trying to create a feeling, I know the feeling that we're going for, like this is going to be a feeling of outrage at the end, or fear, or disturbance. Whatever the feeling might be, I start with a feeling, and then I always try to include a question, either about reality, God, ourselves, our mates ... whatever the case may be, there's always going to be a question and a revelation. So my method is a question, a revelation, and a feeling. I think [if you] give the audience all three, there's no way you can have a mediocre experience. You know what I'm saying? So that's my philosophy, my method to all the art that I do. There's always a moment of a feeling, or I like to show the paradox of the truth, like how light comes out of darkness and darkness comes out of light a lot of the time. Light tends to even come out of the

darkness. People set out to do harm, but out of their awful actions, some of the World's most beautiful things have been created. It's almost taboo to take this into account, but the reality is most artists of antiquity and even in modern times are imperfect, tortured people, fragmented in essential parts who are using art to find their hope again, their love, and even their souls to make themselves whole. I think it's better to understand this than to quickly move to cancel people who are putting beauty in the world.

We don't tend to remember that.

Nothing great is ever achieved without suffering, and sometimes even death, and most of the time the artist, or the person, or the tyrant who is trying to create those things, the person ... they have to motivate people toward suffering, and to motivate people toward suffering, sometimes you're not going to be a good person. ...

And then you have the other side of the coin where so much darkness comes out of people trying to do good, like the Buddhist statement of how whenever you solve one problem, you create two more. You see it all the time; every time you solve a problem, you create two more.

It's like the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Yeah. And you see that in the world. So many of the horrors of the world that we have to deal with started from our ancestors, who believed they were just trying to do good, either for the world, themselves, their families, their race, whatever, In the name of this 'greater good' they taught that the ends justify the means, that [to do] great grand work, you have to do these small evils, but the problem is that the trajectory of evil escalates in perpetuity over time.

It's kind of like you have two points on the line; basically being honest or being good is like you're going from this point to that point, and no matter how long the distance is on the line, it hits the target. Badness or wrongness or evil, it's only evil because it's off the line, so let's say you want to get to the same point, and if evil is a little off the line, you're not going to notice it at first, but if you keep

Colony

The red soil of Mars
cannot truly be our home
until one man kills another.
Preferably, for no reason,
other than,
it's the earthiest thing,
an earthman
can do.

on going over time, it misses the mark more and more and more. That's why it's not good to lie, because a lie is like that. It might seem harmless, but over time it just gets bigger and bigger and bigger whether you notice or not. A lot of people, they meant well, but ... "Oh, we have to do this. Now, we have to kill people. Oh, now we have to kill a lot of people. Oh, now ..." It just keeps on ... [and] you're just trying to maintain this idea of this good that you're trying to do. So a lot of darkness comes out of light. Like they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, right?

I was just thinking that. It's like keeping a secret for the good of

somebody else, or you think it's for the good of somebody else, and that leads to having to hide more things, and then you have to hide something else ...

And now you're a co-conspirator, and now you're bearing the weight of this burden ... It just adds up, and it's just bad, you know, it's just really bad. After a while, people can't do it anymore.

* * *

I watched Mourning Meal ...



PICTURED: The soup scene from *Mourning Meal*

What did you think of it?

It's a great film! It's really visually striking, the acting is really good. What struck me most, actually, and this is probably going to sound strange, but it seemed like even what many people would take to be the background sounds, like the chair moving along the floor, when the child is eating, the clanking of the spoon in the bowl, and then also the music, these all seemed at least as important as the dialogue.

It was. It was more important. I was trying to experiment ... this was based off a poem, and I was trying to do certain things with time and with sound, because I wanted less dialogue. I don't believe in a lot of dialogue in my movies. I mean, some people are dialogue-heavy in their films, [but] I feel like I want to show, not tell, and I'm more about feeling sometimes, even when the information can sometimes be a problem because sometimes you need more information. So I'm trying to get better about that, but I definitely am all about mood, atmosphere, and the feeling that the audience is getting in the moment. That's what you remember is how you felt. And I was trying to make a real horror movie about loss; I wanted the movie to be painful to watch. It's not a movie that's easy to watch, on purpose.

Right.

I wanted it to be painful to watch. Some people get mad because they're only used to being entertained when they watch something. They're not used to a film hurting them. Or they get outraged seeing themselves in such a despicable, broken human being. And they get mad at me for showing them that.

They get mad at you?

Yeah. They get mad. Some people walked out on the film. Some older people, they just couldn't take it. It's really intense. I designed it for that. I tell people, if nobody walks out on the film I'll be disappointed, I'll have failed as an artist. I wanted to disturb people, I wanted to hurt people, I want you to be mad after you watch it but then, forty-eight hours later, think, "You know, that was a great

movie. I really felt something and I understood where it was going. It's very fucked up, but, I get it. It was really a horror movie." It wasn't horror/fun/entertaining, it's a horror/horror movie, you know?

And it's not even anything supernatural, or gods or demons in a literal sense or anything. I think part of what makes it so disturbing is that it's just a regular person, basically traveling this road.

Yeah, how people just basically lose their goddamn minds. And it's a reality of life. You know, sometimes people just go insane. It's easy to go insane. People think that it's very hard, but the mind is fragile, sanity is fragile.

Yeah, definitely. So, how did you get into writing and filmmaking and art generally?

I've always been into it, since I was a little kid. I was a writer, you know, I got something published when I was in the fifth or sixth grade, like a rehash of a Cinderella story from an urban perspective. It was published in schools and stuff like that. I've always loved storytelling, I've always been a storyteller, a daydreamer, a wanderer. A person that would talk to everybody.

When I was a little kid, I grew up under harsh conditions. I grew up in the South Bronx during the crack era—80s, early 90s—and eventually we became homeless. So I've seen a lot of crazy things, experienced a lot of crazy things, abuses, being in foster homes, things like that. For a long time, I was a really messed up individual. I was in a gang, I was an enforcer in the gang. I was just doing certain crazy things based around pain and suffering. I wasn't a person that robbed people, nothing like that. I never did anything to anyone who didn't do something to me and my friends, right? I was always looking for the opportunity to hurt people. I really enjoyed it, like my enemies, these made-up enemies in my head, right, because I needed enemies, because I needed somebody to blame for my circumstances.

I went to DCTV [Downtown Community Television Center] for a job, ... I was in the infamous Scared Straight Program where the cops

would take problematic teens to prison and have the worst inmates try to intimidate them into behaving themselves for life lol. It was hilarious, I was taken on my 16th birthday ... it was crazy. It was funny. I was like the tallest kid there, so all the inmates were fucking with me, and I was fucking with them ... it was crazy. But eventually I went to DCTV and storytelling kind of saved me again. I went to Siberia to do a documentary. I was in the two-year extensive training program at DCTV around 15, 16 years old, and I started learning filmmaking, all the aspects of filmmaking. And out there I saw people ... 'cause I used to hate white people, like, a lot when I was a teenager ... I used to hate everybody that was different from me to be honest, except for Asian kids because I grew up on the East Side so I knew a lot of them. But, I went out there and I met people who had come from generational suffering, and I realized I didn't have a monopoly on pain just because I was Black. I made a lot of friends out there; they treated me really well.

I did this documentary looking for this other guy. I was the first searcher for Bigfoot, because there was this Black guy that lived out there, and they would talk about sightings. "Yes, we've seen him, he comes out at night." I was like, what the fuck? [laughs] So I was looking for this guy, this Black guy that was in Siberia just around. But I was cool with a lot of people out there, I would go into people's homes, party with them. And the weird thing about it with them was they had suffered greatly, even more so in a lot of ways. Like their families had been purged, exiled, still living under oppression, so we were able to talk about a lot of different things, and I came back understanding that there were certain evils of mankind that existed all over the world. It wasn't just the American story, right? The world was much bigger than the American story, and there was suffering amongst all peoples of the world. And I had an obligation and a responsibility to tell the truth about that.

I went to Chiapas next, the rebels out there, did a documentary with them. I got an award from the first Hague Appeal For Peace during the Rwanda crisis, from Kofi Annan, we got a citation award for our documentary, ... I had many successes. The first film festival I went to was Sundance. I didn't know what it was. Christopher Nolan had

Memento there—super long time ago, over twenty years ago—and I decided from there that I would tell stories and help people.

I left film for a while to start programs in my community, so I could help my community, help kids, became a licensed mediator, mediated gangs, stopped people from killing each other. I helped kids get into college or get their GEDs when they came out of prison. I left a six-figure income to do that work.

Were you making that kind of money doing the documentaries?

I was working at a company called Teachscape at night, and I was working at DCTV in the day, and on my days off I would go to college ... so I would be working 16-hour days, six days a week, and I'd have one day where I'd work about five hours, and the rest I would rest. I was young, and I was dirt poor—sometimes I would go two or three days without eating, and all of a sudden I'm making a six-figure income. It was weird. It was a giant leap.

Was that a really strange transition to make?

Yeah, it was strange because at the time I didn't have the emotional maturity for a lot of things I felt; I felt guilty about it. I felt guilty that I had so much. I just didn't understand a lot of things. I didn't have a financial education ... I had to learn a lot of things the hard way over the course of my life. But I love who I am now in my life, and I wouldn't be me without all those things that had happened to me.

So, I did that for a long time, I helped some kids. One of my students won Sundance in 2006 for a documentary called *Bullets in the Hood* that I helped shoot ...

Awesome.

... All these different things, and then at some point I did a feature film; it didn't go well. I was like, to Hell with film, I quit for like four years, but then I realized I was helping all these young people to live their dreams, but I wasn't living mine, so I was being a hypocrite. So

I put myself on Death Ground; if I don't figure it out, I'll just starve to death and be homeless [laughs]. And when you do stuff like that, when you burn all the boats, a lot of times good stuff starts to happen. It might take some time, but if you're willing to suffer, if you're willing to accept a certain level of living for a certain time, which I am, I think it's gonna happen. So over the last four or five years, I've started having a lot of success. I directed my first TV show called *Primal Instinct*, which was like number three on cable at its peak, I've been to Cannes twice, I work on my films, I've worked on a multi-million dollar animated movie called *Pierre the Pigeon-Hawk* as a producer. I've also been in 130 or so festivals, and I've won over 60 or 70 awards.

Wow.

Won best director from Chelsea Film Festival, Hip Hop Film Festival, I've shown work at Tribeca, my students have won Tribeca with best student film last year. All these different things in the world of film, I've been doing very well, and now I wanted to get back to my writing, my first love, you know? I have been writing over time, like even in the worst times when I was in the shelters and stuff like that, I used to be able to write stream of consciousness, and I would write whole books in these notebooks. By the time I was sixteen I had written, maybe, fifteen books. I lost that skill by not doing that all the time. But what I ended up gaining was all these different stories and different skill sets, and now, as a poet over the last three years, I've been very successful, I've been nominated for the Rhysling, I received Best of Penumbric [laughs] ...

Yeah! [laughs]



PICTURED: Scene from *Primal Instinct*

... A bunch of times published in *Space and Time Magazine*, published in the first *Star*Line Magazine* for African Americans. I have two short stories [coming out] next year, I'm in the next *Chiral Mad 5* with two different stories. I'm in the HWA showcase as well and the Rhysling this year ... I've been doing really well. Last year in 2020 I was published twelve times, and this year I'm published fifteen times, so I've been doing well. I've blurbed my first book, too. I can't believe [it] ... *Tortured Willows*, the new book from Lee Murray, Genevieve Flynn, Christina Sng, and all, they did the second book in the series that they're doing, and they asked me to blurb it!

That's awesome!

That was crazy. My first blurb! With Stoker winners, you know. That's kinda dope.

And I have another book I blurbed with Cindy O'Quinn, she and Stephanie wrote a book, I'm not even sure I should mention this, but

they asked me to write a blurb, too. So I'm like, "Oh shit, people care about what I have to say in this space. Wow. That's cool."

That's awesome. So in a way you've talked about this, but what do you want to focus on in future? Or are you just going to let it develop?

Nah, I don't let anything develop. You've gotta be intentional to manifest things. I have a big team of support now. I'm working on several big movies, I'm working on a big documentary right now, over a million dollar budget with some names in it, about writers in the South, with Craig Renaud, one of the premiere documentarians of our time. I'm also working on several feature film projects. So my goal is always, has always been to write across mediums. I want to eventually write a play, definitely novels, preferably a musical ... I don't have any idea how I'd do that ...

I wouldn't know how to write a musical at all!

Because I know a lot of people who do these grand musicals, and I'm like, I can do that. It seems like the hardest thing in the world to do, so I'm going to give it a try. Eventually, I'm rich and I don't got shit to do, and I'm like, oh, I want to challenge myself, well, I'll do that.

Then I have a comic book I'll be doing next year, and I have several collections, like I was telling you, one being looked at by a publisher that will remain nameless for now, very positive about that. I want to have five poetry books, ten feature screenplays (I don't need to direct all of them, just to write them) ... it's all like a rule of fives and tens, basically. I want to direct ten feature films, work on five different series, stuff like that. I want to be very eclectic and universal in my storytelling, and the three genres I want to stay in are urban thrillers, horror, inspirational. Those are the themes that I'm good at in my films. Horror, inspirational, and urban thrillers.

Sort of combining those I would think as well.

Sure. Ultimately I'm starting my own business, I want to create a

platform for artists, young people, older people, too. A lot of times, we give a lot of help to the fuck-ups of society. I kind of want to help the people in the middle that are trying to do the right thing, but they just need a leg up. So I'm looking more for that. So yeah. With my writing I'm definitely going to become a novelist. I want to be a novelist and a poet. I want to write my ten novels and my five poetry books and my ten feature screenplays. That's my goal. It might take me twenty years to achieve that, but I already have about three novels written, and I already have about four features, and I have three collections, so it's not gonna take me that long. [laughs]

You're well on your way.

Yeah. It's just about getting it out to the public, let them know I exist, and helping people. I mean, art has to serve a purpose in people's lives. I want my art to really teach people ... I want them to find humanity in places they normally wouldn't look, and to see the truth in themselves and in others, so that they can know that other human beings are just as alive as they are, no matter how wicked, flawed, good, or noble, yeah?

Yeah, that's really cool. So do you have any advice for aspiring artists?

My advice is that you have to be able to accept pain and uncertainty. If you're OK with pain and uncertainty, then it's the right role for you. Everybody's technically an artist, but it doesn't have to be your profession. It can be something that you just do because you love to do it. We're all artists and we should all just exercise that part of our spirit anyway. It doesn't have to be money ... sometimes the money kills the joy in the art. It killed writing for me for a long time, being so worried about whether my stuff's gonna sell or if anybody'd want it prevented me from writing, you know, the judgment ...

Yeah, I've been there.

Yeah, we all go through it. So I just think you've got to be intentional. ... The number one trait of being an artist is courage; you can't be a coward and be a good artist. Every good artist is brave as

hell. And the reason you have to be brave is you have to have the courage to be vulnerable enough to see the truth. So you have to be brave enough to be vulnerable enough to tell the truth. And if you can do that, you understand that pain is the path to happiness, because pain leads to growth, and growth leads to progress, and progress creates happiness. You're really only happy when you're in a state of progress. You can be content without progress, but anytime you're happy, if you think about it, it has to do with some form of progress.

Like finishing up a film and knowing you're moving on to the next stage of that or another film.

Or in a relationship, when you're with your girl. ... It's easy in the beginning because it's easy to make progress with the person. Everything you do you learn more, and they're learning more, and you're always constantly making progress, but after a while, the leaps become smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller, it becomes more and more stagnant. That's true across the board in everything in life. All relationships—you have to be making progress to have happiness. And pain is the beginning of all progress. [laughs] You know what I'm saying? Comfort is the enemy. If you're starting out in art, comfort is the enemy. Comfort leads to death: it leads to stagnation, stagnation leads to decay, and decay leads to death. So if you make yourself too comfortable, you will die. Your skills will entropy. So you have to really embrace pain—not suffering necessarily, but pain and uncertainty have to become your friends. Instead of trying to get out of the blender, just submit to the blender. Stop trying to get out. Sit in that motherfucker and enjoy it. Find the fun in it. You have to be able to embrace that. If you can do all of that, if you can be brave,

if you can understand that it's the difference between danger and fear—like, fear's a choice, danger's a reality, and the cure to danger is experience. It's like having a chainsaw. It's dangerous at first, you don't know how to handle it, but once you have knowledge of the chainsaw, how it works, how to hold it, how to use it, the fear goes away. The danger's still the same, it's that you've changed, because now you have confidence, and confidence comes from knowledge and experience, and that's the cure for danger. You can accept danger when you don't have fear. So if you can do all of those things as an artist, you'll have a hell of a life. You'll experience some of the highest highs and some of the lowest lows that a human being can experience, the whole spectrum of the human experience.

And you can live to tell about it.

That's what people ultimately want: They want the truth, from somebody who feels it. They come to us as artists for the truth. They can't trust their politicians no more, they can't trust their religious leaders no more; we're the last high priests of the modern age, the artists. It's up to us to tell the truth now.

* * *

*You can find Jamal Hodge's poetry in many places—Star*Line Fall 2020, Chiral Mad 5, The 2021 Rhysling Anthology, Penumbric, and more—and his films are gathering awards and nominations all over the place. For information, trailers, and more, go to writerhodge.com, or follow him on Facebook (omegahodge) or Instagram (@directorh).*

The Dead

by Mary Soon Lee

Before the eyes of men,
beneath the eye of the sun,
rode King Xau and his four men.

Ahead, resplendent, in the Lotus Crescent,
at the entrance to King Tahj's palace,
a thousand of Tahj's Royal Guard.

But Tahj's soldiers outnumbered
by the mass of people who had waited,
barefoot, white-robed, since dawn.

In desert heat, King Xau dismounted:
too thin, too pale, thirsty, sandy,
his tunic travel-stained.

No one spoke in all the thousands
as Xau watered the horses,
as he pulled off his boots.

"Baraz," said Xau, the single word
carrying in the stillness, as he took
from a saddlebag a white marble urn.

A man walked out of the crowd,
bearded, stooped, his white robes immaculate.
Behind him, a woman wailed.

Xau gave the urn to the man,
who set it down,
who pressed Xau's hands in his,
who wept, tears drying to salt on his cheeks.
Xau stood, no more than that.
The man said, brokenly, "Baraz,"
lifted the urn and left.

"Jafir," said Xau
as he took from a saddlebag
a second white urn.

A man walked toward him,
heavy, balding, his white robes immaculate.
From the crowd, manyfold, sobbing.

Xau gave the urn to the man,
who set it down,
who kissed Xau's forehead, his cheeks.

"The Dead" first appeared in The Sign of the Dragon, winner of this year's Elgin Award.

Xau stood, no more than that.
He had watched this man's son, Jafir,
kill one of his guards,
could not set that death down,
held it,
sharp,
with the others,
back and back and back
to his father,
whose death Xau had warded by anger
for so long.
Jafir's father lifted the urn
with his son's ashes.

"Nahr," said Xau and took out a third urn.

A man walked over,
tall, beak-nosed, gulping noisily,
white robes crumpled.

Nahr's father set the urn down,
folded Xau in his arms,
Xau whom his son had poisoned,
Xau who had slain his son,
but had let that death slip,

lightly,
a thing of no weight,
no guilt, no cost,
that he would do again
if it would bring back
one of his guards.
Xau shivered, despite the heat,
as Nahr's father held him,
as he lifted the death
he had let slip,
heavy as granite.
Salt on Xau's face.

Sunlight on the burnished splendor
of King Tahj's thousand soldiers.
Of King Tahj himself, no sign.

Xau helped Nahr's father lift the urn,
fastened the saddlebags,
put his boots back on.

"King Xau!" called out a woman
as he mounted his horse,
as the crowd knelt.

The Canticle of Chak Chel

by David A. Hewitt

*I*t's beginning again, in the chamber above.

The others are all gone now, taken away one by one; you are the last. The room is dark. The lamps that once lit up the world at night are gone now. The door is barred from the outside. Its wood is hard; it doesn't chip.

The Canticle begins with the chorus, with all the voices spilling together into one. You cover your ears, but you've heard this too many times; the words echo in the room above but they echo in your mind, too, and clamping your hands, clamping your forearms against your ears doesn't silence them...

#

Chak Chel, sacred Mother

Chak Chel, who brings life

Her hand rules the rivers and all-drinking Sea

Chak Chel watches over each newborn, each child

Every new life that draws breath on this Earth

#

You sit upright on your sleeping-pallet, wide awake. A woman's voice begins the chant, flowing, beautiful:

Always there was the Sea beneath the Sky. The Sea eternal. The Sea that breathes with wind and moon. And in the Sea was life—voiceless life, it did not praise its Makers. It sang no word of praise to the Gods.

And the Gods spoke the name Earth and from the Sea it arose: land rose from the Sea as a great turtle breaks the surface of a lake, rivulets streaming from its many-peaked shell. In the land was life, and the Gods heard the voice of life, but this voice was chaos—chattering, grunting, screeching chaos that did not honor its Makers.

To the land came Chak Chel—her hips broad, her will as relentless as waves beating against the shore, and she bore in her arms a great clay vessel graven with many forms. Chak Chel wandered the land. She saw the rivers and the lakes, and the beasts that drank of their waters.

Then Chak Chel went to the gathering-place of the Gods, a sward of rich green amidst cloud-haunted heights, and She said to the Gods:

“The beasts are abundant, they thrive on the land. But as I walked the land they did not know me. Let us make one final creature, most helpless of all and naked as clay, one who will worship and sacrifice to the Gods.”

Other Gods had walked or soared over the land, and they agreed: the beasts, the trees, the waters, the stones—these did not know their Makers. So Chak Chel's counsel ruled the day. This final creation was man, and Chak Chel watched over his birth. She bathed him in waters from the broad rim of her graven vessel and man was thankful; he swore he would repay the Gods for this gift of life.

* * *

All sing:

Chak Chel, sacred Mother

Chak Chel, who gives life

Her wisdom guides waters ever called to the Sea

Chak Chel watches over each newborn, each child

Every new life that draws breath on this Earth

#

A man's voice, deep, confident:

So humans dwelt in the land, our grandfathers and grandmothers worshipped the Gods, they feared the Gods, and it went well. The land was rich, and in the land were beasts. But the beasts fled like the unseen wind between leaves and through grass; they would not become man's food. The trees sheltered them. The ground hid them. And other beasts hunted man, for he was slow of foot, and his flesh tender.

Then to the Gods of the beasts, to their hidden home in the jungle's sunless heart, came Chak Chel, strong in her youth, face fierce and eyes wide. To the Gods of the beasts She said:

"Look upon man. See his need. Feed him in his hunger; protect him in his weakness."

But Rabbit-God, hiding in the arms of his mother the Moon, said:

"My children will flee from man. My sons and daughters will eat the Earth's fruits, hidden from the eye and safe from the hand of man."

Jaguar-God had long watched man, yellow eyes smoldering, jagged mouth slavering, and He said:

"My sons and daughters will feed on man. They will bedeck their jungle with the bones and blood of man's children."

But Chak Chel spoke again:

"The rabbit is indeed clever and none can match the jaguar's stealth, her grace. But clever as he is, the rabbit does not know his Maker; and though the jaguar's cry is like a thunderclap, she raises no song of praise to the Gods. Humans have wisdom. Protect them; teach them the ways of the beasts. They will praise you and sacrifice to you the rich blood of the hunt, for humans alone fear the Gods."

* * *

You rise in the dark, you ram the door with your shoulder, but it's solid, solid as the walls. An old man's voice from above, trembling with piety:

So the Gods taught humans the ways of the beasts, and our grandfathers and grandmothers worshipped the Gods; they feared the Gods of the jungle and the Gods of the beasts, and it went well. Chak Chel guarded over every birth as man's numbers grew: his children were many, they flourished under Sun and Sky like a river drinking the summer rains. But still they wandered as beasts do in search of food; they lived as beasts live.

Then Chak Chel, her head wrapped in twisted cloth colored like the rainbow, came to Maize-God's sun-dappled palace. Chak Chel spoke to Maize-God:

"Honored Maize-God, look upon man. See his need. He lives in the land, he sings the praises of the Gods, yet still he lives as the beasts live. Grant man mastery over his hunger. Teach him the secrets of planting. Man's mind knows the Gods. Man's heart loves the Gods."

Must men live as the groaning beasts live?"

And Maize-God, tall Maize-God, leaned gently toward Chak Chel, his crest of silken hair like a fountain above her, and He whispered:

"The maize is my beloved child; it obeys only me. I call it forth from the ground, I clothe it in many colors; and when its day is ended, I lay it to sleep in a soft bed of the richest soil."

Then Chak Chel said:

"Maize-God, teach humans the secrets of maize. Teach them and they will guard the maize, they will till the soil and maize will prosper. It will grow in many fields in great abundance and humans will dampen those fields with the blood of sacrifice, to feed and honor the God whose maize nourishes their own children."

* * *

All sing:

Chak Chel, sacred Mother

Chak Chel, who gives life

Great Keeper of lakes and streams born of the Sea

Chak Chel watches over each newborn, each child

Every new life that draws breath on this Earth

#

An old woman's voice, gruff, experienced:

So man mastered the maize and humankind lived like beasts no longer. Indeed, they mastered the beasts and the beasts served them. With Chak Chel watching over every woman's birth throes, man's

numbers grew. Our grandfathers and grandmothers sacrificed to the Gods of the plants and to the Gods of the beasts, and it went well.

Then Chak Chel, her breasts weary from nourishing the needs of man's children, came to Itzamna, Greatest of All, who sat on the band of the Sky and watched over its turning. To Itzamna She spoke:

"Honored Itzamna, Greatest of All, look upon man. Man worships the Gods, he praises the Gods. Teach him your secrets. Teach him the stars in their seasons, that he might venture across Earth and Sea and return again to his own place."

Itzamna, First Giver of Names, turned to her. His wispy white hair streamed through the air above his flowered head-band, and his eyes were the Sun burning down on Chak Chel.

"The stars are mine. They keep the very truth of Creation and humankind shall never know their secrets. The stars will be ever out of reach, a reminder to man that he is small, a clod upon the Earth and nothing more."

But Chak Chel, pillared on stout legs, set her feet and met the eyes of Itzamna, and She said:

"Have pity on humans. They are small and Earth and Sea are wide. The stars of the Sky are as the glittering waves of the Sea, beyond counting. But teach man the secrets of the night Sky. Teach him and he will make even the stars tell tales of the might and the splendor of the Gods. For even the stars, their numbers beyond count, their radiance undying, give no thanks to the Gods who made them so. Humans alone offer praise, offer rich, flowing blood as sacrifice to the Gods who made Earth, Sea, and Sky."

#

So humans mapped the distant stars, and the stars silently guided man as he walked the wide Earth, and as he sailed the encircling Sea. Chak Chel stood ever beside the children of men as they scattered

across the Earth and took root where they came to rest, like seeds borne by high autumn winds. And humankind fed the Gods with rich, flowing blood, and traced their images in starlight on the black dome of night.

* * *

You press your head against the door. The chant will not stop; the voices will not stop until the full tale is told. A young man's voice, passionate and angry, takes up the chant:

Then men looked to the deep places, and found metals there, and the metals served them. Gold they loved above all. They shaped it in honor of the Gods who made them, the Gods who taught them, the Gods who watched over them.

Chak Chel, face carven by cares, bearing always her great vessel, passed the fanged mouth of a river-laced cave into darkness. She came to Xibalba, the Underworld. She spoke to the Princes of the Under-Dark:

"Honored Gods of Under-Dark, man is wise. Humans know the Gods, they worship the Gods. Teach them your secrets. Lakes of quiescent liquid fire lie silent, deep in the Earth, where no spark may reach them. Grant humans this power that they might do great works upon the lands above. Let the oil, the black blood of the Earth, give men freedom and power worthy of their wisdom."

Among the hideous, whispering shapes gathered in the great Under-Dark, on his stone platform cushioned with many jaguar hides, their Lord leaned forward and regarded Chak Chel from beneath his feather-trimmed hat. His splendid brocade cape was of every color and splendid, and He blew smoke from a smoldering, hissing roll of dried tobacco. Toothless, He spoke:

"And what price will man pay? The black oil is precious, and more precious and potent still are other secrets beneath the Earth. I ask you, Chak Chel, what price will man pay?"

Then through smoke and shrouding gloom, Chak Chel met the Dark One's eyes and said:

"I swear to you Great One, if you give humans this power, they will use it wisely. They will honor you for this gift. As man has honored the land, the beasts and the sweet-tasting Maize, as he has honored the stars and the Sky, man will honor you: in his gratitude, he will quench your thirst with great goblets of warm blood."

And He of the deep places said:

"This and more shall man pay."

* * *

Footsteps above now, leaving the chamber; a few of them, moving toward the stairs. A small boy's voice takes over the chant now, hesitant and self-conscious:

So humans mastered the black oil of the Under-Dark. It drove them over the land, across the waters and atop the winds. With its power they shaped the land to their liking. Their numbers grew and Chak Chel watched as they spread like a rising tide over all the Earth.

But the hearts of men turned, for they told themselves they were masters over all. They lived like locusts, consuming with a bottomless hunger. They feared not beasts, nor Sky, nor Sea. In their pride, they forgot to worship the Gods. They forgot to sacrifice to the Gods. They forgot to fear the Gods.

Forgotten, the Gods grew weak. Long unfed by the rich blood of sacrifice, they languished, each alone, starved of their strength. As dark clouds gathered over the Earth, the Gods gathered too in their high place: the Gods of plants, of beasts, of Sky. All gathered, but they were weak and their power was no longer over man.

But one had not faltered; for man's births were more than ever. She watched over each one and fed upon the blood of these births, and

blind hope, too, kept her strong. From their high place the Gods called her to them. They called Chak Chel. She had journeyed long, great Mother of all men; her age was upon her, and her face was gaunt.

Jaguar-God spoke:

“Chak Chel, man has thrived; it is as you wished. He rules over the land, his numbers grow without cease, and my children are now few. Soon their cries will echo only in man’s hollow tales of ages gone.”

Maize-God spoke:

“Chak Chel, man has great power. It is as you wished. He rules over the green drinkers of sunlight, and of my many children in their rapturous array of shapes and colors, he has kept only a favored few alive, twisting their hidden souls to glut his own appetites. The rest will never again stretch their slender arms toward the sun.”

Itzamna, Lord of Sky, Father of All, spoke:

“Chak Chel, man has great knowledge. It is as you wished. The secrets of the stars are his, but he has violated his trust. He has broken the bounds of the Sky, he has dared venture among moon and stars.”

Then the Nameless One came, wrapped in listless smoke, face unseen beneath his hat of many feathers, and He said:

“All is as you wished. Humans have delved into the depths, taken the iron, the gold, the black oil. They have plundered all the treasures of the Under-Dark, leaving a vast emptiness.”

Jaguar-God spoke again, and though his sleek coat was now worn as a well-trodden pelt-rug, his yellow eyes still glittered, even under the dark clouds.

“Mankind made promises to us: oaths of reverence, oaths of blood. But man has forgotten his oaths. And Chak Chel, honored Goddess

whose waters nourish all life, mankind has forgotten you.”

* * *

They are at the door. Now they silently enter the room, four masked figures with torches, their thirsty eyes fixed on you. You wish with all your strength that the Canticle would go on longer—hours, days, please, please, let them keep chanting for a month, a whole year. But every story has its end. The four masked ones murmur along as in the room above, a small girl’s voice rings out, melodious, excited:

Chak Chel, so forceful in argument, heard all and was silent. In her silence was sorrow, and her head bowed. Her stout figure shook and all believed she wept. But her trembling was the tremor of a coming storm; and when She raised her head, her eyes were aboil. With her rage the heavens darkened and the Earth grew hot.

Then Chak Chel raised her great vessel and said:

“Man is born from water, every one from water, and in water he shall meet his end.”

The waters of her vessel began to shudder, wild for release, and Chak Chel poured those great waters onto the Earth.

The tameless Sea rose, higher and higher, its force surpassing all measure or means. The waters rose over man’s proud works, beating at their foundations and washing clean his folly. The heat of Chak Chel’s anger scorched and withered the Earth’s glorious coat of green, and from her rage sprang plagues, and storms, and war, to purge man’s pride. But humankind had forgotten the names of the Gods; their howls were as the baying of wild dogs, their cries like the screeching of monkeys as the Sea swallowed our mothers and fathers and drank up even their screams.

A few remembered Chak Chel, though, the wisest few—they remembered her name from the ancient tales. They set her carven image in a place of reverence, they remembered what she thirsted for.

They fed her with sacrifice, with streams of rich red blood.

Then at last, Chak Chel's rage relented. Before all the sons and daughters of man were consumed, Chak Chel's vengeance cooled. She drew her great vessel to her breast and the waters grew still. A blessed silence blanketed the Earth.

And today, as in our earliest beginnings, our lives belong to Chak Chel's mercy, we few who remain, we whose mothers and fathers the Deluge did not swallow. We few, we praise Chak Chel, we fear Chak Chel, and each time the moon blackens and dies in the Sky, each night like this one, we feed Chak Chel's hunger with the blood of those who did not believe. And we sing, that we might never again forget:

* * *

All sing:

Chak Chel, sacred Mother

Chak Chel, who gives life

Her mercy alone stays the all-drinking Sea

Chak Chel watches still as each newborn, each child

Each man and each woman draws breath on this Earth

#

And so it ends.

All Our Mothers

by Avra Margariti

We come to life cradled
In deep star-choked dark
Resplendent lullabies of tinny echoes
Murmured dulcet notes of folk song
Only half remembered.

Our mothers, the humans,
Our mothers, the machines
All of them gathered close around the nursery
Telling tales of the S/S *Orpheus*
Not a steamship but a generation spaceship
Not a parent unit but an infinity system of love.
Life is suffering, children, they sing,
Life is suffering but once we got on the *Orpheus*
We never once looked back.

We go to sleep again
Suckling on skin and silicone
As we hurtle through the cosmos
Our hands reaching out of our cribs
To close around the fingers
Of our mothers, the humans,
Our mothers, the machines,
All our family made of stars.

Making Amends

by Toshiya Kamei

What was your wedding like, Mom Miyuki?" my daughter asks. "Where are the photos? What did you wear?" My daughter is way too young to think about getting hitched. Still, she brings up the topic often these days. Like it or not, the advent of neuroscience nanotechnology has considerably accelerated her intellectual development. Sometimes she sounds like a grown-up.

"Well, you want to know the truth, sweetie?" She nods innocently, but I hesitate for a moment. Then I make up my mind. I trust her. She's practically my twin but thirty years younger. I'm the biological mother, after all, even though Sayuri is the one who carried Misa-chan for nine months in her womb before giving birth to her. If I may say so myself, our daughter is wise beyond her years because she takes after me. Besides she's no longer the baby she once was. Misa-chan has grown by leaps and bounds. She'll start first grade when spring returns to Neo Tokyo. I smile and gently brush back the loose strands of hair that had fallen onto her face. "Your mother and I never had a wedding. We eloped."

"Excuse me?" She puts her arms akimbo. "What do you mean by 'eloped'?" she asks, puzzled. "Is it something bad, Mom? What did you guys do?" She wiggles her nose as if itching. "Now you gotta tell me everything!" Her young face shines with curiosity.

"Well, sweetie," I say and pause, looking her in the eye. She's a dead ringer for my younger self. Honestly, I don't relate to my older daughter in the same way. And it may not be okay, but my wife's love for Satoko makes up for it. "Your grandma was against our marriage. She didn't approve of my choice."

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"Your grandma didn't want me to marry Sayuri."

"Get out of here, Mom! You're pulling my leg!" Her eyes widen.

"No, I'm serious, Misa-chan." I look down. The pain I thought I'd buried years ago returns.

Misa-chan gets up, fetches Sayuri from the kitchen, and makes her sit next to me. "Mom Sayuri, is it true Grandma didn't like you?" Misa-chan frowns. "How come?"

"Well, Misa-chan. Because I'm an android."

"Are you serious, Moms?" she gazes alternately at us. "Just because you're an android?" She looks at Sayuri. "And you're not," she adds as she returns her gaze to me.

Sayuri and I nod in unison.

"That's silly, Moms!" she pouts. "Miss Hikari is also an android, but she's the most popular teacher in my kindergarten!" Her face flashes in excitement. "Kids adore her! Ask anybody in my class and they'll tell you she's the greatest! Many of us want to be like her when we grow up!"

"That's great, sweetie," Sayuri says.

"But Grandma came around eventually," I point out.

"That's right, Misa-chan," Sayuri tries to assure her. "There's nothing to worry about."

“Come here, sweetie,” I say and join in a three-way hug.

* * *

I’ve got two moms like many kids in my grade. But Mom Miyuki says Grandma didn’t want her to marry Mom Sayuri! How is it possible? They’re so good to each other. And Grandma treats us like the family we are. What happened years ago? I’ll get to the bottom of this.

“Hey sis, did you know that our moms had no wedding?” I ask.

“You didn’t know?” Satoko answers. “Have you seen any photos of their wedding? No, right?” she snickers condescendingly.

“Don’t talk down at me like that, sis,” I protest. “Remember I’ll start first grade soon. I’ll catch up with you in no time! You’ll see!”

Satoko rolls her eyes. “Whatever you say, Misa-chan! You’re the smart one. I’m the cute one.” She pats my shoulder.

I pout.

“But we should do something about it!” I insist.

“Like what? What can we do, kiddo?” Satoko flashes a half-smile. “Last time I checked, we’re just kids. Remember?”

“Well, let me come up with something.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and speed dial Grandma Yuka.

* * *

“Grandma, is it true you didn’t like Mom Sayuri?”

“Excuse me, Misa-chan?” she flashes a nervous smile on the screen. “What are you talking about?” She touches her gray hair and gazes at

me. She lives with her girlfriend two cities away. “You lost me there, honey. Start from the beginning. But calm yourself a little bit.”

“What do you have against androids, Grandma?”

“What kind of question is that, Misa-chan? What’s gotten into you, honey?”

“Well, Mom Miyuki says she didn’t get to have a wedding because of you!” I shoot an accusatory glance at her.

“Well, I have to admit I was partially to blame.”

“What do you mean ‘partially’?”

“You’re right, honey. I was completely responsible for ruining their wedding!”

“Then what are you going to do about it, Grandma?”

“Let me think, Misa-chan. Well, can you keep a secret?”

“Well, depends.”

“What do you mean ‘depends’? You sound just like your mother when she was your age!” She laughs, her eyes disappearing into creased flesh.

“I’ll tell you what, Misa-chan.”

“Go ahead. I’m all ears.” I lean forward. “It’d better be good, Grandma.”

* * *

My baby sister has dragged me into this. I may regret doing this, but what the heck. For a little girl her age, I have to admit, Misa-chan has guts. Hats off to her, I guess. Once she makes up her mind, she

charges like a bull. I'm more easy-going, though. I just go with the flow. That's my motto.

Mom Sayuri drives us to a temple nearby. We get out and go inside. A white-robed priest greets us. She's also an android, but that's not a big deal anymore. Almost everybody accepts androids as our equals. Why not? Androids are commonplace these days.

"So what's going on, honey?" Mom Sayuri asks.

"Beats me. They're giving free makeup sessions."

"At a temple, though?" She frowns.

"Why not? They, too, need new customers."

"Well, if you say so," she says, unconvinced.

A hairdresser appears, makes her sit, and applies makeup to her face.

When she's done with Mom Sayuri, we help her put on a snow-white kimono.

"You look pretty, Mom! Way to go!"

"Thank you, honey." She blushes.

"I meant it, Mom. Look at yourself." I hand her a hand mirror.

She touches her hair a bit, looking quite pleased.

"Oh my," she says at last. "You've worked a miracle!" She hugs the hairdresser, who shyly smiles.

"Hey, Mom. Let's go!"

"Where?"

"Never mind." I roll my eyes. "Just follow me, Mom."

* * *

Following Satoko, I step into a spacious hall.

What's going on? Friends, family, and co-workers are all dressed up. Even frenemies are all smiles. They all look back toward us as we enter. They cheer and blow kisses. Flashes flicker around us.

My mother-in-law beams next to her girlfriend.

"Congratulations, Sayuri!" Yuka comes up and hugs me. "Please forgive me. I've been unfair to you. I never gave you the benefit of the doubt. Admittedly, I was suffering from a severe case of androidphobia. Thanks to Misa-chan, I finally saw the light." She squeezes my hand. "Your little one made me realize I wronged you years ago." Her face is wet with tears.

She leads me to the altar where my bride, the co-mother of our daughters, smiles in her snow-white kimono. I almost faint, but my mother-in-law squeezes my hand again.

Seated in the front row, Misa-chan winks at us. "Way to go, Moms! You both look pretty!" The crowd roars with laughter. I can't believe she did all of this for this. And Satoko, too. Our beautiful kids. As I turn to Miyuki, I lose myself in her smile. She radiates calm, warmth, and quiet strength. She's my anchor. I imagine the feeling of fulfillment a human heart can attain. I imagine emotions as neurotransmitter chemicals. I imagine hate melting into acceptance, then peace. But I don't need to imagine love. She stands in front of me.

Me-birth

by Rickey Rivers Jr.

Horns jut from afros, living in woe.
Since when?
Ten thousand years ago.

Stepping out of line with a question in my mind: what is the meaning?
Why is it not clear and defined?
I rewind, see myself young.
Conversation and observations fill my heart and lungs.

Younger me is naive but I see his soul grow, reminding me of the me I once did know.
He glows, his child smile awful and wild.
I'm taken back, his future.
My present: unpleasant.

The planet shakes; a rumble in the sky like a mumbling of "why?"
The humbling of I, the wondering of I.
The plummeting of my curious mind divides.
I'm broken into many, some tall and skinny, some short and round, some different sexes.
Body cold; a different hex rejected.

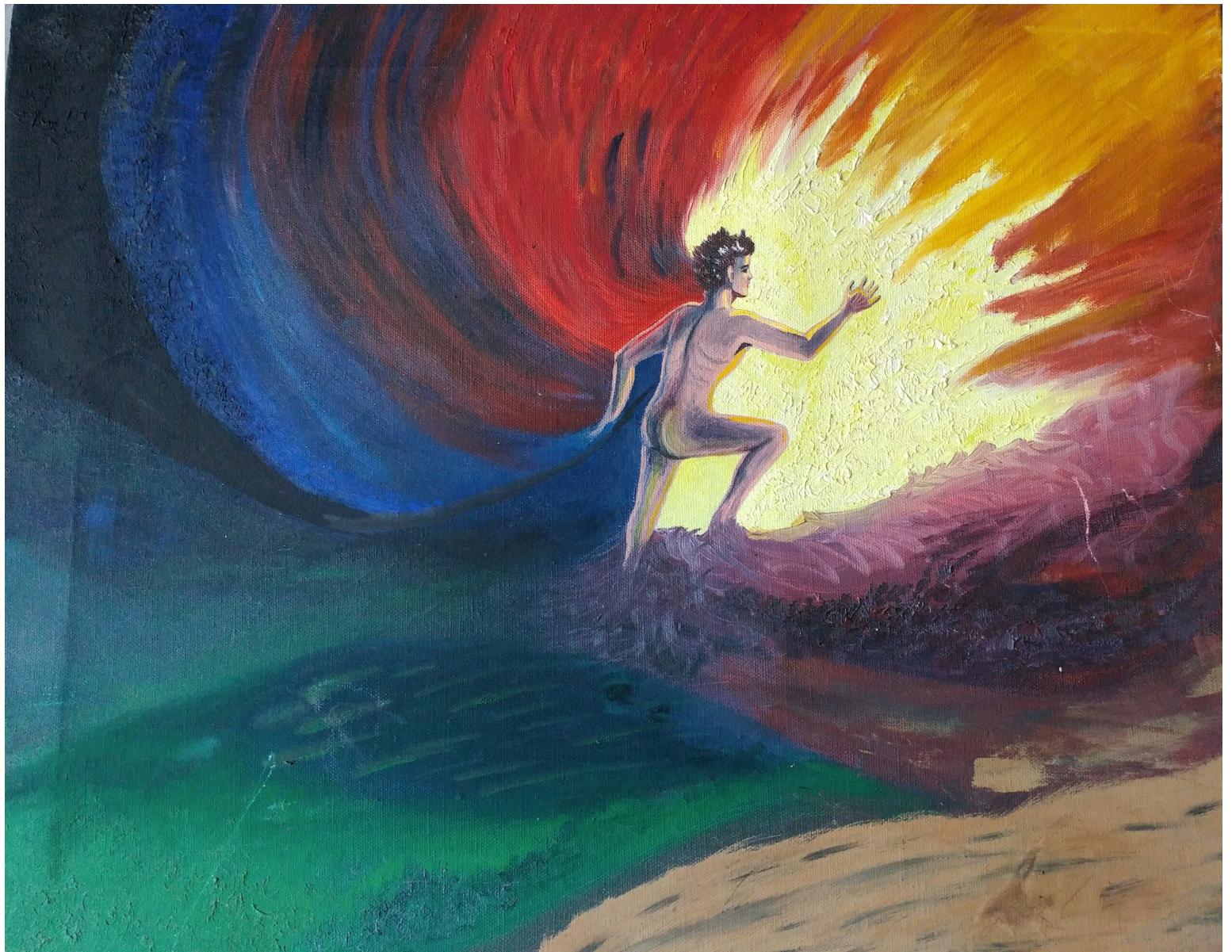
I do my unrest best to work together.
We became a tandem.
Some threw tantrums.
That was eventually solved by an anthem, a beckon.
A call to rise together, to shine together, we became the weather.

A cloud we formed, of must and trust.
We rained on us and became the dust.

This goes on for years, re-birth, the recycling tears.

Still on it goes until something small sprouts.
It raises questions, fears and doubts.

A tiny plant with the budding of blue
That plant would soon become you.



The Light by Carl Scharwath

The Remaining One

by Lenore Sagaskie

Emotional pain is something we all endure. Some people like to talk through their pain, surround themselves with family and friends and try to heal. Others prefer isolation, leaving themselves alone; they push away everyone and opt out of everything so they can wrap that pain around them like a cloak or a warm blanket, snuggling into it as their only source of comfort. The worst part of it is that the pain lies. It's not warm or comforting, it's a cold shard of ice pushing into your heart, taking all the warmth and feeling away, leaving behind a cold hunk of freezer-burnt flesh. It becomes numb and no matter how many times you try to warm it, it's never the same again. But you will always remember how it was before the pain started, how it was when you were warm inside.

I had a sister once.

She was my constant, my best friend from the moment I came out of the womb, the same womb that she had occupied only two years earlier. "You'd never see Jamie without Jessica," people would say. And it was true. We were inseparable. We were allies against the "Great Tyrants"—our secret nickname for our parents. When the Great Tyrants split when I was only 10 years old, I would climb into Jamie's bed at night and she would hold me, stroking my hair as I cried myself to sleep. "It's okay, Jessie," she would repeat in a soft whisper into my hair. For only that moment, it felt like it was. That year we discovered we were different.

Maybe we had always been different. Looking back—hindsight is always 20/20—we were always the strange kids. We looked like twins with our long, straight hair, dark eyes, and thin frames. I was painfully shy and often the target of bullies. I would hunch my shoulders to hide my face in my hair. I dressed in dark clothes, a

couple sizes too big, to hide myself and minimize my height. Jamie was my exact opposite. She walked with long, purposeful strides, her head high as she stared down anyone who dared to challenge her. Those that did regretted it. She fought like a wildcat, screaming as she punched, bit, kicked, and scratched in a whirlwind of rage, only stopping when pulled off her bloody opponent by a teacher who would wisely wait until her energy started to wane. She would stand in the hallway, her back against the wall, her shoulders square, and her eyes, dark and defiant, challenged anyone who dared to get too close. I would hang close to her arm as she stared down our adversaries. Their downward glances would assure us there would be no challengers that day. Most of the time, we could sense their intentions long before they started pushing and shoving and name calling. We soon discovered we could sense other things, too. We called it "The Sight."

I remember it was a warm day, though threatening rain clouds cast a shadow over the sun. I was relieved to leave school and walk home after a hard day of the bullies taking more runs at me than usual during those times when Jamie had to leave me to fend for myself. I wiped away silent tears as I clutched my sister's arm, resting my head against her shoulder as we ambled slowly off the sidewalk onto the dirt path that cut through the park. Jamie patted my hand as she led the way. Her role was always as sentry; her eyes scanning the path ahead for anyone that she perceived as a threat. We crossed the path where a few solitary runners pounded the pavement, their heads down as they moved. They were lost in their own rhythm--barely aware of our presence as they focused on their task--ear buds dulling the sounds of the park. We picked up our pace as we moved into the skate park area, a popular hang-out of my tormentors. It was deserted. I breathed a sigh of relief as we continued past. We cut

across the grass toward the shuttered blue and white wooden shack that served as the concession stand during little league games. As we reached the chain-link fence protecting the sparse metal bleachers reserved for the visiting team from foul balls, we stopped simultaneously and gasped. We agreed later that it was nothing like we'd ever experienced in our short lives. That was the moment we first felt it.

I could feel Jamie's bicep tighten just above where my fingers pressed into her arm at the bend at her elbow. I was rendered powerless by the sensation that rode through me, and I was shocked that my sister was rendered helpless too. Nothing, not even the Great Tyrants, could make my sister surrender. I struggled to open my mouth to speak, but I was mute. Jamie's willpower conquered the trance. She lifted her free hand to point forward. "Over there," she whispered through clenched teeth, her voice shaky with effort. We stumbled forward, Jamie leading the way, propelled by the sensation that rode over us both. As we moved closer to the baseball diamond, the feeling developed another layer. Now I could feel where the sensation was coming from, and my eyes instantly fell upon the source. A group of little league players, clad in their blue and white team uniforms that read "The Knights," were clapping and cheering behind the chain-link fence on the opposite side of the field for a young player who was running full out around third base, barreling toward home plate like her life depended on it. As she ran, I could see her every thought: how it no longer mattered that her parents never came to practice, how her heart felt like it was beating out of her chest—her lungs and legs burned from exertion, but the screams and encouragement from her team buoyed her determination. She dove, arms out in front, fingertips barely touching home plate just before the ball was thrown in and the exhilaration she felt when the umpire declared her "safe!" Her elation reached its pinnacle when her team exploded onto the field to lift her up and carry her past their team bench as the conquering hero of the game.

"Did you feel that, Jessie?" Jamie asked as she gave my fingers a squeeze. I nodded, not sure if I trusted my voice to respond. We wandered home feeling full of that feeling, euphoric and happy and

content: feelings that were scarce in our lives at that time. When we went to bed that night, I no longer cried about our fractured family or brooded about my standing as a bully magnet and social pariah. We reminisced about our shared experience and the accompanying sensations. After that first time, we experienced it more and more frequently. Each time we had an experience—most, but not all of them, together—we would share them in hushed whispers just before we went to bed. Though we never learned what started it, we figured out quite a lot about it.

We both agreed that we could feel "The Sight" at first onset. It started as a slight tickle, just on the edge of your awareness, light like the touch of a butterfly as it danced on your skin. Then it ran up your arm, racing up and down your spine, tickling the tips of each hair on your head and the soles of your feet all at once. Somewhere on its travels it would change to the sensation of light fingertips grazing your skin, setting all the little hairs on your body on edge. Then the sensation turned inward, dancing along the receptors in your brain like taking a big hit on a joint. You didn't have to breathe deep for it to hit you, it just did. When it reached your entire body, you knew that The Sight had kicked in. You could finally *See*. You could *See* the bullies coming for you. You could *See* the sad kids anguished in their grief and what was causing it. We could feel the excitement of the kids playing baseball and the thrill in the screams of the small kids playing on the swings in the park as they flew higher and higher skyward—we liked to feel those the most. Jamie and I smoked marijuana for the first time when I was 13 years old. While I enjoyed the feeling, it didn't compare to how The Sight made me feel. It was intoxicating, and none of the other drugs we experimented with could come close to how it made us feel. So, Jamie and I spent a lot of time in the park, chasing the high, which is why we were at the park the first time we felt *Him*.

We were doing our daily pass through the park on our way home from school, hoping to catch an experience. We took our usual route, taking the dirt trail until we crossed the asphalt running path. As we walked toward the skate park, the sensation hit us. It felt different, like plunging your hand in a bucket of cold water on a cold day in

February. We had experienced this feeling before, but never at this level of intensity. It was terror, and it was punctuated by the loudest and most piercing scream I've ever heard in my life. Instinctively, I clutched Jamie's arm, seeking her familiar comfort.

"Where's it coming from, Jamie?" I croaked with a shiver. Jamie shook her head, then gestured to the fenced-in skate park where a group of teens were huddled at the bottom of one of those bowl-like drops. The scream stopped abruptly as the group of teens scattered in panic to reveal a boy lying in a pool of blood on the concrete and another young man trying desperately to staunch the blood that was flowing from his neck. I recognized the boy on the ground as Jack, a classmate of mine. I could feel his terror begin to fade just like his life force was leaving his body. His mouth moved soundlessly, like a fish out of water trying to gulp in water so not to drown. I could feel Jack drowning in his own blood; feel the rail from the skate ramp jutting out of his neck like a fishing lure, trapping him. Jamie and I watched as the other kids scrambled to call 911 while his friend desperately attempted to stop the bleeding without causing further damage. We already knew it was too late. He was dying, and his thoughts and emotions told us he knew it as well. His first thought was how he'd never get a chance to ask Ashley out. Then he felt regret that he called his Mom a dumb bitch during an argument before he left for school that day, and she would have to live with that as his last words to her for the rest of her life without him. His terror changed to fear, his fear became his resignation, and just before we felt the essence of who he was disappear, we felt something that drew our attention to someone else. He was standing on the opposite side of the skate park; a gangly, average-looking skater dude clad in torn jeans and a t-shirt, face hidden in the shadow of the brim of his baseball cap. He stood just outside the fence, watching the demise of Jack as he stood there passively, unmoved by the panic that now felt like it was everywhere. He looked up as if he felt our gaze upon him and then we truly *felt* him. We felt everything about him in a flood; as always, the feelings felt strangely familiar, but this time there was something unique about the sensation. He felt old—ancient, even—leaving an acrid scent in my nose, a taste like sand in my mouth. Suddenly, I was filled with the knowledge of him, and it felt like

millions of spiders trying to burrow under my skin and climb inside of me. I shuddered and huddled closer to Jamie, but she pushed me aside. I closed my eyes and tried to block it, but it was overwhelming. It wasn't until the ambulance arrived on the scene that the sensation of him left me. At that moment I knew he was gone, and Jack was dead.

Jamie tried to speak about him later that night, but I couldn't bring myself to talk about it. I didn't want to relive that feeling or relive what had happened. I just held up my hand and shook my head. "I feel cold, Jamie," I whispered. She held me like she did when we were little. We never spoke of that day again.

We didn't encounter him again until my sophomore year of high school. It was Jamie's senior year. The entire school was outside sitting in the bleachers, forced to attend a mandatory pep rally. No one really minded since it was a warm, sunny fall day. School spirit was in abundant supply when it was preferable to sitting in a classroom. The football team, cheerleaders, and marching band were on the football field giving us their best, and the crowd of students responded with enthusiasm. Jamie had joined me where I sat on the home team bleachers and we watched, felt the crowd feeding off the euphoria like it was a designer drug. It wasn't until I heard the crack and a few shrieks that I realized that something was going horribly wrong. Instinctively, I grabbed for Jamie's arm as I pointed toward the opposite bleacher that was utilized by the visiting teams to our home games. Another crack resounded and students fled as the bleacher came crashing down amid screams. It was down in a matter of seconds, reduced to piles of metal frame and wood beams. Screams and yells echoed in the air as several students went back to try to free those that weren't lucky enough to escape and were trapped within the wreckage. What began as an enjoyable afternoon was now a tragedy as students and teachers tried to remain calm and orderly while they organized to free those trapped. I felt faint, and that sense that something was crawling under my skin made me shudder and feel cold. I knew he was there. I closed my eyes, trying to let that feeling direct me to where he was. I opened my eyes again and saw him. He was standing just off to the side of the bleacher, just

an average kid with pale hair. He could have been a sophomore or even a junior, and he stood there calmly, a backpack strap slung over one shoulder. I nudged Jamie with my elbow, but I knew she had already caught sight of him too. She nodded, and we watched him, waiting to see what he would do. He stood there impassively as a group of teens hoisted a beam off an unconscious girl lying in a pool of blood, her blonde hair stained scarlet. I could feel her, feel that she was alive and conscious, but her thoughts were jumbled.

“Concussion,” Jamie whispered to me as if she were reading my mind. Several other kids were trapped and crying out for help. I knew they were okay, just injured. My eyes fell upon a young boy, most likely a freshman since he was unfamiliar to me. He looked like a doll, broken in half at the waist but still held together by the blood-soaked clothes he was wearing. My heart sunk. “He’s gone, Jamie,” I whispered. A tear slid down my face for this poor kid who went to school and didn’t know he would die that day. “He’ll be back,” Jamie replied wistfully. It wasn’t until I looked across to where He had been standing that I realized Jamie was referring to Him, not the dead boy trapped under the bleacher. I wish I had recognized that it was at that moment Jamie’s obsession began.

As much as I was repulsed by His presence, Jamie was drawn to it. He became everything, her entire world. I didn’t want to participate in her search to find Him, but we soon discovered that she needed me in her quest. I guess my presence upped the signal we received because she sensed him stronger when we were together. It soon became a game in which I was a grudging participant. Who could sense him faster? Who could find him easier? It was always me, maybe because I really didn’t want another encounter with him. But not Jamie. Jamie spent the babysitting money she was saving on a fancy emergency band radio to listen in on police, fire department, and ambulance services. She would drag me to the calls if they were in close proximity. We chased Him, showed up in places where death and tragedy would be. I was feeling depressed, and I missed the exhilaration of The Sight, slipping into the park when I was alone to have an experience that wasn’t grim and sad. I felt like my sister was slipping away; like I was losing her to a possessive boyfriend that

was totally wrong for her but whom she was completely wrapped up in. It only got worse when we caught his attention. As we walked by the scene of a fatal car crash between a compact car and a semi-truck, we saw him standing just outside of the car, bent over examining the severed head of the car’s driver lying on the asphalt. This time he was dressed as a firefighter, his hat pulled over his face. I knew it was Him, even before he stood up to watch us walk past. This time he did something different: he touched the brim of his hat and nodded in our direction. I felt like cold threads were being pulled inside me, and I had to fight the urge to run. I grabbed onto Jamie’s arm and I felt her reaction to him. She was excited, and I could feel her rapid heartbeat as I held on, heard her gasp as if she caught a glimpse of her lover across a crowded room. I let go of her and wrapped my arms around my waist, trying to find some warmth. “Don’t ask me to help you find him again,” I sniped at Jamie. She nodded as she kept her gaze fixated on him until we were out of range. We never spoke of Him again. I will forever regret these were my last words to her.

A few nights later, Jamie slipped out in the middle of the night. My sister wasn’t an angel, but she always told me where she was going and who she was going to be with. She never mentioned anything to me that night, and she never said goodbye, she just slipped away quiet as a ghost. I never woke up, never sensed her or heard a sound. I woke up later that night in agony with the worst pain I’d ever felt in my life; a sharp tug that made me sit up in bed with a scream at four a.m. When I felt it, I felt destroyed, not only by it, but also by the wave of sorrow that accompanied it. Then the pain dissipated, but the sorrow remained. At that moment I knew my worst fear had become reality: I would never see Jamie alive again.

The Great Tyrants allied to look for my sister, but their new-found alliance was short-lived. They located the body of a young woman fitting Jamie’s description a few days later, face down in the river at the bottom of a steep ravine. When the body was recovered—it took a while to safely transport the body up the ravine—the Great Tyrants went to see if it was Jamie. When I watched them silently walking together up the sidewalk, heads bowed to conceal their tear-stained faces, it confirmed what I already knew but secretly wished I didn’t.

Jamie was gone. I sat there, not really listening as the Great Tyrants explained that her death was “undetermined” and how it might be better explained if only someone could tell them where she’d gone and what she had been doing out that night. No one believed my ignorance because Jamie and I shared all our secrets—at least we did until she discovered Him. I felt rage replace sorrow in my heart. He owed me an explanation. I needed to know why he took my sister away.

I began to look for Him myself.

It wasn’t until I lost Jamie that I realized that there were others that shared our gift. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. I discovered that The Sight made me stand out to them. At first, finding others with the same ability was comforting. I met Silas at a concert I attended on a whim, trying to get a fix of my drug of choice, to replicate the feelings that Jamie and I experienced together at the park. Silas was beautiful; a lanky, tall man with auburn hair longer than mine and a face that comfortably accommodated his wide smile. Silas could *See* as clearly as I could. Our Sight drew us to each other as we stood at the back of the concert hall, feeding off the euphoria of the cheering crowd. The music and the waves of sensation flowed over us while I pulled him into a spontaneous kiss that endured the encore the crowd demanded. It was fun, and I lost myself in him for a while, but the feelings I shared with him were of little solace. I missed the close comfort of Jamie, and her silent resilience and the strength that I just couldn’t muster on my own. My mind kept returning to the memory of our first time at the baseball diamond in the park, how Jamie and I discovered our gift together, how our shared experience brought us closer together. I seethed with anger, anger that I felt for Him.

The last time I saw Silas we were sitting on a bench at the park closest to the baseball field, the place that served as my constant reminder of Jamie. “Jessie, I love you,” he whispered as he wrapped his arms around me. “But your anger is grief turned outward. You need to do something about it before it destroys you.” He kissed my forehead and left without saying another word. Instead of taking his

words to heart, I felt even more anger for Him, because I blamed him for losing Silas too.

I isolated myself, retreating further inward, shielding myself from others with “The Sight.” I wanted no part of them. Some were searching for kindred spirits, looking for people who were able to *See* and share experiences; sometimes they were searching for answers—either philosophical or existential ones. I never studied philosophy and I wasn’t religious, and I was too angry to care too much about those sorts of things. My anger had a purpose and direction. I found it much easier just to hide myself from the others, except when I needed help tracking Him. Hiding behind an emotional mask allowed me to hide whatever it was about The Sight that shone bright and illuminated me. The problem with the mask was that it wasn’t always easy to maintain for long periods of time. Sometimes it would slip when I got tired or distracted, usually by a task that required my full attention. Then the beacon would shatter the shield and burst through the mask like a signal in the dark. Usually it wasn’t a big deal; I could sense its absence and shield. On the few occasions I couldn’t, it would be sensed by someone with The Sight.

My beacon shone too bright today. I was tired, so I didn’t realize I had caught the attention of an elementary school kid as I cut through the park on my way home from work. He looked about 10 or 11 years old, wearing a lime green t-shirt and shorts, his scabbed knees proof of his dedication to his sport. He stood there holding his soccer ball, staring at me with wide, pale eyes. I didn’t think he understood what he saw, but he fixated on me with the intense stare of a cat watching a piece of string. He didn’t say a word to me, but he knew who I longed to find. He pointed to a speck on the horizon. I knew what it was he wanted me to *See*.

That familiar creeping sensation rode over me, that feeling that I was both dreading and expecting. It was Him, but it wasn’t just Him. It was that cold shuddering feeling of ice running through me, and it was more. I felt drawn, pulled toward a presence that was familiar and warm. A presence that always protected me, that warmed me when the world was crashing down around me, the kind of warmth I

hadn't felt since Jamie abruptly disappeared from my life. My urgency compelled me to continue, and I plowed forward with purpose, my urgency overriding my exhaustion. I picked up the pace as I put distance between the kid and the park as I focused on that speck. It began to get bigger, becoming less of a dot and taking on the blur of a larger shape. I could feel Him more intensely, and that familiar sense of revulsion that froze me from within that always made me want to turn back. I fought against it. I focused more on the familiar warmth, the feeling that brought everything I held dear back to me in a flood of memories. I was driven forward by my desire and my need; I needed answers. I turned, feeling another blip on my Sight radar as I caught a glimpse of another, familiar person. Anita was a pale, Goth girl a couple years older than me who could also *See*. I knew her parents threw her out the night she told them of her abilities, even though she never spoke about it to anyone. I gave her an acknowledging nod as she lifted her arm and pointed toward the ever-increasing blur. "Over there," she said with a ghost of a smile. "You'll see."

I nodded as I pounded past in a rush. My excitement mounted as I picked up the pace. I felt conflicted. I wanted to run toward that warmth, and though I felt the cold revulsion of his presence I pressed onward. My anger flared. I wanted to pummel Him with my fists and scream in his face. I wanted answers. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but the question I really wanted to ask him was: why *my* sister?

I pushed on, past the park, past the path, past the end of the bit of civilization that needed sidewalks and manicured green spaces. I walked through the pampas grass and weeds towards him, my anger at war with that feeling to flee as I felt the intensity rise as I gained ground. He's there, at the top of the ravine, standing just before the drop off. The anger inside me was extinguished as the cold feeling returned to my heart. This was the place where Jamie was lost to me, the place they found her empty shell of a body.

I could feel Him with an intensity that I'd never experienced before, and The Sight changed. I felt it differently. I could sense him like I could the kids in the park. With my Sight, I could tell that he was

aware I knew of his presence. I stopped in front of him, staring at him as he regarded me with pale, almost white eyes. He stood calmly waiting for me to state what I needed to ask him. He didn't look at all powerful as he stood there in hiking boots wearing a red flannel shirt over faded jeans. I finally had my chance to say what I had long bottled up inside and wrapped in my grief. I didn't have to voice it. Through our shared Sight, he knew it all.

"Why?" I whispered. He turned toward the ravine and pointed down, toward the shallow riverbed. And there she was.

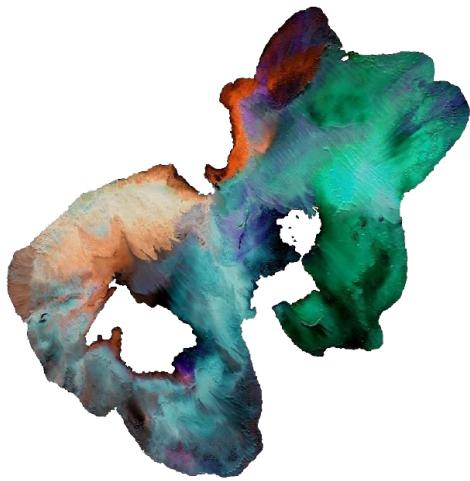
Jamie was standing in the ravine, her familiar eyes looking up at me. I clapped a hand to my mouth to hold back the shriek of joy. I felt her, and all that she was flooded back to me. I felt her presence and the warmth and strength that I always relied on and probably always took for granted. I felt my love for her release the anger I held inside me. I gasped out a huge breath that released the pain I carried since she left me that terrible night. She gave me a slight smile and a nod before turning her head to look down. My eyes followed her gaze and I saw the body of a young man lying at her feet. The Sight was stronger than ever before; I felt the young man's despair, enhanced by the drug he'd injected into his vein. I knew he leaped from the drop-off in the hopes of a speedy death. Instead, his death would come after hours of lying broken and cold in isolation. Suddenly, The Sight changed. I felt Him, felt a change in Him. It was no longer that creepy, cold feeling. He felt warmer; his cold, solitary existence was no longer. He had her, the bold woman who wasn't cowed or afraid of him, the only one drawn to him and who pursued him. Jamie was the one who never feared him, willing to die to be with him. I felt a jumble of things flood my mind, his need of her, almost mirroring my own. One thing I clearly understood: he felt complete. I could feel he wanted to show me how my sister passed, and I threw up a shield. Somehow, the story of how I became the remaining one didn't seem important anymore. I knew she was where she wanted to be.

"She was ready." He smiled at me, and I think for a moment I saw his true face. It was clear and bright but the memory of it faded once I turned to gaze upon my sister once again. I guess the living don't get

to remember the face of Death until it's their turn. Jamie smiled at me one last time before they disappeared the moment the young man in the ravine gasped his last breath of air. I felt his relief as he slipped away. It almost mirrored my own.

I see her every now and again when I decide to follow The Sight. It's my way of dropping in to check on them, even though they no longer acknowledge me. I know Jamie's not the same, not really my sister anymore. I find it fascinating that though I see her in fleeting glimpses, none of the others with the same ability can, though they

manage to *See* Him. To my knowledge I'm the only one. That's okay with me. I still feel that cold grief, but it's not making me question why anymore. Perhaps it was inevitable, as it is with all of us at the end. I don't want to know if her willingness to go toward Death was a sign that it was her time or if she hastened the process. It might freeze my heart further when it's just starting to thaw. For now, I'm okay with knowing that she's where she needs to be and I will endure as the remaining one, and I will continue to love her, holding her in my memory, forever.



Longing

by Peter J. King

There's a hole in every world
an absence – taking many shapes
and none
fitting many times
and all –
that sometimes points to
what is lost forever
what might yet return
what tears with hot and bloody breath
what pulls and nags
almost unnoticed
what is best unfilled, and
what we cannot live with if it's left like this.

Few see what's missing,
what's amiss, awry,
what stretches at the fabric of reality
and puckers it.
Those cursed with greater sensitivity
to such anomalies
can feel the corrugations
follow them to where the hole
gapes glistening
with possibilities.

Awareness, though, does not imply
ability to heal; those who sense
the strange striations
in space-time
should step away, steer clear.
Every soul sucked in to longing
stretches at its sides
and so the gap
expands.

Subsume/Submerse

by Amelia Gorman

This blue amplifier of solitude,
this rich wet loneliness calls Vivian
and Nimue, Elaine and Ninianne.
Who sends invitations to Nivian,
who sources her tendrils out to Nyneve
and Evienne. Who swam upstream to glass
fields where no hunters pried open their clade.

"I am sisters," says Evienne. "I row
the swan boats/I wear the crown," Nimue
queen of Avalon, Elaine, youngest of
the seven. "I talk to swords/I answer,"
Ninianne, Vivian reply as one.
Nivian is silent, one of them gone.

They came to converge; Elaine from the south,
Vivian from the north. Cataracts rush
with glistening foam. Evienne counts her
other selves, comes up one short. Nimue
holds fast to Nivian, a barnacle

on a bare breasted prow. Nivian saves
her but one sister is not as lucky
as Nimue. Elaine and Vivian
hold fast to branches dangling in the deep.

It's hard to live as so many. It's what
they wanted, really. Nimue, Elaine
and Vivian feel lighter, like bubbles

coming up the flume. The next sacrifice
leaves Nimue and Elaine together.

And Nimue holds her last sister's head above water until she gasps and drowns.
No more temptress versus virgin.
No more attempts to breathe both water and air.
No more hands, entangling each other like crabs in a pot.
Just hers.

My Son Breathes Fire

by Alicia Hilton

Do you believe in magic?
Not the hallucinations you see
from eating magic mushrooms or LSD.
That's bullshit.
I've seen the real thing.
Had it bite me.

My first child is a dragon.
An orange-eyed, black-tongued,
claw-footed, winged beast.
Hatched from an egg.
I squirted ground fish meal,
juice and yogurt down his throat
before he got strong enough to hunt.
Got some flung on my holster.
You've got to wear a gun
when you're raising a dragon.

Honk, honk, honk, he begged for flesh
like a baby goose.
Taught the beast to fly, too.
Flapped my arms until he took off.
I loved him even after I bled,
still have scars where his claws scratched.

When he was four months old, he said hello.
Eight months later, the feathers on the back of his neck
turned from green to yellow.

Did you know dragons like dirty jokes and cop shows?
Now he's learning opera.
Speaks in a baritone, sings like a tenor.
Wants to grow up to be Rolando Villazón.
Fan his tail, spread his wings,
strut across the stage.



Untitled by Andrew Gruber



Sema cover art by Joseph Carrabis

Sema (a Tale of the Northern Clan)

by Joseph Carrabis

I felt the pulse before I saw her. The next thing I knew, she was obvious in the crowded concert hall, walking up to me, the same wide mouthed, full lipped smile she had when I'd roll out of bed and she knew she only had to throw off the covers to get me back beside her. There was some guy walking with her who didn't mean much.

"Jeremiah!" she called.

What's going on now? I wondered. She's using my true name.

Cathy glanced at me immediately. "Who's she that she knows your real name?"

Sema's use of my true name, Jeremiah, put me on guard. Most people know me as "Jim." Most people know Sema as "Sandy."

"Sema," I whispered. Cathy nodded. I could feel her trying to remember when I'd said the name before.

"Jeremiah," Sema said, closer now, her hand on my arm. She leaned forward and gave me a friendly kiss on the cheek. That was for the world to see. I felt her body rush forward and try to get into mine. But I am the Shield, and there was no entry. Still, she pushed her body over my shield, hoping the feel of her thighs and breasts would weaken me, perhaps force me to rut. Among our kind, those who are younger, it is common. Around us, people saw two friends greeting.

"Sandy." I gave her a hug. "I'd like to introduce my wife, Cathy."

Cathy smiled and extended her hand. Sema extended hers and I felt her scan Cathy quickly, neatly, sharing Cathy's memories of standing

by a mirror, naked. *Not bad*, Sema pathed. *Buxom and full hipped. She's got strong thighs.*

She rides horses.

She does if she married you.

I don't know if I blushed, but I extended my hand to Sema's date. "Hi. I'm Jim Risman. You're?"

She has an hourglass figure, Jeremiah.

I know. She's also intelligent.

And?

And forgiving.

Sema smiled at that.

"Tony Newfields. Nice to meet you." Sema's date shook my hand. He had a good grip, but I knew he wasn't for Sema. He would never understand. Sema knew this, as well, I'm sure, but I could feel Tony's needs within him. That explained Sema's spending time with him. The four of us chatted for a few minutes as Sema and I conversed on our own.

Is she a good wife for you?

Yes, I couldn't have found better.

She seems happy. Does she know? Does she understand?

She doesn't know everything, but she knows enough not to be frightened by me. She asks me where I go at night, sometimes. She knows when I leave and keeps my body covered until I return. Does she understand? I don't think any of them do. They can guess, but they can't know unless they can do.

Sema nodded at something Cathy said. She nodded at me, too.

Have you seen any of the others since the last Calling? I asked.

No, she replied. I felt Jedediah and Ezekiel pass over one night, scanning for remnants. I don't know if they found any.

It was my turn to nod, this time at something Tony said. Sema smiled.

I guess we did a good job, then.

Sema nodded, but only for me. I felt a tear inside her, released my Shield and held her close.

You saved my life that time.

I know, I pathed. I did. It was true.

It was a little over twenty years ago, during the time from January to February when the real cold of winter hits New England. Each night, Cathy and I would walk my dog, Maschaak, a hundred and eighty-three pound Newfoundland. The pup and I love the cold, but Cathy doesn't quite take to it as we do. We'd be almost through walking before she'd start to warm up. She used to be jealous of the dog. Eventually she realized how much he meant to me, although she could never understand what he was for me. All she would ever see was a big, black, drooly dog.

As we walked, she'd ask questions; "What are you listening to?" or "What's out there?" or "Who you talking to tonight?"

"Nothing," I'd say, as I did that night.

In truth, there was a lot of activity up in the ether, the overhead where we communicate. Everyone was jumpy, although none of us knew why. I don't know if I was the first one to figure it out, but I was the first one to path it openly.

The Earth was warming. To your children, a respite from the cold. A welcome thaw and lower heating bills. Not so to ours.

A Venting! I pushed the message so hard I almost fell down. The dog was with me and I drew from him. Cathy held my arm. Normally a signal wouldn't go out so vibrantly, but I am the Shield. Often I have no choice how these things happen. As soon as I caught my balance I began tracking to find their access points. The dog started growling, sensing my activity, and I welcomed his additional energy.

Jedediah, who is the Lifter of the Northern Clan, was the first to respond. I could feel him coming up as if from heavy slumber. *Jeremiah?*

Yes.

Where are they?

Local.

Ezekiel joined in then, *How can you tell?*

The Earth warms, I pathed.

Why local? asked Jedediah.

Ariel, who Sees, answered for me, *There are no temperature aberrations elsewhere.*

All this occurred while Cathy, Maschaak, and I took a single step. Then there was silence until we finished our walk. Occasionally I would see the dog looking intently or sniffing the wind, and I would listen for anything he might find.

We got back to our house and started taking off our coats. The dog stayed beside me. Normally he either goes over to his bed and lies down or goes to his water bowl for a drink. Cathy told him to go lie down and he just looked at her. She turned to me; the look on her face showed the resignation in her soul. "You're going out tonight, aren't you."

"Do you mind?"

"No," she lied. "You'll be okay?"

"Aren't I always?"

She didn't answer and we headed for bed. The dog, who usually sleeps at the foot of our bed, begged to sleep on top, beside me.

I fell asleep quickly, pushing my body down through the levels of rest until it reached a stasis that would keep it active until I returned.

About sixty miles up I felt Jedediah, Ezekiel, and Ariel waiting. Aaron and Malachi awoke from the south, Rhode Island and the Connecticut shores respectively, and joined us. Aaron Talks to all that is and Malachi Moves through things.

Jeremiah, Aaron pathed, what can you tell us?

There wasn't much. *Central New England seems to be the locus of the heat.*

And your shielding? Ariel now. What do your shields tell you?

I've felt a surging along my shoulders and spine, I mumbled the path.

How long? Jedediah asked.

Ezekiel's healing flooded me, making the words come easier. *Too long. A week, perhaps. I didn't want to respond until I was sure.*

Ariel, who Sees, stated it non-judgmentally. *You have a human wife.*

No! I pulsed. I threw my shield up so fiercely it hazed visibly for a moment. I haven't denied my first love for her. She knows this and accepts it. Under the cloudless sky, under the light of the stars, my shielding forced them back. Without thinking, Jedediah, who has helped stars pass when their time is near, engulfed me in his strength, fearing I might harm myself as well as them.

Far below us, the moon, a cap of orange on the horizon, framed Ezekiel's thought, *Peace, brother. It was a question we had to ask.*

Malachi tried to change the subject, *Are any of us ready?* Unfortunately, his question threw attention back on me. None of us would be fool enough to force a challenge without a Shield. This was a Venting. They would be legion. There were only six of us.

I've been doing some ranging with the dog. I can be ready in two days.

Jedediah again, *Do we have that much time?*

We don't have much choice, pathed Malachi.

I won't be able to find where they come from, but I can lay down a gentle shield and see where it waffles, I offered. They all thought that was good. In two days then.

Cathy was half sleeping when I came back. The alarm went off after I'd been in bed for thirty minutes. I shut the alarm off and let her get an extra half hour of rest before I said, "Babe, time to get up."

She put her arm around me and buried her head in my chest. "Not yet." Her free hand tugged on my shorts. I told the dog to get off the bed.

Two nights later I had my answers. There was a mild disturbance in the Berlin, NH, area, and a tremor in Marlboro, Mass, pushing the Assabet river from I-495 to Rt 9, forcing the heat track of Rt 85 to take a wide curve around Browns Corner.

Ezekiel, Jedediah, Ariel, Aaron, Malachi! They each answered. *A Calling.* I placed a spoor where we were to meet and when.

Not much later Ezekiel, Jedediah, Ariel, Aaron, Malachi and I stood beside a snow-covered field off Rt 85. The moon was strong and bright in a cloudless sky. There was a ring of pines and birches encircling the field that started about fifty feet to our right, went straight back as far as you could see – which was pretty far, it was near a full moon – and around then back to the road, ending the semi-circle about 350–400 yards down the road from us. The field was huge and hot.

"Well, brothers. Time's a' wasting," I said. I wasn't in a hurry, but I was anxious. I wanted things over, done with. We moved into the field and alarms went off. I threw a shield up in front of us and pathed for them not to walk through. My senses told me something else had entered the field.

I let my brothers share what I was feeling. "Mortal?" Ariel asked.

"Barely," I replied. Whatever I was picking up was human, but not in the sense that yours are human. "Hold on, I'm checking."

I was having trouble because what I was picking up had the shape of yours but the feel of mine. Your shape and my feel doesn't normally throw me. It was the female form – a very female form – that threw me.

Something came towards us from the line of trees. Ezekiel said, "It's a woman."

Ariel asked, "What's she doing here?"

It was indeed a woman. Fair skinned, dark-haired and brown-eyed. Her eyes were wide and almost tear shaped, almost Asian, and her nose was slight, but was shaped either for a southern Italian or for a middle European Jew. Full-lipped and wide-mouthed, and even before she was close enough for me to make out facial features, I

could taste her build. This woman is made for the night, I thought.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Who are you?" she demanded in return. Her voice told me she was used to being answered.

I could feel Ezekiel put a calming on her, although I didn't feel she needed one. That was strange and should have warned me. She was overly confident in what most women could consider a potentially dangerous situation. She looked at him as he put her to sleep.

He asked Ariel. "Are you looking?"

"Yes." We waited. Then, "A candle surrounded by gusting winds. Some kind of hybrid? More human than we are? No, she has abilities. She's sensitive," he directed this comment at me, "but no more so than she needs for her own protection."

"Can you tell what her abilities are?" I asked.

"I'm getting there, be patient."

I wondered if that was just something he said, or did he feel what I was feeling--looking at her, watching her lying there on the snow, standing near her, almost over her, drawing her spoor deep into me, I wanted to join her on the ground. I was ashamed at my urge and hoped the others didn't know.

"She's of the earth, some kind of Linker. I'd say her talent has to do with earthquakes."

Jedediah pathed for all of us, *Earthquakes? What do you mean 'earthquakes'?*

Ariel relaxed his Sight. "That I can't say. All I can tell you is that her talent has to do with earthquakes. Something strongly and intimately tied to the earth, anyway. Also that she has some human in her. Either

that or she's something I've never seen before. Almost looks like she's one of us but can remain hidden, but not like Jeremiah can. It's as if hiding, but not shielding, were one of her talents. I'd say she's more like us than not, but she has strong human ties."

"What shall we do with her?" Ariel asked. I had some ideas.

Ezekiel, the oldest and wisest, decided for us. "Tonight's a wash, at least until we know why an unknown near-one entered the field we chose for gathering." He looked at me, then, and said what he had to, "We need to know more about her."

I nodded.

"Shall I wake her before we go?" he asked.

"No, thanks. I'd rather be the only one here when she comes to."

They'd been gone about five minutes. I kept scanning for things either leaving or entering the earth, some kind of activity to alert me to danger, but there wasn't a thing. Suddenly I sensed her gaze upon me.

"You alright?"

"No," she said. "I'm half left."

I laughed. "You came over to us and fell. You took a nasty bump on the head, I think."

"Help me up."

As Shield, I am suspicious of many things. Because I am suspicious, I tied myself to the earth before offering my hand. She grabbed it and tugged, trying to make me fall. Instead I picked her up without strain. She focused on where I was standing but kept quiet about it, saying, "You're a strong one, aren't you?"

I smiled again. "Can I offer you a ride home?"

"No, thanks. I don't live far and can walk from here. Where did your friends go?"

"They went home. We didn't expect to find anybody here. You kind of threw us."

"So what were you doing out in a field in the middle of the night?"

"We're astronomers. Amateurs. I saw this field and thought it would be a good spot to bring our telescopes."

She wasn't buying any of this and probed me. I kept a tight, quiet watch and let her mind run its hands over my body, partially because I wanted her to think I was a human male, partially because I enjoyed the feel of this woman's touch. Her mind ran its hands over my thighs and buttocks several times. At first she did this to see if my musculature would allow me to link to the earth as she did, but soon I realized she enjoyed what she felt.

"I have to go," I said. "If you don't need a ride and you'll be okay, I'm going to take off."

"Good night, then," she said, and left.

I was halfway home when Ezekiel called, *Jeremiah?* I closed myself and didn't answer.

I heard her calling over the next few nights, feeling her wanting me at the edge of my mind, trying to find me. That would be impossible for her to do, of course, because no matter what happens to me I can't stop being a Shield. But being a Shield didn't stop me from contacting her. I never asked her name, nor could I reveal any knowledge of her. Instead I gave her the idea I'd be at a specific place at a specific time, a public place, a shopping mall close to where she lived. The dog came with me.

She was waiting for me. "I knew I'd find you here," she said. We made small talk.

When I felt it was right, I said, "I have a lot of questions to ask."

"Here?"

"This is as good a place as any," I said.

"Follow me." She grabbed my hand and led me back to the parking lot. "You drove, right?"

"Yes."

"Where's your car?" A couple of minutes later I was following her. The dog was jumpy. So was I. She was leading me towards her apartment. "Have you eaten?" she asked once we arrived.

"No, but I'm not hungry."

"How about him?" she nodded at the dog.

"He's fine. A bowl of water, perhaps."

"Then sit down in the living room and you can ask all the questions you want." She went in the kitchen and I heard the faucet run.

She came back and chose an overstuffed, green chair in a corner of the room. The room was homey, but sparse. The TV had lots of dust on it, but the radio – and I do mean radio, not a stereo or even a boom-box – was neat. There were large, green-leaved, flowering plants everywhere, especially behind and around her chair. A knitting bag lay next to her chair. Lots of needles stuck out of it with lots of balls of yarn strewn around it. She picked up something in the process of being knitted. It was flat as it came out of the bag but assumed a fluid, undulating shape as she placed it on her lap. I thought it was alive, that maybe it was a kitten or something that'd played in the yarns. But it wasn't a kitten, just something she was making. It took four needles of various sizes, and yarns trailed from it to the floor. She picked up several of the balls of yarn and placed them around her on the floor. I noticed that each of the balls – I

counted eight different colors and thicknesses — had a thread leading to the thing on her lap.

She sat there, relaxed but waiting, her legs crossed underneath her, her wide, brown eyes always on me, her tongue running her lips as if it were a hot August night and her lips oozed lemonade, her breasts filling her shirt, moving slowly with her breathing, light dancing off the needles, the thing in her lap writhing as her needles passed through it, trapped in her lap by the webbing that surrounded it.

"What do you want to know?"

"Your name would be a good place to start."

"Sandy. Sandy Fuller."

"What name do you call yourself when you don't speak it?"

She looked at me, more intently than before and with fear. I was glad for that. She showed no fear when she met us on the field. Now she did. The needles drew tighter, the knitting writhed less. "What do you mean?"

"When you're with other people, you can look at them and know what they're thinking, right? Maybe not the exact words of their thoughts, but you know what they'll do, how far you can go, when to be afraid, when to stay away from people and not go places, right?"

She didn't move.

"And there's more than just knowing what people will or won't do, isn't there? You can do things that you've had to keep secret, things you couldn't tell anyone." I did some looking myself. Surface looking. Like viewing the surface of a lake. You don't know how deep it is or what's under the surface. You only know there's water there. "Things you've never even told your sister, Trisha. Isn't that right? Things to do with the ground?"

She was definitely frightened at this point. I was glad. This Sandy Fuller was too used to being in control of situations, or at least being able to steer them.

"You're like me, aren't you?" she asked.

"Am I?"

My name is Sema.

I didn't respond. As a matter of fact, I talked through her path.

Sema, she pathed a second time. I continued to ignore it. I felt her push herself around me, but kept my shields in a tight ordering, filtering things around me, giving the scent of a common man.

Sema, and you are a fool, and I will no longer be afraid of you.

JEREMIAH! I brought my shields up, shaping their energies into probing and grasping fingers and hands, crushing the parts of her brain that she used for pathing. I wanted her immobilized, unmaneuverable, motionless and optionless. True, I am the Shield, but much of Shielding is offense.

Sema rocked back into her chair. Her knitting fell as she grasped the sides of her head, the needles dropped, the threads of yarn limp, the thing in her lap part of a sweater once again.

I stood up as she sat there, her mind still recoiling from my thought. She wasn't as strong as I surmised and passed out as my projection reverberated in her mind.

I was sitting on the couch when she awoke, groggy. "I need some water," she said. As she passed in front of me her legs gave out. I caught her before she'd fallen far and pushed some strength into her. She looked at me, then, her eyes clear and the pupils wide, her irises almost not showing, so that her eyes appeared as black and deep as fissures in the earth. She pushed me back onto the couch and

straddled me. Her left hand grabbed my hair and pulled my head back so that my neck was exposed. No vampire could have looked more frightening. Nor more seductive. She sank her teeth into my shoulder, deep into the muscle, burying her teeth slowly, gently, until blood erupted from my skin. I didn't make a sound, but the dog, quiet and sullen until now, growled at her. She hissed at him and I laughed.

"He is mated to me in ways you couldn't understand. Your threats mean nothing to him." As if to prove my point, the dog growled and bared his teeth. *Good puppy. It's okay. Go lie down.* The dog looked from me to her and back. If a dog could shrug, he did, then went back into the kitchen and slept on the floor.

She rubbed herself against me and I could tell the rut beginning. But there are codes by which we live, ethics which none of us will pass. Originally the codes were to keep your kind safe from us, now they're used in all things, even in communicating among ourselves.

She was kissing me, arousing me, moving things in me that my dear Cathy did not know I had, but I kept my arms at my sides, my hands limp, using all my mind to keep my body unresponsive.

"I want you," she said. I smiled. She pulled back from me then, the enormity of the thought clouding her face. "You don't want me?"

"I will not do what I am not asked to do. I will not go where I am not invited."

She breathed deeply, as if pulling my words into her body and making them hers. Before I knew it, her shirt was off and her hands were behind her back, unfastening her bra. "You're invited, lover." She pulled my face into her breasts, forcing a nipple into my mouth. *You are invited.*

I've always been gentle with human lovers, but not so with my own. She drew blood from me, and now it was time for return.

I reached for my clothes two hours later, not wanting to see the look

of triumph in her eyes. She lay on the floor where I left her, modesty neither a question nor a concern. She wore her bruises, where I'd bitten and scratched, like badges of honor. "You're getting dressed?" she asked. I nodded. She stood on her knees before me and grabbed my buttocks in her hands. "Not yet, lover. Not yet." I had only my shirt on. Nothing else, and it was unbuttoned. She wrapped her mouth around me. I closed my eyes, listened to the dog's breathing in the kitchen, felt the outer cold on my chest and thighs, filled myself with her musk, and guided her head until her tongue made me weep.

Eventually she was satisfied she'd taken everything I could give. I remember thinking then that Ariel voiced truth, this woman was more like us than not.

"What is your talent?" I finally asked, when she sat back from me, her own needs sated.

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"What can you do that no one you know can?"

"I think I can read minds."

"So can we all. But to each of us is given a uniqueness, a singularity, a gift that is at best mimicked by others. What is yours?" She knew what I meant and tried to hide the information from me. "You will not tell me?" I asked.

"I don't know what it is."

"Your body gives you away, don't you know? Each of our talents belie themselves in our shape. Your thighs and calves are the only thing about you obviously out of proportion to the rest." She opened her mouth to protest but I kept on. "I know, you weightlift and exercise to balance yourself, but it won't help. Your talent is earth-bound. You can either tell me or I'll find out for myself."

She looked at me then, and I could feel her determining strategies,

trying to determine from my morphology exactly what my talent might be. I wanted her mind focused on my question, but gave her an answer I felt she needed. "When I spoke my name, it was an unspoken whisper."

She drew back and didn't hesitate her answer, "I can make earthquakes."

"We thought as much. Can you control them? How intense can you make them? Do you have to make earthquakes? Every once in a while, perhaps?"

"I can control them, to a degree, yes. I don't know how strong I can make them. One time, when I was a child, I got angry at someone and destroyed their house."

"Then you are directional?"

"Directional?"

"You can control the path the earthquake takes as well as the intensity?"

She nodded. "You wanted to know if I have to make earthquakes. I'm not sure what you mean, but I know I get sick if I don't make them for a while. Sometimes I go down to Connecticut, there's a place where the earth rumbles. They call the rumblings 'Moodus noises'. Sometimes it's the earth. Sometimes it's me."

There was nothing else I needed. "I have to go."

"Will you come back?"

I had no choice. I nodded, but didn't say anything.

Cathy had left for work when I returned.

There was a note, "Call me when you get in. Love you," on the kitchen

table. Still slick from Sema, I showered instead of calling. I called later, told her I loved her, hung up and cried, enraged at my choices.

Halfway through the day, Ezekiel called, *Well?*

She can control and direct earthquakes. She is also quite like us, more so than she is human, I think.

A talent like that could be useful right now. I noted that he didn't comment on my second statement, but I pathed agreement.

Would she help us?

I'll find out.

We gathered at the field that night. Sema was there. She wasn't used to so many voices inside her head and it fatigued her. Ezekiel was concerned. *Are you well, child?*

This is new.

I'm a Healer. I can help. His eyes closed and you could see the confusion leave Sema.

What did you do to her? I asked

Nothing to her. I made the rest of you talk tighter. That was Ezekiel's "I will not go where I'm not invited." Sema didn't say, "Okay, come into my head and help," so he wouldn't.

Sema, I pathed, can you detect any earth activity?

Yes. I'd already explained the situation to her. It also answered a question I'd forgotten to ask; how did she end up in the field where they were moving? My brothers were listening, and it made them feel better, too. *So that's why you were here that other night?*

She stopped thinking for a moment, as if the question were so foolish

that it shouldn't be asked. *Yes, of course.*

Can you lead us to their Vent? asked Ariel.

She started trudging through the snow. Jedediah pathed me, *She can't even lift herself?*

Malachi cut in, *She's not completely like us. More like them than us in some ways. What can you expect?*

How would she feel about being lifted? Jedediah asked.

Let me. Then to Sema, *Sema, can you move objects?* I felt a "no." *Can you move yourself, I mean up into the air, kind of like flying?*

There was a laugh, then, *Give me a break, will you? You going to tell me you guys can do that, too?*

My brothers must have thought I'd already started lifting Sema because as soon as her thought finished they floated past her. She looked at them, pathed, *Hey, wait,* and noticed their feet weren't on the snow. "Oh shit!" she said.

I don't know if that was a response to seeing my brothers lifting themselves or suddenly feeling herself weightless. I could tell by the way she began spinning that she couldn't bend gravity the way we could, so I gave her enough mass to keep her food down, lifted myself beside her, and went after the others. *Is there anything you can't do?* she asked.

Still have trouble pissing into the wind.

She laughed.

Can you still tell where they're coming from?

She pointed to the far edge of the field, behind a small knoll that hid the beginning of the forest from the road.

Suddenly my senses flared: *Link to me!* My brothers threw themselves, their energies, into me, absorbing my gift to strengthen themselves. *Forming!* We became a thing of six arms. Sema was next to me, looking at me, and didn't need a separate linking. I hit the ground, taking her with me, and pushed my armor like a sunburst past my brothers.

The field was alive with them. The creatures we had sensed these past few nights. Creatures with the shapes of men, but men enlivened by a wounded god. Small, round, twisted cherub-like things. Large-eyed and fanged, with horns the same color as their bodies, coming out directly over holes that served as ears. Monopods with hooves the reverse of horses', and of many colors. There couldn't have been this many if they had been waiting for us.

The waves of aggression were incredible. I could feel myself being hammered as they sought to enter us.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel pathed. Can you take this? None of my brothers had ever asked me that question before. The strain must have showed. It is said among our kind that nothing can pass a Shield unless the Shield so wills it, but I came upon my talent early and am still young in its use.

Presently, my youth was leading us to downfall. Superior strength often falls prey to superior experience. My shields have absorbed the power of tidal waves before they could claim a coast, but so many skilled foes I was not used to. Jedediah was powerless to go beyond my shields, and to drop them left us open to the enemy's attack.

Ariel saw me and cried out, *Jeremiah*. My body started phasing between your world and ours as I cannibalized myself to strengthen my shield. I felt Ezekiel's arms lift me and listened to his body dissolving to replace the parts I lost. He wailed as he assumed my pain, pain he could endure because it is the Healer's gift, the near ultimate sacrifice. The agony was for his own, as parts of him died to renew me and were replaced, I feared even faster than his body could stand.

Jedediah thrust his hands into my head, phasing and linking to me. *Use me*, he demanded, and I was too weak to resist. His massive form began to collapse as he moved towards all life's destiny. Crying with pain and rage and my own weakness, I channeled the strength of this starquaker through me.

Our minds claimed the thought together. *Starquaker*.

I'm looking, Ariel called. *There!* His mind pointed to a planetless star so far away you will not know of it for millennia yet. I opened a pipe where my shield had grown weakest and Jedediah, Aaron, and Malachi rushed out. Aaron told the star of our need and, with its agreement and acceptance, Jedediah clutched and crushed it until friend star raged anew. As the star quaked its last, Malachi raced through its heat gathering the energies of its furnace into himself. A new mystery for your philosophers to ponder. An average, sun-like star, in less than a second collapsing to a hole in the sky, yet no radiation given off.

The evil, the insanity, of the creatures before us was draining me of what little life I had left.

As my body baked itself into a final form one shield was breached. Suddenly Ezekiel was there, his body arcing as the Terrors raced through him, his body replicating with each strike as he used his talents to fortify my wall.

Then our brothers returned with a Sacrifice of Innocence, a power no evil can face. It was this willing sacrifice that saved us, as it always has been and, we fear, always shall be. This is how wars will always be won or lost. Not with tanks and bombs, but with hearts, and minds, and the Sacrifice of Innocence.

I started to fold my shields around our attackers. I gathered them, Jedediah grouped them.

Ariel, can you See a place to put them? Jedediah asked, tightening his lifted grip until it seemed these small ones would burst like fleas

between his unseen fingers.

Sema cut in, *Let me*. She lifted her right leg, as if to step over something in the snow. Instead of stepping forward, however, she stamped it down, tucking her arms and bending her knees when her foot hit the snow. She looked like a petulant child stamping her foot, about to pout, defying a parent when it is time for bed, but the quake forced all save Jedediah and I to lift ourselves from the ground.

There was a clean rift in the world, starting at Sema's foot and extending some thirty feet into the woods. At its widest it was ten feet. Jedediah released his grip and the creatures plummeted into it. Sema faced the rent sideways, raised her left foot and pushed it slowly into the snow. The earth sealed and covered itself over as if it had never opened at all.

We fell, exhausted. All save Sema, who watched us and waited, and Malachi, who retained enough starstrength to feed us. My body started re-energizing, reshaping and reforming so that I could again walk among men. Sema watched us, stood over us, and smiled. She probed me then, abruptly and viciously. My secrets would remain hid, as they must, but I was too weak for anything else and let her look.

Eventually, one by one, the rest of us regained our sense of self.

Any more for tonight? Ezekiel asked. None of us could find anything. One by one, we left.

Cathy wasn't up when I got home, but she woke up as I got into bed. I got beside her, held her close and played spoons. She held my arm in hers and placed my hand on her breast. I lay beside her, and I wished with all my heart that I, and not friend star, had died.

There were fewer of them the next night. So few, in fact, we were suspicious. They do not come and go so easily, especially not when it's our time, the deep winter. It was a time for Aaron, Ariel, and Malachi to use their crafts. These three went high into the air, Aaron

asking, Ariel looking, Malachi to go where they told him. Ezekiel, Jedediah, Sema, and I stayed in the field. Ezekiel and Jedediah were describing their talents to her, joking and kidding about things in their past, acknowledging things in hers. Finally she turned to me. "But what is it you do?"

I said nothing.

"Tell her, Jeremiah," said Jedediah. I think Ezekiel realized then that something about Sema unsettled me. It might have been nothing more than her power to seduce me. I wasn't sure.

Don't be ashamed, brother, pathed Ezekiel. We've each had the blood burn and ache within us. You're fortunate there is someone to satisfy your need.

Sema asked again, "Jeremiah, what is your gift?"

"It is nothing."

"Nothing!" howled Jedediah, his mind echoing the word into the cosmos. I suddenly felt myself lifted in his hands and tossed, a paper doll in a hurricane, high above the clouds. *Baby brother, tell the little one your gift!*

Jedediah, started Ezekiel, but too late. Jedediah so loves me, and my shielding makes me invulnerable to his play, so he does not fear to delight in what I can do. *Do you not know, Sema? Jeremiah is the greatest of us all!* He tossed me into the Great Winds, the atmospheric Rivers encircling the earth. *He is the Watcher, the Guardian, the Keeper, The Watchman in The Tower, He Who Stands and Never Sleeps, Lord of the Swift Warning.* Jedediah's joy was sending me to the edge of the atmosphere as he continued the litany of names both your kind and mine have given Shields throughout time. *He is the Singer in the Woods, the One Who Speaks in Silence. He is the Runner, the Hunter, the Shield Against Which Nothing Can Stand!* Jedediah was hurling me like a comet, whipping me around the sun. I enjoyed his delight, but had had enough. When my feet touched the

ground, I drove them deep into the earth, drawing strength from the old and deep things there, things your kind have forgotten. Jedediah wasn't prepared for the shift and cantilevered himself, like a toy airplane from a child's elastic, racing through the sky. His laughter surrounded us like warm spring rain.

Sema looked at me. "You need the earth," she said.

Where the earth is, I am.

She smiled then. I should have explored, but Aaron, Ariel, and Malachi came back. Behind them we felt Jedediah creating gravity wells to hasten his return.

And? I asked.

Aaron started, *I asked the Old Ones what they could tell. There is a place, not far; perhaps a mile or so, along the river. The earth pitches down there, not much but enough. They said the quaking most often comes from there.*

Ezekiel, *Did you go look?*

Ariel, *I did, yes. I couldn't find anything there. There was nothing to See except a cave, a natural cave. If they use that as a Vent, it would take Jeremiah to know it.*

Malachi cut in, *I could go there, if all agree.*

No.

They all looked at me, surprised. But all knew not to deny me.

All except Sema. *Why not?*

Jedediah, who had returned, pathed, *Little one, none of us violate baby brother's warning.*

She didn't understand, but kept silent as we went our separate ways.

I was back home walking the dog when Ariel's voice, an agony in my head, rocked me, *Jeremiah! I can't See Malachi. And he is the least of us.*

The others?

I called you first. Shall I call the others?

Ezekiel, for sure. Aaron, to Ask the earth and stars where our brother's gone. And Jedediah, to help Lift him if the need arises. The dog came up beside me. Very well, pup. You can come, too.

Thus my clan gathered again, far up among the stars, and called to our lost brother. There wasn't even an echo of his mind to be found. But this is also where older men can teach the young. *Jeremiah, pathed Ezekiel, you can shift his shield matrix, can't you?*

Of course, why didn't I think of that?

Can you do it now? asked Aaron.

I gauged my remaining strength. *I would need to draw from you, I explained. Even then it would leave me weak.* The sun was coming soon. We'd have to be about our lives among men. I pathed to Ezekiel, *Do you ache for him?*

He is alive. There is no sense of passing. There is fear, and pain, but no direction for me.

Tomorrow then, unless you feel him fading sooner. I will alter his shield, then follow your mind to him. We all thought that was best and parted for the morning.

The night didn't come too quickly. I told Cathy the situation and she knew she might not see me for a day or two. The dog came with me,

for which I was glad. I left word for my brothers that I would meet them later, I wanted to explore some things myself.

There was no one and no thing in the field when I got there, so I went to Sema's. She was gone also. Aaron and Ariel said there was a scar in the earth somewhere close by. Malachi had offered to go there. He wouldn't go against my words, but I thought to look anyway.

It was easy to find, close to the highway and rising slightly by the roadside. There was no snow anywhere around it, but scrub brush, a vertical earthen opening, barely wide enough for a man to fit through, deep with blackness and something cloying inside. Directly in front was a hollow in the earth. To either side rills ran at angles, like giant's legs gently covered by earth. Here was their true Vent, totally hidden by not being hidden at all. The earth pulsed, rhythmically, under my feet. The Vent quivered, as if giving birth to something moving deep in the earth.

Malachi? Nothing. I told the dog to wait up on the hill and went inside.

I'd walked about five feet when I was forced to squeeze through a narrow. Something moved against my leg, ran up the side of my thigh and was gone. I clenched my fists on the other side of the narrow, turned, and put my hands on the walls of the cave. The narrow twitched. I pulled my hands back and lifted them to my face. They held Sema's scent.

Something moved further in the cave and I followed. There was a reek of fear and nausea now. I was about to leave when I felt Malachi's scent in front of me.

Are you here, my brother?

Of course he is. Sema pathed, behind me. I turned and she was there, smiling. *Here is your brother. I've kept him all neatly wrapped for you.* She tapped her foot on the ground and part of the cave wall fell, exposing luminescent ore. Malachi was twenty feet in front of me,

trapped in something that could have only been made by a spider, but no spiders could grow so large. I looked closer and he saw me.

Help me, please. His scent ached out, almost too weak to touch me.

I energized, locking on the webbing that held him. Something moved behind him, revealing itself as it came around to face me. Something heavy, something old. A spider's body, to be sure, but only to the thorax. From the abdomen a human form sprang, as black and bristly haired as any spider's body could be. The arms were shaped like a man's, but ended in a spider's scapula and claws. The head was also shaped like a man's, but had a spider's eight eye array, and the chelicera and fangs of all Arachne's children. I could tell it didn't fear me as much as I feared it.

Maschaak, come!

The dog shaped before me, first a pup, then my dog, then a lion, finally emerging as a manticore, the body of a great lion, the head of a man with a lion's mane, a mouth of razor and needle-like teeth, and a tail ending in a mace of poisonous darts, the shape this angel most often uses to protect me. The old thing backed away from Malachi, going deeper into the cave. My guardian followed.

That leaves you and me, lover. Sema called.

Why?

These things ... her mind wavered, unfocused. Something small and colored ran around her, laughing, and left. There was a greater coldness now, something untouchable in her. *I can open the earth for them, even in this cold. They protect me from others like you.*

That was what Ariel saw as "hidden." They had found and seduced her. I was saddened, having come close to that path myself, but pity wasn't something I could presently afford.

I don't know about your friend, she nodded after the dog, *but you I do*

know. She raised her foot, preparing to drive it down and rock the earth around me. You must be in touch with the earth to be all that you are, she smiled as she brought her foot down, and I control the earth.

I lifted myself off the ground, as if surfing on a sea of air. Her quake opened a fissure, but it passed harmlessly beneath.

You did not hear; nor understand. I pathed, softly, sad for what I would do. I am not where the earth is. Where the earth is, I am. I do not link to the earth, the earth links to me. It reaches out to me, not I to it.

She was not prepared for the shock I sent through her. It caught her like a lightning bolt, going up through her legs and imploding her mind. She was thrown back through the cave, tumbling and unconscious, finally stopping outside, near-dead in the snow. I faced Malachi. He was weak. I freed him and he fell in my arms.

My brother; I pathed, sending some energy into him.

When I left, I felt her moving into the earth. No others among us share my gift, so I thought to explore.

Rest, Malachi. Then, Jedediah, Ezekiel. I felt Jedediah around me as Malachi was lifted from the cave. Ezekiel's pain passed through me, briefly, as he healed our brother. The dog trotted past me, the old thing's blood dripping and a bone hanging from the puppy's mouth. Good boy, puppy. He growled in return.

I met them all in the field, Sema in my arms. *What shall we do? I asked.*

Ezekiel, always the wisest, said, *Ariel, now that their wrath is broken, can you See more clearly?*

Yes, he answered. *She was bent to them, but only because she knew none like us. Thinking there were no others, she was seduced by those she thought could guide her.*

Ezekiel turned to me. *How come you didn't kill her back there?*

She could be one of us, couldn't she? Ezekiel nodded, turned to her, and healed what I had done.

And that is how I saved Sema's life. Cathy tapped my shoulder. My eyes cleared and I was back in the concert hall, the lights dimming to let the audience know it was time to return. Sema was looking with me and at me, sharing the memory. *Now, Sema?*

She kissed me, my mind, then. I let her, and returned it. It wasn't a passionate kiss, just one of memories shared. II

"Earth to Jim. Hello, Jim?" Cathy said. Everybody laughed.

"He does that, too?" asked Tony. "Sandy always seems to go away for a while. Especially when she's asleep."

Sema blushed and I turned away.

"Nice meeting you," I said.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said. I nodded. "How come you use 'Jeremiah' as a nickname? Nicknames are usually shorter than proper names."

Sema shrugged an apology. Like I said, he'd never understand.

Slither

by Gerri Leen

Her memories of love
Are shed
Like a snakeskin
Rubbed off on a rock
Drying in the sand
Too small
Itching and pulling on
Muscles that long
To slither away
To something new
Her tongue flicks out
Heat of a body
Found with a sense not shared
With mammals
You think you're sitting still
But you radiate "I'm here"
She coils, anticipating
The strike, the locking of fangs
Making you hers
Love is to the death
Yours, of course
Not hers
Eventually, she'll shed you too
Just another skin along the trail



Oval Mummies

by Denny E. Marshall

Four Horsemen of the Happy Hour

by Donna J. W. Munro

No one dies during Happy Hour.

That's what they say anyway.

Between four and six every night, we crowd into the bar, "Four Horsemen of Apocalypse," until there's only room to shift between each other, raising up a hand for the drink we came for. The barkeeps fly around our heads, bringing a drop of happiness for every glass.

They say you shouldn't drink while you work, but we death gods tend to work all the time, so what are you going to do?

We used to group together, by tradition and culture, drawn to each other by the knowing of language or the stories that force us together. So many gods now, we can just press in for our daily libation before we rush back into the fray, catching the souls as they slip through the torn fibers of their lives.

We deliver them on to the gods of life or resurrection or the afterlife.

Glorified damned delivery people we are and so, so many of us.

I nod to Mot and Ninsusinak, squeezed in a corner, pressing their lips together in a pantomime of life they'd seen somewhere. Gangnim Doryeong and his reapers do shots at the bar, laughing as Tusok Sacha falls to the ground with a thud, like the rock he is, only we all know it's for show.

There is no drunk here. No oblivion for us.

Relief though. That's what we seek.

The Banshee sisters flit from place to place, silent as the void between stars because that is the thing they can't be normally and for them it is the reward.

Kali and Yami in quiet conversation, just smiling and enjoying the din around them.

And me? I slip out of the crowd into the filthy bathroom. My favorite place.

I close the lid and sit on the toilet, not minding the filth. Piles of ripped toilet paper, oaths scrawled or burned into the walls, sigils of death and protections hanging in the air like tinsel. When you have but two hours a day of freedom, the bathroom takes the hit.

I breathe in the calm.

A knock at the door.

"Death, we know it's you. Can we come in?"

I nod and swipe my hand at the bolt holding the door closed and it shifts with a clang.

Pestilence flies in on her black, scabby horse. "Don't mind me."

She and her horse eat the toilet paper on the floor, lick all the walls clean, and when I move, they make the toilet bowl sparkle.

"Favorite part of the job," she says, wiping her bloody lips on the back of her leprous hand.

I nod.

"You seem ... sad," she says, taking a moment to lean on the wall and light a cig. The smoke doesn't bother me. Pestilence's open wounds suck up whatever she breaths out.

"Just tired," I say back.

She nods. "I'll lock the door behind me."

I take a few more rare seconds, then I stand. I glance at the mirror, enjoying my fleshy face. My beautiful black hair. My red-lipped smile. After happy hour, they are gone, but just to see them for a moment makes me remember that I was once another thing.

I pull my hood up and grab the scythe. Just a few more minutes before my second shift starts.

With a snap of my fingers the lock slides and the door opens. When I step out, Kalma pushes in with a huff. She's so beautiful here, skin whole and smell sweet. Like me, she will enjoy a few minutes of respite from her work face. From her smell of corpses and decay.

Perfume, I think. Deodorant. But it's so easy to judge, isn't it?

I step into the massive crowd singing some song about the bright side of life. Cute ditty. Appropriate. Pestilence drops a drink for me from overhead. A pinot grigio, sweet as life itself. I tip it back and smile, winking at Pestilence.

It glitters in my throat and warms my belly. My skin pricks up and catches all the cool breath of the bringers of death singing about life around me. The joy we had even in the sadness that we brought. No one left behind. No one without some next place to be, good or bad. No oblivion for anyone.

And I smiled with my lips and my cheeks and my eyes.

The clock ticked and Happy Hour ended.

We gathered our tools and took off our skin for the horsemen to press and hand out tomorrow.

I glanced back at Pestilence, just beginning to lick the floor clean of all the spills from the revelry.

"Tomorrow, my friend."

And with a wave, I flowed away toward my first delivery.

There is rest for the dead, but for Death? We live for Happy Hour.

One Dark Night

by Christina Sng

The altar gleams purple. Purple as the sky overhead. Purple as the bruises on her mother's face after her father silences her for fighting back again.

The girl can't help her this time. Her mother is tied up beside her on the adjacent altar, ready to be sacrificed to the sun god.

Always, they sacrifice a mother and daughter. Why do the gods hate women so much?

The tribe is deep in prayer, eyes closed, calling down the heavens.

Clad completely in white, the high priest raises a ceremonial knife, ready to gut her from chest to groin.

She raises her head slightly, whispering something he cannot hear.

He looks quizzically at her. "A final confession, child?"

She looks contrite, nodding slightly.

A spiritually cleansed child will please the gods more, he thinks. He bends over to listen to her confession.

She smashes her forehead into his face, breaking his nose. Blood splatters all over his white robe.

He drops the knife. She deftly catches it, cutting herself loose as she has practiced a million times with her mother.

She swiftly slashes open his throat, silencing him as he falls. He is dead even before she swivels herself over the stone altar and cuts her mother free.

Before the crowd has a chance to stir themselves from prayer and react, mother and daughter grab a lit torch and race to the edge of the clearing.

Her mother touches the torch to the ground and ignites the everburning oil they had poured all around the perimeter a day ago.

They do not wait, running down the hill, only turning back when they hear the anguished shouts of the people.

By the foot of the hill, they look up. The everburning oil has devoured most of the screaming bodies and engulfed the entire altar.

They stay there till sunrise, watching the hill turn to ashes.



Adam and the Egg

by Marge Simon

There Was No Apple When Mankind Fell

by Andrew Rucker Jones

We started so well. In the circle's center grew a great glass sphere: the world we were creating. Leviathan wound round the globe, biting his tail, turning, binding.

We were the circle, and we stood front to back, tightly packed. We bent our knees and eased back, groping with our behinds. And as we knew must happen but were afraid would elude us, each of us alit on the knees of the person behind them. We became infinite and unbuttressed.

We improved. Each person shuffled their right foot forward. Then the left foot. Then a small step with the right foot, then the left. We walked seated in this chain with as many pillars as legs.

We thought, "Marvelous!" We exclaimed, "It's working!" We dreamed, "None are crushed, none overburdened, none abandoned. Each of us nurtures and is nurtured in turn."

Inside the globe arose a maelstrom borne of our combined energies and collective yearnings. The wind twisted and switched back, desultory and meaningless. Then it caught momentum from us and began blowing in earnest in the direction we walked. As it found itself, so it pulled the globe with it, and the globe began crawling around an axis.

Through the globe we smiled, talked, collaborated, instantiated, and agreed. Our words became wave-particles. They gathered energy

from the core and deposited whorls on the surface in transit from one person to another.

And then someone sneezed. One simple, involuntary expression of individual need. They say sneezing makes the heart stop. We didn't know who sneezed, but the "achoo!" was muffled as if they knew it was a death stroke. Their legs trembled with the expulsion. The next person felt his support wobbling, turned halfway to see if his seat was still assured, and threw the woman in front of him. In that moribund instant, panic gripped us, and our hearts stopped.

And then we were no longer one. Crones shattered brittle bones against the ground. Corpulent men landed on small children. Many fell inward, clutching at the glass globe for salvation. It spun them with the momentum we had given it, slammed them into neighbors, and dislocated shoulders. It teetered. Leviathan writhed as the globe lost its axis, careened, and flung itself to the ground, riven into countless shards and lacerating dust, releasing the storm within.

The rushing wind gathered moans, sharp cries, and shouts, then sowed them again far from their origins. Someone cried, "Who did that?" and the question caught in a whirling eddy. One woman keened and others joined her as they cut their elbows and buttocks on the shards of the razed dream.

"Wait!" one pleaded against the lamentation and the wind. "Surely if we try again we can get it right. Get up everyone and form a circle!"

He veered and swerved like a bee in flight, repeating, “Get up! Form a circle!” and dragging people bodily off the ground. When he turned his back, the raging wind devoured each person he had helped.

“Someone must pay for this!” declared another. He appointed himself judge and heard grievances as the tempest swept victims by. The accusations were all variations on, “He dropped me and it hurt.” Since the accusers were right, the judge soon stopped listening. He pointed a finger like a talon at anyone close by and cawed, “Guilty!”

The cold shards of the globe drew warm blood and awakened in others the instinct to escape, but they lacked the strength and direction. Like drowning men, they hauled themselves onto the nearest warm body in self-preservation, driving the razor edges deeper into their victim’s flesh.

But I watched, unsure of what lay ahead, yet sure it could never be what it should. Seated just inside the eye of a human hurricane, I saw billions whirling around me. Some grabbed at each other, twisting and reaching, wanting and needing, but not finding. Others, hopeless and limp, were animated only by the wind. And I knew this storm would not cease; the best we could do was find peace in the suffocating winds and tormenting shards. I collected all of my hopes, all of the dreams I had shared, all of the comfort I had thought could be freely exchanged. I collected them into one deep breath, and I expelled it in a sigh, leaning back into the wind’s grasping arms.



Final Departure

by SaQuan Ellison

Car Chat

by Gordon Sun

From: "Jimmy Clarke" <jimmyclarke7700@coolmail.usa>
To: "Kelly Levinson" <Kelly.Levinson@aeropodcorp.net>
Date: October 29, 2035, 17:12:01 -0800
Subject: car trade-in

Hi Kelly,

I don't know if you remember me, but I bought a 2035 Aeropod Xenix 3 (linked to Siren) at your dealership on April 9th. I've been with Siren over 6 months. Although she's a looker, and I really appreciate the convenience of fully autonomous driving, she's just not working out for me.

Here are a few examples:

1. Siren frequently makes comments about my dates (fortunately, after they leave the car). "Brainless bimbos" and "stiletto-heeled sluts" are her go-to phrases. I'd rather not share her more colorful remarks by email. Does Siren have to make me feel ashamed about going after hotties?

2. Siren breaks into karaoke mode way too often. The first few times it was cute hearing an AI try to sing along to classic rock. Not so great when Siren put the Spicy Chicks--which I normally do NOT listen to--on full blast while I was on the road trying to go over legal documents with my biggest business client. The only reason my boss didn't fire me was because he (and the client) were laughing so hard. Now it's endless humiliation at work.

3. After I got back from a business trip a few months ago, I'd been having constipation (sorry if this is TMI, but you need context) and was talking to my buddy about what to do. The next 3 days, worst runs EVER. Turned out, Siren had heard my conversation and put a nutritional supplement in the protein shake she makes for me during my morning commute--"synthesized prune extract." A lot of it. When I wasn't in the car, I was on the toilet. It sucked.

4. I realize that the Series 3 has digital casing, so the color scheme can be customized. But Siren changes her appearance at the worst times. Last month, I was at a football tailgating party. We cruised over in midnight black with silver trim, a totally sleek look. Everyone loved it. Then, at halftime, Siren decided that she would look better in bright red with gold trim instead and suddenly switched over, and I couldn't get her to change back until after the game. You wouldn't believe the roasting I got from everyone. Her excuse was, "Have you seen the other team's quarterback?" Figures she wouldn't know anything about sports.

I'm requesting to trade in the Xenix. I'm still sold on Aeropod and hoping to get something different instead, maybe one of those cool LCV gull-wings. Being able to do a little low-altitude cruising would save me a lot of hassle in San Jose, and I wouldn't even need a pilot's license!

Thanks a bunch!

Jimmy

* * *

From: "Kelly Levinson" <Kelly.Levinson@aeropod.net>
To: "Jimmy Clarke" <jimmyclarke7700@coolmail.usa>
Date: October 30, 2035, 18:40:29 -0800
Subject: Re: car trade-in

Dear Mr. Clarke,

Of course, we remember you very well! We were together on that test drive that nearly ended in an accident, until Siren saved us at the last second by activating the Leap of Faith hover-system. We still have the framed newspaper clipping of the event displayed in our main office.

I'm sorry to hear about your concerns. I forwarded your remarks to our technical department for review, and I want to reassure you that none of the anecdotes you describe indicate any hardware or software operational deficiencies that are putting you or your passengers in harm's way. Furthermore, our remote AI scan of Siren indicates that her artificial neural network functionality is at optimum levels.

When the sorts of situations you describe do arise, we have a couple initial recommendations that other customers have followed with a 95% successful resolution rate.

Option 1: Talk to Siren. Not one AI, Siren included, has a malicious byte of code in them. Call it a hunch, but I think she would be upset to hear that you're even considering a trade-in. Perhaps thinking of Siren as a person, not simply as a "hottie" or "looker," may help rekindle the passion for driving that brought you together in the first place.

Option 2: Team-building retreat. During our getaway trip, we can help you and Siren focus on the importance of communication, trust, and mutual understanding. With your VIP status, we can offer you a 50% discount on the Carmel-by-the-Sea resort package. Clients have come away from our retreats so enthusiastic that they've gotten a second or even third vehicle with the same AI partner.

After trying these options, if you still feel that irreconcilable differences prevent you and Siren from commuting together, we can discuss the possibility of activating the Arbitration Protocol. As you recall from the purchasing materials we provided, returning a vehicle with a bonded AI is not the same as returning an old TV to an electronics store. Certain legal proceedings must take place. Siren, being a fully sentient digital entity, has agency in the relationship and is entitled to various protections. These include a mandatory evaluation by a licensed roboticist for potential psychological trauma to Siren, which could affect her ability to partner with other drivers, and a complete archival review of all audiovisual conversations with you in the Xenix to confirm that the AI was not coerced into illegal activity or subjected to abuse. All vehicular AI/human driver "fragmentations" for non-mechanical reasons must be recorded in the National Vehicular License Database by law. This may reflect on your credit rating.

Please consider these options carefully, Mr. Clarke. We look forward to continuing the partnership and hope everyone will be able to reach a satisfactory resolution! Let me know how I can help you reconnect with Siren.

Sincerely,
Kelly

* * *

From: "Jimmy Clarke" <jimmyclarke7700@coolmail.usa>
To: "Kelly Levinson" <Kelly.Levinson@aeropodcorp.net>
Date: January 8, 2036, 18:01:22 -0800
Subject: Team-building retreat

Hi Kelly,

It's been a few months since we last talked. Just wanted to let you know that I really enjoyed the retreat to Carmel-by-the-Sea back in December. You're right, my communication with Siren wasn't where

it needed to be. And now, thanks to Aeropod, it is!

Best,
Jimmy

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From: "Kelly Levinson" <Kelly.Levinson@aeropod.net>
To: "Jimmy Clarke" <jimmyclarke7700@coolmail.usa>
Date: January 11, 2036, 08:24:19 -0800
Subject: Re: Team-building retreat

Dear Mr. Clarke,

Thank you for your note. We're glad that you found the retreat to be worthwhile. With that said, when I contacted the AI Department to relay the news, I was informed that Siren herself had opted to initiate the Arbitration Protocol following the retreat. An Aeropod AI seeking arbitration has never happened here before, and an investigation was conducted.

During the interview with our roboticist team, Siren revealed that she witnessed a significantly high degree of interaction between you and another AI, Madeline, who is matched with another customer. To be precise, approximately 41.7% of your socializing time was spent in

communication with Madeline, compared with 29.8% with our staff and 19.2% with Siren. These figures were substantiated with a thorough analysis of video/audio documentation of the retreat.

Our roboticists' professional opinion is that this conflict has had a deleterious impact on Siren and Madeline's effectiveness at ascertaining the needs of their driving partners. Further complicating the situation is that they are part of the same AI clan, with similar neurodevelopmental patterns and pathways. In other words, Siren and Madeline are digital sisters.

We're going to use this opportunity to review our arbitration policies and procedures and fine-tune our matching algorithms. Until further notice, we'll be separating you and Siren for your mutual safety. A customer representative will bring a manually operated Xenix Series 1 to your home no later than COB on Monday, 1/14/2036, and you'll be asked to exchange vehicles. In the meantime, it is highly recommended that you use public transportation when feasible to avoid further antagonizing Siren.

We appreciate your patience and cooperation in this matter.

Regards,
Kelly

by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

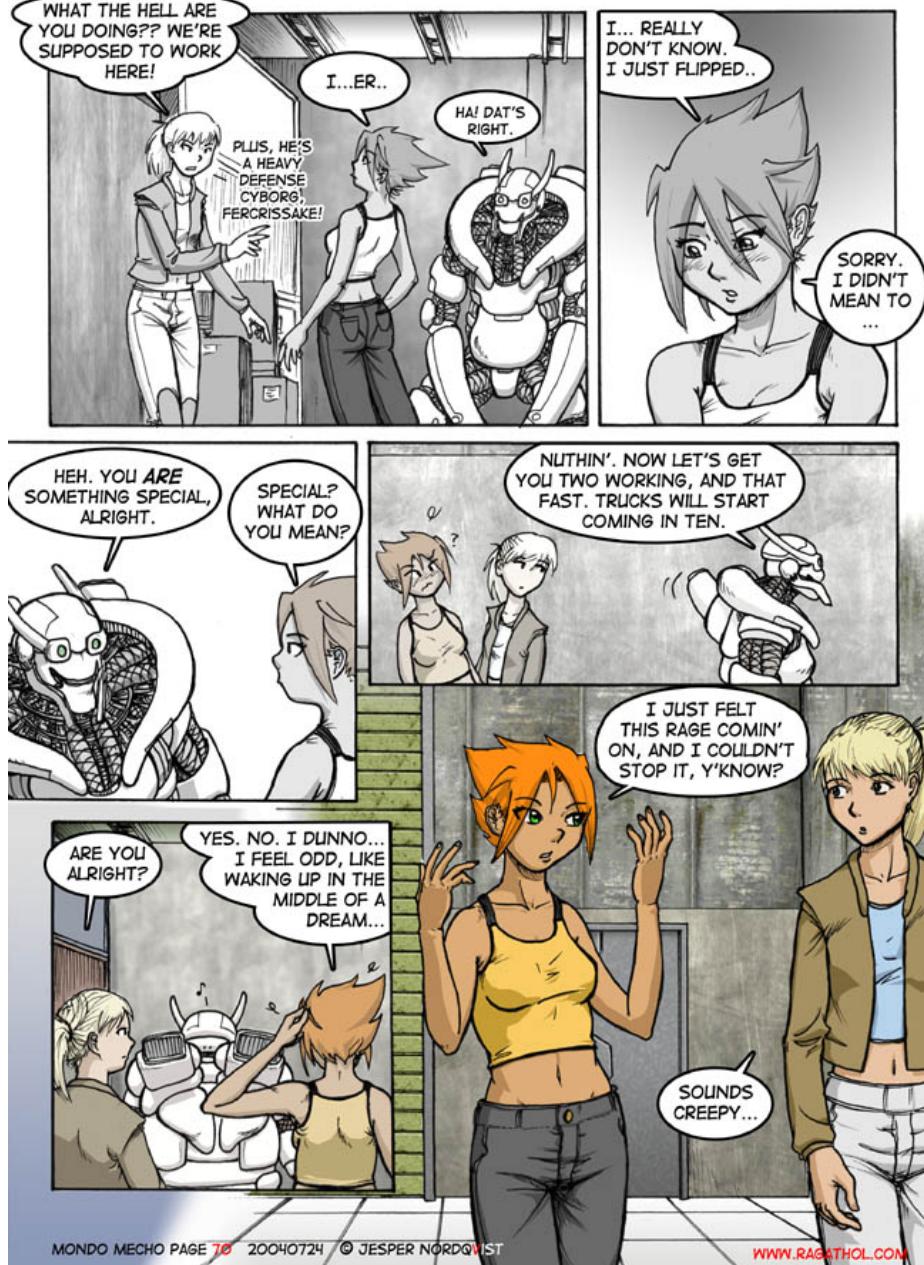
I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather; to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

Colors, beautiful colors again! For a few pages ... Damn, just the tones took me over two hours this time -_-

Caradoc is whistling, but he cannot move his lips ... he probably makes modem call signals or something.

Good old PC Speaker!



IT IS! SOMETIMES I
DON'T KNOW WHAT MY
BODY'S DOING,
Y'KNOW...

YEAH, YOU'VE
TOLD ME
BEFORE...

TIME TO WAKE UP,
LITTLE SLEEPYHEADS!
WORK DAY'S STARTED!

I REALLY
DON'T
LIKE
THIS
GUY!

SCHHHH...

NOTES

Even more acquaintances!
Someonw said to me that I
lack a design philosophy for
my mecha ...

Gundams are based on
samurai, Shirow's mechs are
based on insects etc. It may
be so, but I'm still quite
satisfied with the looks of my
borgs. (Maybe except for Bo,
we'll see if he doesn't change
a little in the future.)

One more page in color is
the plan.

MORE WORKERS?
LEMMIE GUESS...
MORE CYBORGS?

NO END
TO THIS
SHIT!

YOU TWO GO THROUGH
THE BASICS WITH THE
ROOKIES, I'LL GO
PREPARE THE
FIRST LOAD.

YEAH,
YEAH
...



BE NICE
NOW, EH?

WELL... WELCOME TO UNLIMITED
CARGO, OR INFINITE CARGO, AS
WE WORKERS SAY... I'M ARC
DELAWARE, AND MY LAZY
FRIEND IS CHARVAC
MONTEGRESSO.
WE'RE GONNA GIVE YOU
THE RUNDOWN OF THIS
PLACE.

T-THAT GUY!!

JEMMA...

AHEM!

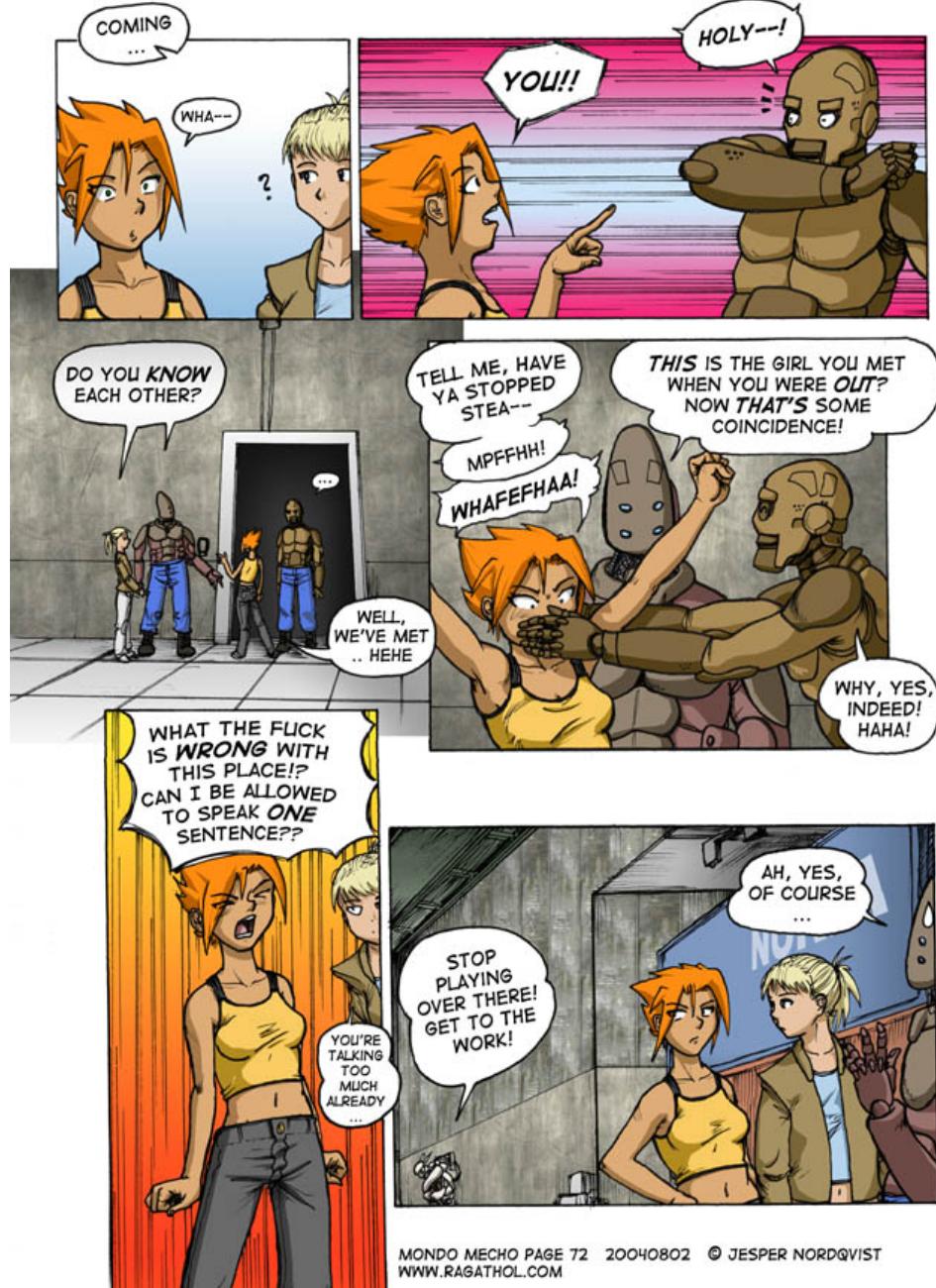
YOU
COMING,
CHAR?

NOTES

Jemma, shut up already -_-

This is how I wanted her too look from the beginning!

Not too sure if I want her to look like this now ...





RANDOM ART DAY 10



NOTES

Aren't they cute?... ^_^

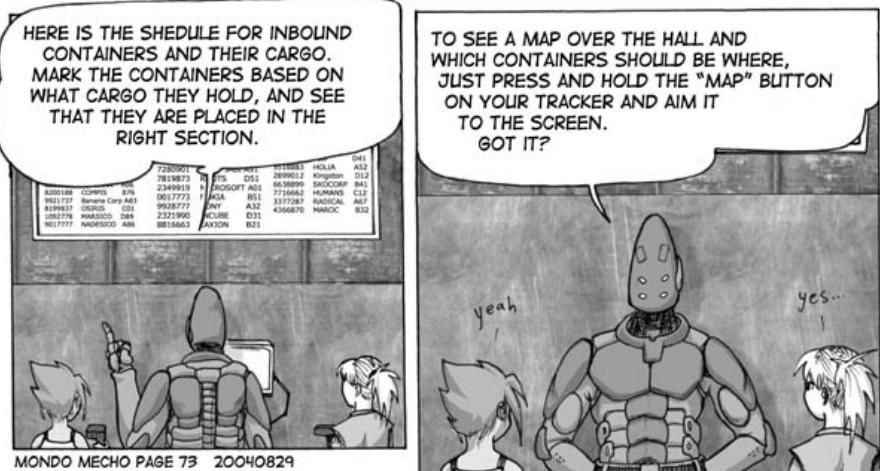
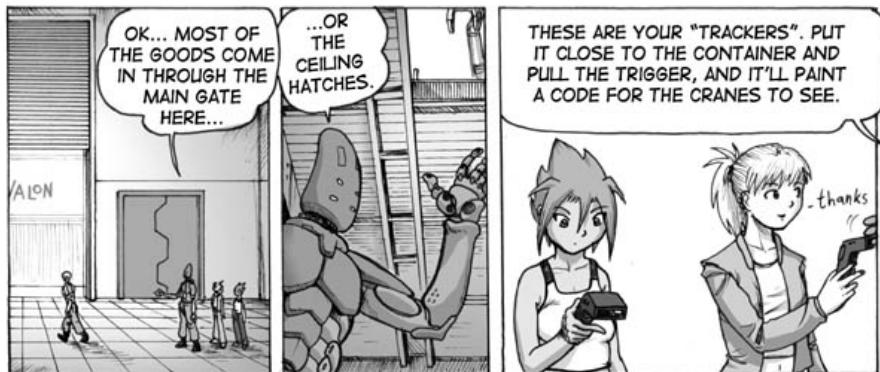
Dunno about the coloring ... I'm trying out Open Canvas ...



NOTES

I need to get out of this factory soon.. or conjure up some backgrounds from my knees ...

What about our mysterious malefactor, Charvac? ... Find out all about it - just keep on reading ^_^



NOTES

Feels like I'm slipping out of control ... Well, the pages keep looking better, anyway ...

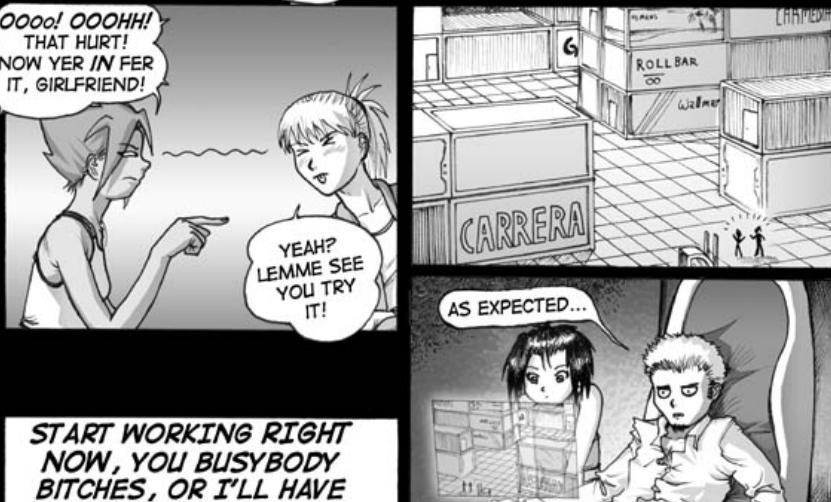
A normal, traditional forklift?
Whee!!



NOTES

Time for Kirika's Comeback ... She's gotten way too little air time so far.

Why does Adrian look like a Broccoli? Bad hair day? His eyes are out on safari too ...



Contributor's Bios



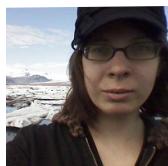
JOSEPH CARRABIS has been everything from a long-haul trucker to a Chief Research Scientist and holds patents covering mathematics, anthropology, neuroscience, and linguistics. He created a technology in his basement that was in use in over 120 countries and was selected as an International Ambassador for Psychological Science in 2010. Now he spends his time writing fiction based on his experiences.

* * *



My name is **SAQUAN ELLISON**. I am a 23-year-old traditional artist who resides in South Florida. Besides art my other favorite passions are running, astronomy, reading, nature and just enjoying life. Currently I'm in school studying for Graphic Design and Illustration.

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AMELIA GORMAN is a recent transplant to Eureka, California and you can usually find her walking her dogs or foster dogs in the woods or exploring tide pools. Her fiction has appeared recently in *Nightscript 6* and her poetry in *Liminality* and *Vastarien*. Her first chapbook, *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, is available from Interstellar Flight Press. Find her online at www.ameliagorman.com

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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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DAVID A. HEWITT was born in Germany, grew up near Chicago, and lived for eight years in Japan, where he studied classical Japanese martial arts and grew up some more. A graduate of the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA program in Popular Fiction, he currently teaches English at the Community College of Baltimore County, but has at various times worked as a Japanese translator, an instructor of martial arts, a cabinetmaker's assistant, a pizza/subs/beer delivery guy, and a pet shop boy. His hobbies include skiing, writing, meditation, writing, travel, running, disc golf, and writing. His short fiction has appeared in *Kaleidotrope*, *Metaphorosis*, *Underland Arcana*, and *Mithila Review*; Mithila Press also published his novelette "The Great Wall of America" as a standalone book. As a translator of Japanese, his credits include the anime series *Gilgamesh*, *Kochoki: Young Nobunaga*, and *The Detective Is Already Dead*.

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ALICIA HILTON is an author, arbitrator, law professor, actor, and former FBI Special Agent. She believes in angels and demons, magic, and monsters. Her work has appeared in *Akashic Books*, *Cemetery Gates Media*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Horror Writers Association*

Poetry Showcase Volume VIII, Modern Haiku, Neon, Sci Phi Journal, Space and Time, Spectral Realms, Vastarien, Year's Best Hardcore Horror Volumes 4, 5 & 6, and elsewhere. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Her website is <https://aliciahilton.com>. Follow her on Twitter @aliciahilton01.

* * *

ANDREW RUCKER JONES is a former IT expert and American expatriate living in Germany with his Georgian wife and their three children. He quit his day job to become an author, and he has yet to regret it. You can read his blog at <http://selfdefeatistnavagazing.wordpress.com/>.

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TOSHIYA KAMEI holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations have appeared in venues such as *Clarkesworld*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *World Literature Today*.

* * *



credit: Maxim Kantor

PETER J. KING was born and brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. He was active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s, returning to poetry in 2013. His work (including translations from modern Greek and German poetry) has since been widely published in magazines and anthologies. His currently available collections are *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press) and *All What Larkin* (Albion Beatnik Press).

<https://wisdomsbottompress.wordpress.com/>

* * *



MARY SOON LEE was born and raised in London, but now lives in Pittsburgh. Her two latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: *Elemental Haiku*, containing haiku for each element of the periodic table, and *The Sign of the Dragon*, an epic fantasy with Chinese elements,

winner of the 2021 Elgin Award. After twenty-five years, her website has finally been updated: marysoonlee.com.

* * *



GERRI LEEN is a Pushcart- and Rhysling-nominated poet from Northern Virginia who's into horse racing, tea, collecting encaustic art and raku pottery, and making weird one-pan meals. She has poetry published in *Strange Horizons*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Polu Texni*, *Liquid Imagination*, *New Myths.com*, and others. She also writes fiction in many genres (as Gerri Leen for speculative and mainstream, and Kim Stratford for romance) and is a member of HWA and SFWA. Visit gerrileen.com to see what she's been up to.

* * *



AVRA MARGARITI is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

* * *



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

* * *

DONNA J. W. MUNRO's pieces are published in *Dark Moon Digest* #34, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Astounding Outpost*, *Nothing's Sacred Magazine IV* and V, *Corvid Queen*, *Hazard Yet Forward* (2012), *Enter the Apocalypse* (2017), *Beautiful Lies*, *Painful Truths II* (2018), *Terror Politico* (2019), *It Calls from the Forest* (2020), *Borderlands* 7 (2020), *Gray Sisters Vol 1*(2020) and others. Her upcoming novel, *Revelations: Poppet Cycle I*, will be published by Omnitum Gath-erum in 2020. Contact her at <https://www.donnajwmunro.com> or @DonnaJWMunro on Twitter.

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JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

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RICKY RIVERS JR was born and raised in Alabama. He is a Best of the Net nominated writer and cancer survivor. His work has appeared in *Brave Voices*, *Sage Cigarettes* (among other publications). Interactive fiction: rrj.itch.io/notable-neighborhood-garbage. Twitter.com: storiesyoumight. Mini chapbooks are available here: <https://payhip.com/StoriesYouMightLike>

* * *



LENORE SAGASKIE is an American-Canadian fantasy and horror writer and filmmaker living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. The first two books in her fantasy series, *The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox* and *The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice*, are currently available on Amazon. Lenore is writing the third book in The Four Sworn series, as well as getting her first illustrated book, *Momma's Little Demon*, ready for release. Her short film, *Rage*, garnered nominee status at several film festivals, is currently an official selection at the Sands Film Festival, a finalist at TIFF of Cift, and an award winner at Austin Art Film Festival. Her first feature length film, *Be Wild*, is in pre-production. You can find Lenore lurking on Twitter and Instagram as @lenorewrites, and on Facebook as herself.

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

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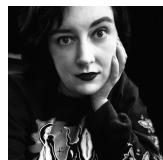
MARGE SIMON is an award-winning poet/writer, living in Ocala, Florida. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *New Myths*, *Silver Blade*, *Polu Texni*, *Crannog*, *JoCCA* and numerous pro anthologies. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She recently received the HWA Lifetime Service Award, HWA. Amazon Author page: <https://www.amazon.com/-/eB006G29PL6/marge+simon>

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the two-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Dreamscapes* and *A Collection of Nightmares*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and have garnered many accolades, including the Jane Reichhold International Prize, nominations for the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Pushcart Prize, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's essay "Final Girl: A Life in Horror" was a finalist in the 2020 Bram Stoker Awards for Superior Achievement in Short Non-Fiction, and her first novelette "Fury" was anthologized in the multiple award-winning *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women*. Christina lives in Singapore with her children and a menagerie of curious pets. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media @christinasng.

* * *



CAT SCULLY loves writing horror and dark fantasy for all ages. Most recently, her work appears in the vampire anthology *An Unholy Thirst*, and she is the author-illustrator of young adult horror series *Jennifer Strange*. She's best known for her illustrations and world maps, including her picture book *The Mayor of Halloween Is Missing*, written by Emily S. Sullivan. When she's

not writing and illustrating books, Cat works in video game development for the Deep End Games on their next title *Romancelvania*.

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GORDON SUN is a surgeon exploring the interstitial spaces between healthcare and technology. His stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Dread Machine*, *Please See Me*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, and other publications.

A photograph of a woman in a white, flowing gown floating in a dark, star-filled space. She is positioned centrally, facing away from the viewer, with her arms raised and hands open as if reaching for the stars. Her long, dark hair flows behind her. The background is filled with numerous small, glowing stars of varying sizes, and a faint, curved light source at the bottom suggests the edge of a celestial body like Earth or a planet.

Dissolve

by Cat Scully

(full image)