



penumbra

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Memory

Reality is what we
remember

Prose, Poetry, and
Art featuring

Elana Gomel • Maia Brown-
Jackson • Yuliia Vereta • Flairiart
• Aaron Knuckey • Emmie
Christie • Eva Papasoulioti •
Jade Scardham • Huijia Li •
Deborah L. Davitt • D. H. Parish
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C.J. Subko • David Sandner •
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MacCulloch • EA Mylonas

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

Table of contents

from the editor, 1

fiction & poetry

by Elana Gomel

by Yuliia Vereta

by Aaron Knuckey

by Emmie Christie

by Eva Papasoulioti

by Huijia Li

by Deborah L. Davitt

by D. H. Parish

by Jennifer Jeanne McArdle

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

by Annie Tupek

by E.W.H. Thornton

by Jennifer Crow

by C.J. Subko

by David Sandner

by Simon MacCulloch

by EA Mylonas

The Prison-House of Language, 3

A sneak peek into the unknown, 16

After Leaping 100 Light Years from Earth, 18

The Worst Is Not Darkness, 19

impermanence, 25

Painted Skin, 27

Come and Play, 28

Last Door on the Left, 30

I've Seen the Movie, 33

Wolf Girl Relishes the Wolf Moonrise, 47

Remnants, 49

The Slide, 51

Cloaked in Starlight and Doom, 61

The Creeping, 63

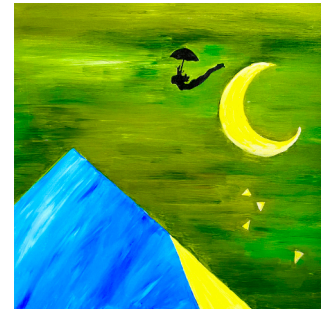
Notes on Monsters I Have Loved, 68

Delivery, 70

Thank You and Goodnight, 71



Dark Siren



Untitled 2

art

by Maia Brown-Jackson

by Flairiart

by Jade Scardham

by Carl Scharwath

by Irina Tall

by Binod Dawadi

by Janis Butler Holm

Untitled (1) and (2), 14 and 15

Quasar Titans, 17

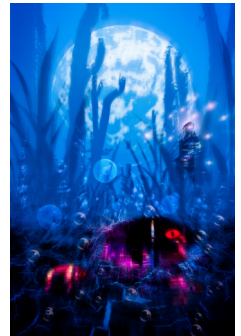
Dissolution, 26

Voyant, 48

Dark Siren, 60

Intruder, 62

Gleeful Arrival, 69



cover: Communion
by Barbara Candiotti

contributors

Bios, 86

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

When you think about AI—general AI, not generative—acting human, this tends to be all about emotions/feelings and personalities. Memory isn't a concern. For some reason, we're perfectly happy for our "human-like" AI to have computer-like memory systems—perfect, accessible, speedy. For my game AI engines, I created not only a personality system but also a memory system that more closely mimicked human memory, moving some memories from short- to long-term memory, misremembering some things, forgetting others completely. Now, even in a game, this isn't what most programmers want; NPCs need to impart certain pieces of info to the players, and you wouldn't want to run the risk that they give misremembered "facts" to the players, or forget to give info entirely. In fact, creating such an engine is more about just experimenting with it for its own sake.

One of the things you notice when running such systems in what amounts to an empty box is that the NPCs basically create their own reality with their memories, foggily remembered or not. And inside a blank and malleable canvas, the reality becomes, well, real to them and to any others within the same box; there's really nothing to distinguish between what I know/think is the "real" memory originally entered into the system and the new "real memory" they've created and accepted.

This is to be expected, really, for the NPCs, isolated as they are.

But would you expect it in "real" life, with "real" humans? Unfortunately, we seem to be running the same experiment ourselves, and unexpectedly with very similar results.

Although at one time the development of social media seemed to be leading us (along with the rest of the Internet) to better and more widespread knowledge, it also has lead us to more and more fragmented realities. We've become, or always were, able to put ourselves in boxes similar to those my NPCs were stuck in, and then within that isolation accept whatever "reality" is fed into it. Worse, the vast knowledge that does still flow around the 'Net and could help us all to help each other build a better future doesn't seem to be able to penetrate into these self-made social isolation tanks; in fact, attempts to introduce facts into these systems just make the "walls" thicker; we more aggressively believe our misrememberences (or "lies") (which is a whole other psychological thing beyond explaining here), and in some cases the isolation and lies become even more hyperbolic.

I guess my memory system didn't go far enough, really; the NPCs didn't develop this aggressive refusal to learn new ideas or revise old ones, and thus my engines were not as human-like as I thought. But maybe, in this case, I'd rather they weren't. And maybe the future AI creatures won't destroy us because we are emotional, illogical creatures, but instead because we've fragmented into tiny groups of flat-earthers who refuse to learn

anything new or contradictory to our established beliefs. Maybe they won't so much destroy us as wall us off, so that eventually the situation I created with the NPCs will be reversed, and we'll be the ones stuck in blank little boxes.

And we probably won't even notice.

On that grim thought, happy holidays,

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

The Prison-House of Language

by Elana Gomel

I did not speak until I was six.

My parents were offered the usual platitudes: *Einstein did not speak until he was in primary school* (not true); *did you try a body-based therapy* (the answer a horrified “no!”); *she will never shut up when she starts* (in high school, I would often go for days without opening my mouth; I still do). I was lucky, though, that my parents, being constantly on the move and totally wrapped up in each other, paid little attention to my disability. I was not diagnosed until much later in life. I was not medicated. When our three-person family settled down in some place for longer than a couple of months, I was given intermittent speech therapy, which produced no results whatsoever. I was not bullied in the various schools I attended; just ignored. When I reached adolescence, my exotic looks—green eyes and cocoa-colored skin—drew the attention of boys, so I never lacked company. I liked sex because it precluded the need for conversation.

Language always felt, to me, like an invasion. When it finally came, it filled my mouth like a handful of grinding stones. I often experience a physical pain producing words: some words more than others. It has little to do with their meaning and a lot with their shape. Words like “love,” “delegate,” “serendipity,” and “confabulate” make my gums bleed. Others, like “kismet” and “friendship,” are puke-colored. Still others, like “starch” and “optimize,” are glass-transparent, but can be dangerous if broken into sharp little syllables. Language, to me, is a danger-

ous and unwanted thing, a brutal intrusion into my inner space.

I became a linguist.

It’d be easy to say that I was looking for a language I could speak without spitting blood, but that would be an oversimplification. I can learn a new language in a week and retain it forever. Occasionally, I pull out a retired language from my mental storage and examine it, hoping that it has somehow matured into compatibility while fermenting in my mind. But this never happens. Swahili is the closest to a neutral means of communication I can use, but it still gives me a cluster headache. Standard Arabic is like chewing a rose-flavored gum: pleasant at first, but soon nauseating. English is the worst: rock fragments rolling in my mouth and battering my teeth. Even writing it requires wearing a mouth guard, so I won’t shatter my expensive dental work.

For a while, I tried to use a tablet to communicate. But the admiration of my classmates when I faultlessly answered any question asked by a randomized language program in the same tongue, aided only by my brash self-confidence, was too heady. Boys told me I had a beautiful voice. They say that Renoir painted despite excruciating arthritic pain. I convinced myself that I was like him—a solitary genius, overcoming the weakness of the flesh by the sheer force of will.

This, of course, had been before my father’s death. Afterwards, I hugged my pain as a substitute. Or an atonement.

* * *

The call came as I was researching one of the recently extinct Australian languages, Bidyara. This was my own pet project that had nothing to do with my official job as a translator to the UN. I was trying to recreate the first language, the primal language spoken by our hominine ancestors. This is an idea universally considered to be antiquated, anti-scientific, and vaguely racist, on a par with the medieval attempts to figure out the language of God. Naturally, it became an obsession. I have been repeatedly told that OCD is part of my “condition.” It is the only part I enjoy.

The window blinked into existence, overlaying the phonetic grid I was peering at, and the face of an old woman stared disapprovingly at my attenuated attire: knickers and a tube top. I knew she was old because her porcelain skin had that weird, glassy sheen that repeated gene-juve leaves in its wake. I actually like it and am looking forward to acquiring my own—in about thirty years *if* everything goes well with my stock portfolio. Rejuvenation does not come cheap.

“Dr. Abdoul?” the woman asked. “Dr. Sophia Abdoul?”

I was silent. I don’t waste my limited speech tolerance on small talk. She knew who she had called.

The old woman sighed. She was generically beautiful, with one of those faces that, as Oscar Wilde had quipped, once seen, are never remembered.

“We would like to hire you,” she said. “A special project, full non-disclosure, B1-pay-grade. Starting immediately.”

I lifted a brow. Non-verbal communication is not painful, just

irritating.

“The Peace Corps,” she clarified.

The Army.

* * *

We are made by language. It has dug an impassable trench between us and our animal brethren, who peer at us across this divide with their mute, opaque eyes. Animals have various communication systems, some quite sophisticated. But human language is structured quite differently from these systems. Note that I say “language,” not “languages.” All human tongues have the same underlying grammar. The old Chomsky theory that language is a sort of universal module, miraculously slotted into our brains at birth, has often been challenged, but never disproven.

Something went wrong when this slotting happened to my brain. My DNA has been mapped, and a number of mutations pinpointed. Some could be reversed. As with all gene therapies, the consent for this reversal had to be given by the recipient at the appropriate legal age (which happened to be twelve in South Sudan, where my parents were stationed to monitor another interminable civil war that had come on the tail-end of yet another patented crop’s failure). I was asked; at the time, I refused. My parents did not pressure me.

I still occasionally call my mother, blot out my end, and have exactly five seconds to look at her until, tired of fruitless “Who is it?”, she disconnects and blacklists another disposable number.

* * *

The old woman's name was Major Stella Rostoff. The name, Russian in origin, did not suit her. On our way to the Project's location, I amused myself by figuring out what language she should be speaking as her mother tongue. I decided it should be Azeri, full of quick, bit-off words that sound like curses or commands.

She spoke English, of course, and badly, too: with meandering sentences and unnecessary repetitions. Finally, I just asked for the relevant material to be downloaded to my implant and reviewed it in blessed silence.

As the result of this review, I had to risk a toothache by speaking.

"Why am I here?" I asked.

Stella looked at me in amazement.

"Your unique qualifications ..." she began.

"I am a linguist. This is brain science. Take me back."

I had reached my limit of pain-free speech and had no intention of continuing unless I was paid, so I mutely ordered my AI to stop the car, which resulted in our fishtailing across the tawny-colored Mojave Desert. Fortunately, we had passed the electronic fence, plastered with threatening signs, some time ago, so there were no other cars to hit.

"Whoa, whoa!" Stella's AI returned us to the dusty tarmac and pulled off. "Didn't you get to the part about the aftereffects?"

I had glanced at it, but now I called it up again. I reluctantly

admitted that she may have a point. In any case, a second thought occurred to me: a B1-pay-grade was nothing to sneer at in the time of depressed markets. My portfolio was not doing as well as I needed it to be doing.

I stared at the faces of the volunteers. They all looked grey, somehow, and I wondered whether this was another side effect or sheer exhaustion. A human being can go on without sleep for about seven days. After that, hallucinations, delusions, and severe cognitive impairment set in. Two weeks of sleeplessness kill rats and presumably humans. These people had been awake for at least four days, on the average. It was not because they could not sleep. It was because they refused to do so. They drank coffee until their heartbeats spiked up into the danger territory; they paced their rooms; they beat their heads on the wall; they stuck knives and scissors into their flesh to keep themselves from nodding off. But a person can only stay awake by the sheer force of will for so long. Eventually, they drifted off into slumber one by one. And when they did, they did not wake up.

I scrolled through the files to see how many of them were in a coma. It seemed more than sixty percent. The others were holding sleep off, but only just.

I risked another grind of words on my molars.

"How were they chosen?"

"Volunteers," Stella replied.

This was what the files said, but I did not believe it. I stared at her until she looked away.

"Refugees," she said. "Promised asylum."

This was interesting, if only because it confirmed what I had gathered from their names and faces: they were of all ethnicities and all mother tongues. And yet they all gabbled alike, producing an unending stream of the same gibberish.

It is actually quite hard to make up a language. Whatever mother tongue you originally spoke would emerge from under the artificial agglomeration of random sounds like the bedrock from under the swirls of windblown sand in the desert. And even if somebody came up with a truly new vocabulary, the essential structure of all human languages—the Chomsky module—would still be there. Examples abound: like a group of deaf kids in Nicaragua in the 1970s developing their own sign language, or the pompous tongues of bad fiction, from Elvish to Klingon.

But the sounds produced by the sleep refuseniks of the Project, while undoubtedly articulate and quite complex, did not fit any phonetic template I could think of. And they were uniform across the group, regardless of whether it was Rima from Lebanon or Augul from Xinjiang speaking.

“Translate?” I asked as the car sped across the baked landscape.

Stella gave me a contemptuous glance.

“The best AI translation programs,” she said. “No results.”

The subtext was that they would not bother with me if their precious machines could do the job. I could not argue with that.

The warm air, smelling of sagebrush and dust, caressed my face when we exited the car, having gone through the gauntlet of discreetly camouflaged security cameras. I like the dry calm of

deserts. It is the wet heaviness of coastal cities that I have a problem with.

The Project was located in a sunken structure whose mirrored dome was painted orange and dark rose by the garish sunset. I looked up into the pink sky as I followed Stella across the forecourt. There was nothing to see, of course. All that peering into the universe with powerful telescopes in search of a sign—and all in vain. The real thing had been hiding in plain sight within this glorified military bunker. Or rather, within the brains of the refugees that cowered in their brightly lit cells, afraid to go to sleep.

The aliens.

* * *

There is a story in Herodotus that Pharaoh Psamtik I, eager to know what the first language spoken by humans was, ordered two babies to be brought up by deaf-mutes. Supposedly, the children started spontaneously babbling in Phrygian. Subsequently, other curious tyrants repeated this atrocious experiment. The primordial tongue varied according to the expectations of the culture: Hebrew, Latin, even, in some versions, French. Now we scoff at those crude attempts to dig down to the roots of humanity. Children reared with no linguistic interaction would not speak at all. And yet ... there must have been the ur-language, spoken by the original band of hominines who rolled over the planet, exterminating their mute cousins. Wouldn't you like to know what it sounded like?

But perhaps an even more interesting question is: what was there *before* language? The empty slot of the Chomsky module: had it truly been empty before the plug of the universal grammar

was shoved in?

* * *

I showered off the dust of the desert journey in the tiny bathroom of my assigned quarters, which contained a bed, a wardrobe, and a sim-window. Irritatingly, it showed surf on the sodden beach. I tinkered with the controls and succeeded in calling up a forest scene with a spastic rabbit that twitched alarmingly, due to some programming glitch. Still, it was better than the alternative. The quarters were Spartan, to put it mildly, but thanks to my upbringing, I am very adaptable. My parents, observers for the UN Human Rights Committee, had been very relaxed about such things as tables, chairs, and indoor plumbing.

At least the dome was warm. I hate layers of clothing and go naked when the occasion calls, which has the added advantage of signaling to potential sex partners without having to go through the torture of small talk. But the only people of the Project I had met so far had been Major Stella and a glum neurobiologist called Aziz, who exhibited all the symptoms of an incipient nervous breakdown. Neither of them was to my taste, so I put on shorts and a top and went exploring.

I was stopped by a soldier before I got very far, and it took a call to Stella to straighten things out. She showed up in person, looking peeved.

“I thought you’d want to go over the recordings first,” she said.

“Sleep,” I started to say, but seeing incomprehension on her face, realized I was speaking in Old German. It fills my mouth with a meaty aftertaste, but it was better than the rattling stones of English. My teeth were already throbbing.

“Sleep,” I repeated, determined not to say another word, but she understood. Perhaps I had underestimated her. Even stupid people are improved by experience, and who was to say how many years our blond, ponytailed major had spent in the military?

She nodded reluctantly.

“Yes,” she said, “they cannot hold out much longer without sleep. And no matter what we do, we cannot wake up them up. Scans show alterations in the frontal lobe, but unlike any other pathology we have ever seen. Very well, try to talk to them. Follow me.”

* * *

It all started with the Fermi paradox, of course. You know: if there are aliens, where are they? Tons of verbiage promising a solution; SETI programs; search for inhabitable planets ... and nothing. Not a peep.

And then somebody had a bright idea. The name of that genius was blotted out in my records, but I did not care who it was. The consequences were all that mattered.

Perhaps, so the thinking went, aliens are in fact all around us, but we cannot see them because our perception is limited and skewed by language. It has long been argued that language conditions not only what we can say, but what we can think and see. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it is called, though I prefer the poetic phrase “the prison-house of language.” I don’t remember its origin, but it has stuck with me and apparently with whoever was behind the Project. They suggested that we break down the prison walls and let our perception roam free. Perhaps then we can actually contact the aliens.

The idea sounded loopy to me, but the military was persuaded, though a more cynical interpretation may suggest that they just wanted to do something with the refugees accumulating in the island camps. So, the Project was set up. It had a code name, but everybody just called it the Project, which had a certain logic to it: if you want to get rid of language, use as few words as possible.

The details of the brain intervention that the subjects had undergone were too technical for me, but it was clear they involved switching off several genes involved in language acquisition, including the famous FOXP2, and switching on some dormant bits of DNA. Astonishingly, instead of just plunging the subjects into a coma straightaway, this brain-scrambling produced spectacular results. First, the so-called volunteers, who had apparently not known each other before the experiment, started falling asleep and waking up simultaneously, even when they were kept apart. Second, their dreams became synchronized as well. Dream-recording equipment is still crude and unreliable, but they were able to obtain some spectacular footage, which I reviewed with increasing disquiet. And finally, though they lost the capacity to use their native languages, they did not stop speaking. Just the opposite: as the tapes showed, they gabbled incessantly. I was reminded of the glossolalia of charismatic sects, even though this oozing of agglutinated phonemes sounded more uniform than anything produced by ecstatic worshippers. But if this was a language, it was unlike anything else on Earth.

And this was where I came in.

* * *

Rima Habibi was a pretty, slim girl with brown hair and blue eyes like many Lebanese; the Crusaders' genetic legacy, more

durable than the crumbling stones of Beaufort Castle. She looked underage to me, and I seriously doubted she was legally competent to give consent, but such niceties had been almost forgotten in the last decade of renewed political upheavals. She was wedged into the corner of her cell. Her hand was bleeding from where she had repeatedly struck it against the edge of the table. I crouched in front of her, despite the obvious disapproval of Stella, who hovered at the entrance with an armed guard peering over her shoulder.

I spoke to Rima in Lebanese Arabic, which, as opposed to other Arabic dialects, tastes of aniseed. It is my favorite, so I may have cheated by choosing her, though it quickly became clear that it made no difference, as she did not react at all. I was observing her carefully, and there was not even an unconscious twitch or eye movement, which always accompanies the sounds of a familiar language. I spoke to her in French. I even tried Armenian, even though her file stated she was a Christian Arab. No luck.

But she did speak, though it did not seem to be in response to what I said. She was gabbling on over me, pouring forth a flood of shocking syllables. I listened carefully for a while, and then I leaned forward and dabbed away the blood on her hand with an analgesic tissue I had brought with me.

I discovered myself on the floor, cartoon stars in my eyes, stickiness on my brow that had split open as Rima's delicate hands smashed me into the wall. The armed guard was yelling as he pushed her face down on her cot while Stella tried to lift me up. I stopped the commotion by getting up myself and telling the guard to leave the subject alone.

When we were outside, I turned to Stella.

“It’s not a human language,” I said.

“You mean it’s not one you know?”

“I mean it’s not one anybody knows. It does not have the structure of a human language. It’s outside the Chomsky module.”

She frowned, looking dubious.

“It sounds articulate.”

“So do thrushes’ songs.”

“And you can’t translate it?”

She sounded both disappointed and relieved, and I thought that perhaps she was not as invested in the success of the Project as she made out to be. Thoughts of retirement? Or ... fear?

“I will,” I said. “But for this, I need to step outside the prison-house. I need to go into their dream.”

* * *

After what happened to my father, I had decided I no longer wanted my talent. The mutant genes in my brain could be switched off, at least some of them, and so I canceled the form I had signed in South Sudan and contacted the UN hospital in Istanbul. The procedure was too dangerous to be done at once, and I was to be hospitalized for a couple of weeks. I was alone; a fifteen-year-old with no visitors. They did something that resulted in bouts of nausea, blurred vision, and inability to remember Aramaic suffixes. I was set on continuing when I got a letter from my mother saying, essentially, that she never wanted

to see me again. I checked myself out of the hospital that very day.

The thing is, the gene that they had switched off was one of the suite that the Project’s subjects had had tampered with. In my brain, it clearly had played a different role: before my aborted procedure, I had been multilingual, rather than aphasic, and remained so after it. Even my Aramaic had come back. But what if the expression of this gene was somehow triggered or modified by the presence of others with a similar mutation? What if switching it back on would enable me to enter their shared dream-space without losing my ability to understand and speak human language? It was a slender hope, but it was all we had. The number of awake subjects dwindled every day. Rima was found curled up in her bed a couple of hours after our altercation. And if no one remained awake, who would I speak to, once I learned their language?

Having a mild anesthetic injected into my forearm, I seemed to float into some inchoate pink room, warm and cozy. But then I heard the sound of waves and smelled the fuggy rot of seaweed drying on the polluted shore.

* * *

This was supposed to be the last assignment I would accompany my parents on. I was growing up and my talents had drawn the attention of various UN agencies. I had a place reserved for me in a very exclusive boarding school. But I had never been to Turkey before—or since.

Izmir, on the shores of the Aegean Sea, is one of the most beautiful cities of the region. But all I remember is the sluggish waves stirring the slime-covered pebbles and the rusty splatters

of blood on the cobbles of Kemeralti.

The Circassian rebellion was winding down as we arrived, put down with efficient brutality by the government. It was our bad luck that a splinter group ran into us just as we were exiting the cab in front of the Karaca Hotel. They herded us away with curses and much waving of their antiquated rifles. They were speaking a sub-dialect of the Circassian, which I had not encountered before. It sounded like mint and wood varnish.

They blindfolded us and took us to a secret location. I heard them say its address several times. I also heard them say that we were not to be harmed, as they intended to trade us for a promise of safe passage to the Circassian Free Republic, which was to survive another month or so. I was not particularly worried, and neither were my parents, who had been in similar situations before. They knew that the way to handle the captors was to be as open and truthful as possible.

The window in the small room was barred, but the sash was raised to let air in, and it smelled of fish-rot. Didn't they realize that we could figure out our location without understanding their rapid-fire chat? Perhaps it was the intimation of our perfidy, rather than any real need to keep their paltry secret. Perhaps they subconsciously believed that the UN represented some promise of fairness in the world that was about to come crashing down around them.

They brought us tea and talked to my father in Turkish, which he had immediately told them he knew. They did not address my mother and me, us being mere women, and gave us white scarves to cover our hair, even though the rebellion was supposed to be secular and nationalistic, in opposition to Turkey's theocratic regime. Maybe that set me off. Or maybe it was just

thoughtlessness. I don't remember.

One of them addressed their leader in Circassian, telling him they did not know how to get in touch with the UN Headquarters to inform them they had their people.

"It's in our phones, you fool!" I said, proud of my perfect pronunciation of his rough dialect. "Just dial! And do it quickly, I want out of this hole. They say Çeşme is a tourist town; sure doesn't look like one!"

I can still see the shock on their faces. And then the man who had spoken roughly dragged my father out of the room. He had lied to them, hadn't he? If his slip of a daughter could speak their obscure language so well, clearly the envoy and his family had prepared for this mission for a long time, ready to spy on the beleaguered freedom fighters. Who knew what schemes they were hatching with the hated government in Istanbul?

They did nothing to my mother and me. Perhaps they simply ran out of time, as the army raid that freed us happened less than an hour later. My father's body was found on the beach. They had cut out his tongue.

* * *

I felt exactly the same after the procedure, so I suspected it had not worked. Stella, harried as her stock of human guinea pigs dwindled every hour, wanted me to take a sleeping pill in the middle of the day, but I refused. Soporifics interfere with REM sleep. I listened to the tapes again, analyzing my one-sided interaction with Rima in audio and video. It struck me that her eyes did not seem to focus properly. One pupil was more dilated than the other.

I had a glass of red wine and fell asleep on my institutional bed.

I was walking on the rocky beach, or what seemed like a beach, only without any body of water to define its boundaries. Round stones, ranging in size from a bullet to an infant's head, slipped and tumbled under my bare feet. Some were furred with slimy weeds, others gave moistly, as if they were made of cheese. Sheets of fog whipped and danced around me, but there was no wind, and the air was as warm as blood. I followed the sound of breakers, but no matter how fast I tried to run or in what direction I turned, the surf was always one step ahead of me, too close but never close enough. Soon I realized that it was not a surf at all, but a multitude of people speaking together, their words blending into a meaningless noise.

A human shape loomed in the fog and advanced toward me. It was Rima, but something had happened to her. Her face had elongated into a muzzle like a dog's. She stared through me as she shambled by. A couple of others followed; I had seen them lying unresponsive in their hospital beds. They had all undergone some transformation, but it was different in each case. A man crawled on splayed flippers like an amphibian. Another hopped on a thick pad his legs had fused into. A woman cradled a big leech that suckled at her breast.

I opened my mouth to hail them and swallowed a wad of the warm fog that wormed its way into my gut, as comforting as my mother's milk, whose taste I had forgotten. There were no words anymore. The parasites had been expelled from my brain.

I dropped to my knees and started digging through the rocks, sorting through them and setting aside the right ones. It took a long time, except there was no time on the beach and no need to hurry, though hurry I did. Some of the stones were sharp-edged

and broken, cutting my fingers, so that blood dripped into the hollow I made, and I was glad, hoping it would lure the right ones to the surface. There were stones beneath stones beneath stones. Some bit back when I separated them from their brethren. Some rolled away. Some licked me. And all the while, the susurrus of voices went on and on.

Finally, I had my pile. There was a yellow, porous stone like a chunk of bread with a little hole in the middle. There was a smooth, green-veined pebble. There was an agate that blinked at me with a black mildew spot. There was a bigger rock sparkling with an incrustation of pale crystals. And a couple of smaller ones, whose colors and shapes were as irrefutable as pain.

But I still missed one. I was looking around in desperation when a man appeared out of the fog.

It was my father. A glistening tentacle like that of a squid hung out of his mouth. He gave me the last stone and passed by me, disappearing into twilight.

* * *

"The Project has succeeded," I told Stella. She poured me another cup of tea and sat in the big armchair, staring at me. In the lifeless fluorescent light, I could see tiny lines on her taut cheeks.

"You mean, they are talking to aliens?"

I shrugged. My throat was raw, as if I had been screaming, which, apparently, I had. The oversweet tea did little to mask the metallic taste of blood and wet stone.

"Not sure that the aliens are still around. Perhaps. Perhaps they

come to check on their handiwork from time to time.”

“But that language ...”

“It is not the aliens’ language,” I said. “Everything else is, but not this.”

“What do you mean?”

I swallowed more hot liquid. I was parched.

“It is the original pre-human language. Or rather, the pre-human communication system. What we used when we were like chimps, or songbirds, or bees. Before the implantation of the Chomsky module.”

“You mean the aliens gave us language?”

“Sure. There is no way language could have evolved naturally. It is just too different, too complex. Too much of a piece. Could not have come about in incremental steps like everything else. Pre-human hominids had communication, sure, just like chimps and bonobos have today. Maybe more so, judging by how vocal your subjects are. But this was not language. And then the aliens came and tinkered with our brains and gave us the capacity for recursion and embedding and syntax. And everything else that has built the prison-house. Where we are today.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I lied.

“So,” she said slowly, “language is a parasite. An alien parasite that has taken over and separated us from the rest of our bio-

sphere. Made us what we are: strangers on our own planet.”

I stared at her in amazement. I had clearly underestimated Major Stella.

“Yes,” I said.

“But how is it that you are so different?”

I shrugged.

“I’m a mutant. Not that surprising, actually; mutations are ubiquitous. My Chomsky module is ... improperly fitted, I guess, is a way to put it. We must all have a remnant of the pre-hominine communication system lodged in our brains, but the Chomsky module overrides it, presses it down into the darkness of dreams. But mine is unusually active. And to compensate, my Chomsky module also kicks into a hyper-drive, growing bigger, more active, more developed ...”

“A parasite trying to suppress the host.”

I nodded. Suddenly I just wanted to be alone. Talking to Stella was easier than any other conversation I had had in my life because the tastes and the smells and the textures of language had receded, leaving my mouth pristinely free to generate more words. More lies.

She got up.

“I need to write a report,” she said. “You look tired ... Sophia. Are you all right? Do you need anything?”

I shook my head. She patted my hand awkwardly, lingering at

the door, as if expecting me to say something more, but I closed my eyes, faking fatigue. She left.

I got out of bed and went to the closet where I had hidden the piece of paper I had scribbled on after I woke up. Low-tech is guaranteed to be unique and irreplaceable. Not like computer files that can be infinitely copied, breeding more words in a world overflowing with language.

I had not lied to Stella about my being a mutant. This was my own best guess. But I had shaded the truth a little. I wondered whether she would figure it out herself.

If the aliens had seeded our brains with the Chomsky module, it must have been for a reason. They had wanted to communicate with us, or rather, with the creatures we would become. Could they foresee our spectacular technological progress? Had they planned on reaping the fruit of their little scheme millennia in advance? Why not? Who knew how long-lived they were?

Locking a bunch of clever primates in the prison-house of language and letting them play with this new toy until they dis-

cover nuclear fission, quantum computing, self-replicating neural nets. And then coming back to collect the inmates' output.

But whatever the original language programmed into the Chomsky module, it has branched and evolved into endless linguistic families, tongues, and dialects. The world has become a babbling cauldron of mutual incomprehension.

In such a world, one needs a translator.

A prison guard to deliver orders to the inmates. A traitor.

I looked again at the wrinkled piece of paper—actually, an old receipt—on which I had scribbled the message I had received in the shared dream of the experimental subjects. The rocks I had dug up on the beach—those were words, the original ur-words of our creators speaking to us from outside the prison-house they had locked us in.

I tore the piece into two, and then again and again, until nothing remained but a handful of illegible fragments.

Untitled (1)

by Maia Brown-Jackson





Untitled (2) by Maia Brown-Jackson

A sneak peek into the unknown

by Yuliia Vereta

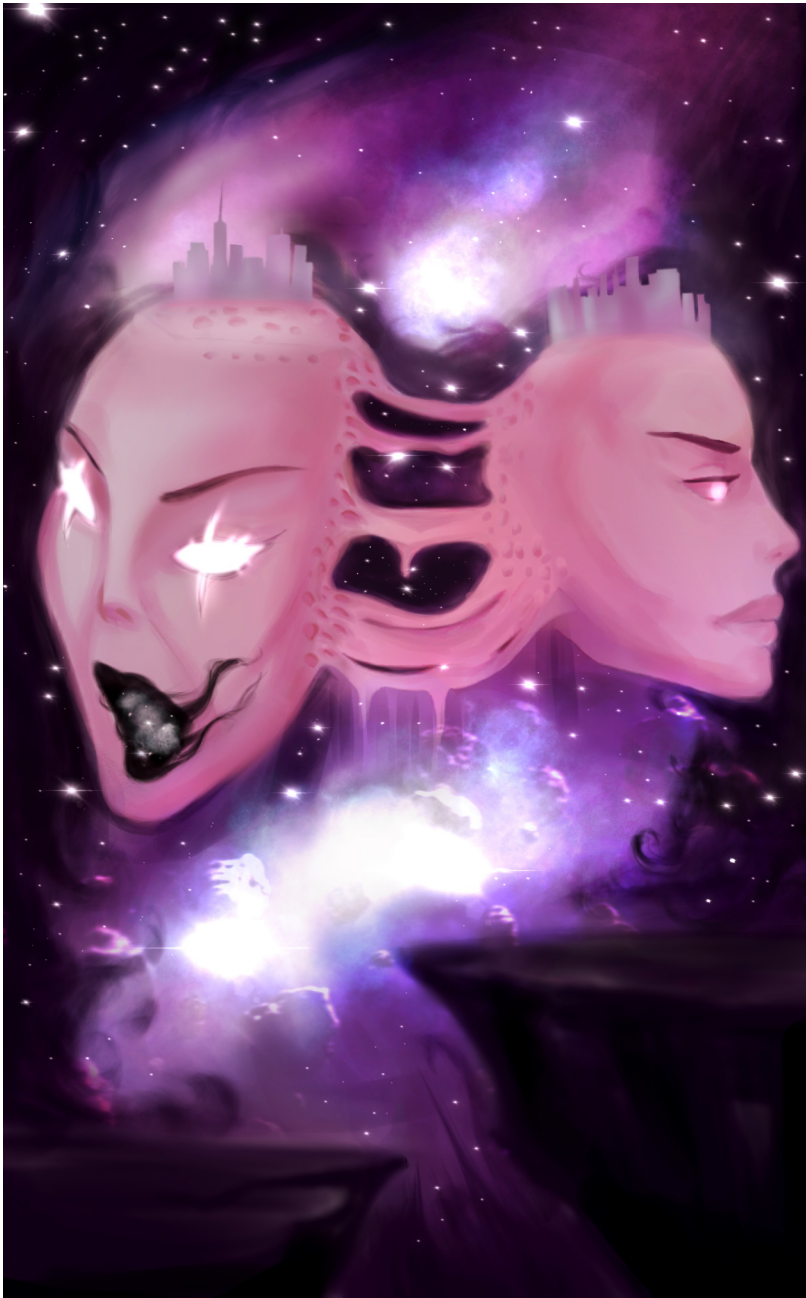
When you go to the parallel reality
for the first time in your life
what you expect to see is
cleaner air, better infrastructure,
and all of those general things
that have big impact on society,
but little impact on your life.

In fact, it's the other way around.

What you find there is
an exact copy of yourself,
which definitely has what
you have been missing.

They stayed in that low-paying
but beloved job, taking care
of their tomato garden,
playing bridge with neighbors,
and sharing turkey with relatives,
those dead ones in your world
and those unborn.

This is why it is forbidden
to look for ourselves in a parallel world.
But we never listen.
We never listen.



Quasar Titans

by Flairiart

After Leaping 100 Light Years from Earth

by Aaron Knuckey

we've journeyed beyond Heaven's jurisdiction. There are no angels to ferry our prayers onward, so they just fall at our feet and gasp like landed fish. When we wake, newborn sins are waiting beside our cots—lost, scared, weeping sulfurous tears. They can't be comforted. They can't be forgiven. We just kiss their horned foreheads and blow them out the airlock. Even worse,

*there is no succor to be found in the sterile cathedrals of
towering nebulae nor wonder to be savored in the glorious
blasphemies that are exploding stars and the endless catacombs
of the universe are just the undercroft to a Temple that was
burnt down to the size of a blue-green mote an eternity ago and
we've now exiled ourselves from that sanctuary; in our ignorance
we've abandoned the absolution offered by the last remnant of
the True Firmament.*

*God, there used to be light.
This all used to be Light!!*

This isn't an S.O.S. Don't send help.
Never send anyone again.

The Worst Is Not Darkness

by Emmie Christie

The bats swept and dove like dark necklaces at the edge of the clearing. Dusk alighted on the forest trees behind the fence and smiled its half smile. Dadin had died.

Shiyal, pruning branches up in the apple tree, waited for her mother's cries to start up from the house, but silence greeted the bats' declaration. She scrambled down the tree, tossed the pruning shears to the ground, dashed past the vegetable garden and the strawberry patch covered over with wire mesh, and stopped outside the sunroom. She hesitated, then peeked through the window. Dadin lay back in his favorite reclining chair, the Yulasil splayed at his feet, its pages bent back. The blotches on his wrinkled face and hands had darkened.

She sucked in a breath. Pivoted on her heel. Dusk drained sunlight from the leaves, its large body blanketing the beginning of the woods. The bats flitted about.

"Shiyal," her mother called from inside the house. "It's almost Dusk, dear. Come inside. No need to invite fable to dinner."

"Yes, Mother."

Yet her feet carried her towards the trees, closer to Dusk. It swelled against the fence, no feet or wings or teeth, no limbs, but a body of answers, nonetheless. Dusk functioned as the keeper of the afterlife, so the stories said, and the bats worked as its messengers.

Her legs propelled her at an awkward half-trot, half-trudge. What was she doing? She stopped at the fence, where Dusk tried to squeeze through but couldn't except for at the top, bulging like a muffin in a tin. She peered into the murk, at the bats, diving in and out. One bat hung from the oak tree on the side of waning sunlight, close to the sunroom, one green eye blinking slow at her. In her dadin's stories, the bats could talk in Dusk.

"Did you see him go?" She asked the bat. She curled her hands into fists. "Will he get to see Nanin?"

"Shiyal?" Her mother stepped out of the house. The bat flitted into Dusk, and Shiyal, on impulse, plunged after it.

Dim light enfolded her, muffling sound, blurring vision, as if several layers of cloth bundled around her.

What had she done? Stories of those lost in Dusk spun through her mind. "*Some fear the night, or wolves, or knives,*" her mother quoted often, "*but the worst is not darkness, it's the fading light.*"

The bat alighted on her shoulder and she squeaked. It just preened its wings. "You're not dead," it said.

She swallowed. So, the tales held some weight. The bats could talk in Dusk. "I want my dadin." Speaking felt strange here, as if someone had stuffed cotton in her mouth.

“Who-zat?”

“He just—hey, *you* should know. An old man. He *just* came in here.”

“You can’t go far in here. He might have crossed the bridge, now.”

“Can you take me to him? Please. I just want to see if he gets where he wants to go.” She paused. “I’ll feed you strawberries from our garden.”

The bat rustled its wings. “Might be able to swing it. I could take you to someone who would know.”

“That’d be great. Do you—do you have a name?”

“Fiu for now.”

“Shiyal.” She almost held out her hand but stopped herself. Bats didn’t shake hands. “How do I find him?”

Fiu squeaked as if laughing. “You don’t find anything in Dusk. You can’t see, human. ’S why you all lose your way in here.”

“But you can see. You fly in and out all the time.”

“We see change. ’S the only way to travel in here.” Fiu glided off Shiyal’s shoulder and flew in a circle. “Look at the swirls. Look at how the colors swoop and dive.”

Dusk shifted, and the sunlight filtered through in a whole new way, churning the shadows like silt at the bottom of a riverbed. The curtains of invisible pressure around her eased and a forest—no, an orchard—came into focus. The trees budded as

she watched, flowering and opening into fruits, while others dropped their leaves and became barren as if in winter. A stone path showed where darkness had crouched before, a path she rambled all the time. It led to the town a few miles away.

“I do! I see!”

“Thassa girl,” Fiu said. “You’re a quick study. Not screaming or running like your arms are spiders.” He paused. “The other humans do that. The screaming.”

“Well, I came here on purpose. I’m not scared.” Shiyal’s heart pounded. She strode forward before the path could shift again. The muted light twined around her ankles, but the pressure stayed subdued, as if she wandered through a room filled with light, swaying curtains.

“Course, if your arms *were* spiders, that’d be great. I’m hungry.”

The leaves on the trees shivered in an invisible wind. Several kinds flourished here: gnarled old fruit trees, small, bendy saplings, magnificent firs. Some trees grew inches as she watched, while others did not. Their fruit bore varying stages of the seasons, some with ripe peaches or apples, others just with baby seeds curled up like hibernating squirrels. The dimness of Dusk accented different qualities in the stone path, like a new kind of softness, and transformed the sky into a question.

A stone retaining wall formed along the path. Shiyal was sliding her hand along the top, just to remind herself of solidity, when a rattlesnake, half-molted, shook its tail near her feet. She jumped back.

“Why are you in Dusssssk, human?” The snake coiled up, tasting the air. “You still have sssskin on your ssssouls.”

Fiu flapped down and landed on the retaining wall. “Just a peek, she said. Won’t stay long.”

“Better not,” the snake said. “The Dussssssk King will take you.” It stretched, and the scales split further along its length. It sighed in satisfaction.

“The Dusk King? Who’s that?”

The snake swayed back and forth, eyes darting away from her. “Looose your form, you will.”

Shiyal hesitated, then stepped a little closer. “Were you—were you once a soul?”

“Me? I’m a sssssign,” said the snake. “A guideposssst for the ssssouls. Becausssse the batssss aren’t alwayssss focussssed, you ssssee.”

“I’m focused! I’m helping her, aren’t I?” Fiu puffed out his chest.

“What’s beyond the bridge?” Shiyal bit her tongue. “Is it what my dadin always thought? Will he become someone new alongside my nanin?”

The snake stretched up, and up, and up, till it wavered in front of Shiyal’s face. “I am jussssst a guideposssst. I just point you where you want to go.”

“Fine. I want to find someone.” Shiyal clenched her fists. “Did a soul pass by, just now? An old man?”

“That way.” The snake jabbed its head, indicating the stone path.

“Thank you.” Shiyal strode on, Fiu fluttering behind.

Dusk thickened, filling the space around her. The trees all shifted again in a whirling kaleidoscope of seasons and fruits. “How are you hungry anyway, Fiu? There’s so much fruit here.”

“Oh, those aren’t for eating.” Fiu said. “They change too much. Gives us stomachaches.”

“No kidding.” She wondered if she could find her way back after.

Did it matter without Dadin? Why waste all her time living by his precious Yulasil when he wasn’t even there to guide her?

Well, her mother still wanted her around, of course.

One knobby old apple tree by the path caught her eye. It was her apple tree, the one by her house! She’d spent hours in it, knew each branch, each gnarled part of the trunk. It did not grow or shrink in height like some of the others did, but it still shifted the seasons. She swallowed. “What—how is that here?”

Fiu flapped over to it. “Ah, here we are! It is his tree.”

“He has a tree?”

“Of course. Every soul has a tree.” He snorted. “Where else would we store all your memories? Would you prefer a bush or a weed? Ungrateful humans—”

Shiyal trotted over to the tree, placing her hand on the trunk. Its leaves shifted to green, and the blossoms changed to small, hard apples.

The pressure of Dusk ceased. The orchard vanished. Clear

morning light shone down on her house, on the ratty old porch. Her mother cried on the steps, and her dadin had wrapped his frail, mottled arms around her.

Shiyal froze.

Was this—

No, of course not. Little things clued her in; the sunlight held a sepia tone, a slight blurriness swirling out of the corner of her eye.

“Dadin?” Shiyal hesitated before the porch steps. Her mother clutched a photo in her hands.

A man called from inside the house. “Shiyal!”

Dadin’s knuckles whitened on her mother’s arm. Shiyal stopped. She’d almost forgotten what her father’s voice sounded like since he’d left. Or perhaps she’d hoped she’d forgotten. The photo showed the four of them at the fair, smiling. Two years ago.

Her father pushed through the door, gripping a suitcase. “She up in that tree again?”

Her mother stared at the picture.

He slammed a fist against the porch railing. Her mother and dadin jumped. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t choose this.”

“You’re choosing now,” her dadin said.

“You blame me for everything. The girl just had to lie once!” He leaned against the doorframe and groaned. “I could’ve won twenty gold that hand. Could’ve turned everything around. But

she went and snitched to the dealer, and now I can’t pay those men back.”

“She did the right thing, like it teaches in the Yul—”

“Like I need someone else reading that damn book.” Her father strode down the path, the sunlight framing his broad shoulders.

Her mother buried her face in dadin’s shirt. He stroked her hair. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Sometimes you have to let them go.”

Dusk fell again, erasing the scene in swirls and eddies of light and dark. It pressed against her now with purpose. Her dadin’s tree waited next to her. Tears slid around her nose and it itched. She wiped her face. Fiu fluttered down onto the path, craning his neck up at her.

“That wasn’t my dadin,” she said. “That was just his tree.”

“The snake points where you want to go.”

“The snake lied then.” Shiyal sniffed, then knelt in front of Fiu and held out her hand. “Please tell me. What’s past the bridge?”

Fiu squeaked and arched his neck so she could scratch his chin. “You can’t ask me questions like that. ’S’not proper.” He chirped. “Get it? *Snot*?”

She rolled her eyes and hovered her hand next to his chin. “Oh, no. My hand’s so tired.”

Fiu rustled his wings. “’S a lie. Shouldn’t do that, and all, according to your dadin.”

“Can you at least take me to the bridge, where we know he’ll

go?” She tapped her finger on his head. “Soooo many strawberries in that garden of ours, all hidden away behind that wire mesh. I could open it for you.”

“Mmmmmmm. Alright. That’s not against the rules. ’S long as you don’t cross. Cause you’d die.”

She scratched his chin. “Good bat.”

Fiu led the way. She had to push through Dusk now, as if it swaddled her, forcing her to mince along. Something shifted in the darker shadows off the path, and she sidestepped as a flow of nighttime streamed by. Fiu flapped through it and grew as tall as her waist.

“Hey! What just happened?”

“The bridge lies close.” Fiu’s voice had deepened, and his eyes reflected golden-honey, unblinking. “There.”

She followed the direction of his outstretched wing. A long, wooden bridge stretched into the ever-shifting Dusk. This bridge led to the town during the day, but it, as with everything else in this place, seemed different. The grayness of the sky lent the old oak boards a kind of luster, a subtle radiance, and the forest at the edge seemed to reach towards the other bank, towards a part of Dusk that swirled so heavy, it blurred the other side. One of the trees, a small apple sapling, shrank to a sprout, then grew again, never reaching past four feet high. *That’s my tree.* She recognized it as if she had looked in a mirror. It fascinated her for a moment, until movement on the bridge drew her gaze.

Dadin hobbled across. His body had lost substance—it seemed formless and a part of the ever-shifting shadows—but it was

him.

She charged to the edge of the bridge. “Dadin, wait!”

He swiveled around. “Shiyal? You shouldn’t be here.”

“Wait! Don’t go.” She covered her mouth. “Please don’t go.”

“Shiyal—”

“What will I do without you? I’ll just become a liar and a cheat like father.” She stepped onto the bridge. “Let me come with you. Dusk isn’t so bad. Death shouldn’t be much worse, right?”

He sent her a gentle, faint smile. “I wanted to enter Dusk for many years, after your nanin died. I stayed for you.” He was more voice than body, now. “It’s your turn to stay.”

“But—but if I don’t come with you now, what if I don’t end up alongside you when it *is* my turn?”

Dusk swallowed him up and smiled like a cat licking its whiskers. She stepped on the bridge. “No! No! Wait!”

Behind her, Fiu intoned in a deep bass, “Another soul for you, my King.”

She whirled. Fiu had grown to the size of a man, wings outstretched like a canopy over the bridge entrance, over her.

“Fiu! What are you doing?”

“I am not Fiu any longer. I am Havor, the Dusk King.”

She spun back around in a panic. “Dadin! Come back!”

Dusk pooled at the middle of the bridge, filling up a mold like water in a pitcher. It formed into Havor. “He is gone.”

“No! You tricked him into leaving! You have to give him back!”

Havor grew larger, the size of a tree, and stalked towards her from the middle of the bridge. It shook under his weight. “Do you want to know what lays beyond?”

“You’ll just lie to me too! He did everything for—for what happens after. And he doesn’t even know if it’ll work. It’s not worth it, living like that.”

“I don’t lie. It is against the rules.”

“That’s a lie! You brought me here to take me to death, didn’t you? To eat me!” She wiped at her face. Back on the bank, her tree shifted seasons and the sky whispered hints of starlight.

“The trees reflect the change of the soul,” Havor’s deep bass rumbled above her, closer. Hungry. “Each tree bears a fruit of belief, then of doubt. They grieve, then rejoice. Some go through many seasons and bear different fruit at the same time. This is normal.”

A wing brushed her cheek, and she looked up. The Dusk King’s form held an intense pressure, as if he had contained all of Dusk

inside himself. It seemed like, if she scratched his chin or ruffled his fur, he would snap and smother her and gobble her up. His eyes blinked golden yellow. “Do you want to know what lays beyond?”

She swallowed. Back in the daytime, Dadin’s apple tree needed pruning. And her mother—her mother would worry, and wonder, and never know, just like how they both had never known what happened to her father.

The worst is not darkness. It is the fading light.

She glanced back to her tree. “My tree would stop growing, right? Like Dadin’s did.”

“Yes.”

She raised her chin. “I’ll go back.” She tried to breathe in deep, but so close to Havor, she couldn’t inhale much air. “I did promise to feed you strawberries, didn’t I? I didn’t lie.”

His eyes flipped back to green. He shrank back down, down, until he was just a normal bat again. The pressure of Dusk on her soul eased.

“Let’s go back,” Fiu said.

impermanence

by Eva Papasoulioti

death doesn't have to be permanent to be
perfect, is what I say after my every death

the absence of thought, the soft dangling
of breath mid-throat. the ephemeral rest

of the restless heart, the naught behind
unseeing eyelids. when the alveoli resurface

from aurora borealis, inhalation becomes
explosion, oxygen burns, churns, turns

tissues into a wildfire and bones into
words of praising gods. streams run a hard

bargain to return, forerun an ending
before the fall, perception is paid in

respiration and aspiration, and I never
hesitated to offer both, offer everything

to become the pause between breaths, the black
dots of loose ends, the evergreen knot between

life and the mind, oh the mind, a shine,
a shrine, a thin red line that springs into

action, for the very first time, again
and again

Dissolution

by Jade Scardham



Painted Skin

by Huijia Li

Skin-stealing is an art.
I pick mine fresh—
grief-scented, tear-tanged.
Being loved makes them last longer.

Painting is another matter.

New-spelled skin is soft, supple
with the shadow of life. Ink holds,
poring into crevices, tracing features
stamped from the gaze in another's eyes.

The faces I paint are beautiful.
Willow brows and limpid eyes,
lips—a kiss of full-ripened cherry,
parted in a velvet sigh.

I know how to beguile, with
these shells I borrow. Desire holds
ink in place. Someone has to want
this face, this body, for it to want to stay.

Unloved, skin hardens—crackling
as rot cackles through; years
descending in a matter of days.
I always know when my time is due.

It is not today.

This skin glows, inviting as new-pressed silk
awaiting a brush's first graze.
I ignore the pull of a stranger's face,
and paint instead, my own.

The lines run, like they always do, fluid
as memory. Eyes dragging low, lids
seeping into nose, marbling into mouth.
A ceaseless unforming.

I watch the mirror,
heart tight. Clenched fists—
unclench. Wash the stains.
Begin again.

Come and Play

by Deborah L. Davitt

Jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne
(in every beginning, there's a magic)
is what the staff wrote on the wall
with a little heart behind it;

painted on another wall,
two cheerful children
faceless,
yet holding hands;
one pink-striped
the other blue.

They weren't supposed to be nightmare-fuel
for the children kept in this room;
they were supposed to be
a charming vision
of what they could be:
behold, normalcy.

The children on the ward didn't
tell the nurses how the figures
slipped free of the walls at night
moving aslant,
two-dimensional in our three,
to whisper in their ears
asking them to come play;

didn't dare tell
that the painted figures
were the ones who drew
the smiling *Kästchen*
on the wall beside them,
proof of their good intentions,
"Look, we have a pet,
do you want to stroke her ears,
dangle a string for her?
Come play, Klaus, come play, Gretchen—"

Instead, the nurses scrubbed at the wall,
revoked dessert for a week
to compel a confession
from whomever had really done it,
and the word *Zauber* started to look
more like *sauber*, *inne* more like *Zimmer*
especially the way the nurses said it:
every new beginning lives in a clean room,
you have to keep your room clean, children—

Then the tally marks appeared up on the ceiling
where no child could reach,
but the figures could,
sliding up the walls like shadows
"One for each day you've been here—"

you know you're never going home,
your parents don't want you,
so come and play."

And the nurses screamed at them
for all the dirt, for all the marks,
and they covered their heads
and ears and curled into fetal balls
in their beds,
unable to make the adults understand
that the danger wasn't in their heads,
that they didn't have imaginary playmates,
that they didn't *want to play*—

and the blue figure
drew a demented smile on his face
and eyes with which to see,
and the pink figure drew him genitalia
while she giggled, "You've been here
so long, that even we
have hit puberty!
You're never leaving,
count the marks on the walls—"

"They aren't true,
you put them up in fives

and tens—"

"You don't know that,
not for sure.
Maybe these are actually
all the days you have left."

"Till I go home?"

"Don't be silly. You're never leaving.
These are the days left till you die.
Unless you come and play."

"What happens if I say no?"

"We cross them out. Just so."

And they started to scribble them out,
till Karl and Ilsa
and Mads and little Lotte,
breathing choked,
hearts pounding,
all agreed to play.

Last Door on the Left

by D. H. Parish

“The bathroom’s down at the end of the hall, last door on the left.”

“Thanks.” He stood up from the table, placed his linen napkin on his empty dessert plate, and walked away. He planned to go to the bathroom, return without sitting down again, and say his goodbyes. Karl would probably be upset at having to leave early, but he’d had enough. His husband’s friends were fine, but the evening had been more a chore than a respite. He had nonetheless done his duty with grace and a smile.

He walked down the surprisingly long hall with no lighting of its own. As he reached the promised room, he noticed another, just beyond, on the right. There was a bluish flickering light coming from the bottom of that door.

“Probably a television left on,” he muttered to himself.

He went into the bathroom, shut the door, and, by habit, locked it. He didn’t really need to go, but he had to make a show of it. He waited a minute, flushed the toilet, and then turned on the faucet. He splashed cold water on his face to revive himself for the drive home. He stared at his reflection, studying the lines that age and stress were etching, every day rendering another pass of time’s scalpel on his skin, each pass slightly deeper. He was only 38, but in the harsh light of the bathroom’s mirror he

felt old. He sighed, slapped his cheeks, and walked out.

As he left, he glanced again at that same door across the hall. He now saw what seemed to be blue smoke seeping through the bottom.

He walked over and placed his hand on the door. It was cold, so no fire. With a mixture of apprehension and curiosity, he pushed it open. He was bathed in that bluish smoky light. It was bright but not blinding. He could make out no details of the room; it was as if someone had left a fog machine running, or as if the room were a cloud. He crossed the threshold.

“Please come in,” a female voice said.

Startled, he began backing out.

“If you leave now, you may never return.”

He paused, confused.

“Please, come in,” the voice repeated.

He took but two steps. He could still see nothing but fog ahead. When he looked back, even after only two steps, he could barely make out the doorway.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“This is a portal,” the voice replied.

“To what?”

“To another world.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is a gateway to somewhere else. To another place. To another time.”

“What kind of place? What kind of time?”

“This is not a trick. It is a chance.”

“A chance for what?”

“To leave. You feel trapped. You feel as if the glorious gift of life is slipping away.”

“I don’t.”

“I do not care if you lie to me, but do not lie to yourself.”

“Where will it take me?”

“Anywhere.”

“But what about Karl? What about my parents? What about my clients?”

“This is not about them. This is about you.”

He looked around, as if a different view of the swirling clouds might give him needed perspective. He could perceive neither the ceiling nor the floor, if they still existed.

“I need to think this over.”

“You do not have that luxury. This is your chance. It is only your chance. You must choose. Now.”

“I can't just leave.”

“You can. If you don't, you are choosing not to. But it is your choice.”

“I must say goodbyes.”

“No goodbyes. If you choose a new path, everything will be different. You will never know this life, nor will they.”

“That's not fair.”

“Fair? Would you prefer not to choose? Then come no further and retreat on the same path you entered.”

“But now I know I have this choice. It is not the same.”

“It is. This choice was always available. It is only your awareness that has changed.”

“How do I know another path might not be worse?”

“You don’t.”

“You are cruel.”

“Perhaps. But then leave. Go back to the dinner party. It will be as if this place, this option, never existed.”

“But now I will always know.”

“That is irrelevant. Regret is not a matter of knowledge but of your decision as to what to do with that knowledge, that history.”

“But you have now forced the possibility of regret on me.”

“We are going in circles. This is not something you may reason out with formal logic. Your legal training will not assist you here.”

“But, why me?”

“Why you? Are you so solipsistic that you think you are the only one ever given a choice? You are not so special. It is simply your time. Pick. Go forward or go back.”

He thought for a bit, then smiled.

“Then I choose not to choose.”

“Is that really your choice? To lie on the precipice of all possibilities but never to experience any? That is not permitted.”

“Aha. Is it because I have found a loophole?”

“No, it is because I am not that cruel. What you are proposing is

your own eternal Hell of indecision.”

“Please, can you show me the best way?”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

“Because such a way does not exist.”

“Then,” he paused, looking all around at whatever the room was, this land of possibly endless opportunity, “I shall return.”

“You have chosen.”

He retreated through the fog back out into the hallway, the blue light going black the moment he shut the door behind him. He had chosen this life. He walked back to the table and said his thank yous for a lovely evening and that he looked forward to seeing his gracious hosts again soon. He stepped out of the home into the cool, clear night and toward his car. As he clicked on the key fob to unlock the door, he had the nagging feeling that he had forgotten something in the house, but he could not place his finger on what he might be missing. He opened the door, got in the car, and turned on the ignition. As he drove off, there remained the unmistakable sense of emptiness, of a void.

“Oh well,” he thought, “if only I had a husband to help me remember such things.”

I've Seen the Movie

by Jennifer Jeanne McArdle

Yesterday, the woman with the scarred face and yellow cloth around her head had started following their group. They were trying to get to the border as fast as possible. Was the scarred woman a spy for the authorities, insane, or also searching for a way out of their country?

Herrera had wanted to shoot the scarred woman as soon as he noticed her. Reynard asked him to wait until they knew what she wanted, which frustrated the others. When he approached her, she was holding a brown and black striped cat with a white belly while she learned against the wall of a building and took deep breaths, her whole body expanding and shrinking.

"Before I had to watch the movie, I had a cat just like this one." She put the cat down and the animal wandered into the alleyway.

"You're making everyone nervous by staying in the shadows and not explaining yourself," Reynard told the scarred woman. The rest of the group watched them from a distance, holding their weapons ready. They had to keep moving, keep running. Kindness would get them killed. But Reynard guessed the others didn't want to piss him off. He was tall, bigger than the rest of them—sometimes fear bred altruism. They didn't know each other well enough, yet, for trust.

"She's sick and crazy. What the hell is wrong with her face? She'll slow us down and get us killed," Herrera insisted when Reynard brought her to join the group.

"We can't just leave her behind because you don't like her looks." Reynard crossed his large arms.

The others shrugged. They didn't have energy to argue right now.

"Let it go, Herrera," Matsuda, their unofficial leader, told Herrera. Herrera pouted but shut up.

* * *

Reynard held his hands over the woman's mouth to keep her from talking as the now six of them hid in the three-foot-high space under the floorboards of the old house. They listened until they could no longer hear the stomping of heavy boots.

After a few silent seconds hiding under the floor, Reynard reached to move the loose piece of floorboard so they could climb out. "*No*." The scarred woman dug her fingernails into Reynard's arm. "I've seen the movie. They've set up the scanners."

"What the—" Herrera opened his mouth but this time, Matsuda, who was much stronger than his small size and thick glasses suggested, grabbed him.

"She's right, listen. Do you hear those clicks?"

The scarred woman counted. The others were frozen in anticipa-

tion. She reached one hundred twenty and stopped. Then she stared up, looking through tiny cracks in the wood. A visible shiver went from her knees up through her head and her right eye twitched.

“What now?” Reynard whispered to the woman.

“Hey!” Herrera’s grizzled, scruffy face looked extra menacing in the low light. “Wake up.” He poked the scarred woman with the tip of his laser pistol. She turned to look at him.

“Relax, Carlos.” The woman reached her hand forward, but Herrera avoided her touch.

“What? How the hell does *Twitchy* know my first name—”

“Now.” The scarred woman interrupted him. “We need to leave now. I’ve seen the movie. We have four minutes to leave the house before the scanners turn on again.” The others exchanged looks. Matsuda shrugged, and Reynard moved the wooden plank. They all climbed out and could see the round scanners sitting dark in the corners of the room.

“Get your emergency bags quickly and let’s go.” Matsuda went first and the others followed, retrieving the backpacks they had hidden under furniture. The scarred woman started picking things off the floor and putting them in her pack; a pair of shoes, an extra flashlight, a hunting knife, a broken shard from a potted plant the Enforcers knocked over.

“Twitchy.” Herrera squeezed the scarred woman’s arm. “I thought you said we only had four minutes. Let’s go.” Everyone moved towards the back door, the scarred woman dragged by Herrera. Suddenly she bolted upright, dropping her bag. Rey-

nard picked it up.

“No. We need to go exit *south*.”

“South? Which way is south?” The others waited.

“There is no south facing door. We need to scam before the scanners turn on.” Herrera pulled the woman’s arm.

“That window faces south.” Matsuda pointed. One of the siblings, Edwards, ran toward the window, grabbed the lamp standing beside it, and smashed the glass. “Go, go, go!” Matsuda’s deep voice echoed. Amber, Edwards’ sister, went to the window next. Edwards helped her climb up, and then he climbed out behind her. Herrera let go of the scarred woman and followed them through the window.

Matsuda, Reynard, and the scarred woman heard a whirring sound.

“The scanners are powering up.” Reynard turned towards Matsuda, pleading for instructions.

“Take her and get out of here.” Matsuda sprinted towards the scanner nearest them and threw his body over it, blocking it from detecting the others. “I don’t know who she is, but she knows things.” Reynard didn’t have time to argue. He grabbed the scarred woman and her bag and dragged them towards the window. She let him lift her and push her out. He tossed her stuff behind her, then his own bag and laser pistol, and finally he climbed out, hearing the rhythmic clicking of the scanners behind them.

The others were already running ahead, even the scarred

woman, her hands waving and her loose, stained sweater flopping around her. They ran through dry forest, passing the skeleton branches of dead trees; the only thing growing was moss under where the trees' scant shadows landed during daylight. They did not speak until they came upon a clearing where a dilapidated series of graffiti-covered stone walls and a couple of towers stood. The graffiti suggested these ruins were of little importance to the Regime as the paint would have been scoured off any useful buildings—unless it was a trap.

“I’ve seen the movie. This is the part where we stay here for the day,” the woman announced as everyone slowed down. The walls could have been remnants of a church from the nineteenth century, but someone must have tried to remodel the structure not too long ago as they could see piles of rotten wood and old scaffolding as well as buckets of unopened paint. Two long sets of five empty rooms lay parallel to each other, but the entrance to the last three on the right and the last two on the left were collapsed and covered in moss and dry grass.

The ruins were, the group supposed, as good a shelter as they would find. Traveling in daylight was dangerous, and the purple sky meant the sun would rise soon. Even if they covered their skin completely and wore goggles, prolonged exposure to the sun's unfiltered rays could cause first- or second-degree burns and dehydration. They crawled into one of the rooms, sitting in the dark, away from the doorway.

Amber placed a lamp in the middle of their circle. Reynard knew she wasn't older than twenty, but her face was already haggard. Herrera had told Reynard that Amber and Edwards' parents had left them years prior to become smugglers. Over the years, they sent their children secret messages, contacts, or met them for a few moments in between jobs.

“Where's Matsuda?” Herrera asked the question that ran through everyone's mind.

“He didn't make it.” Reynard rubbed his temples, not looking forward to having to explain. Herrera would be angry, though Reynard had more reason to be mourning.

“What happened?” Amber asked.

“He stayed behind to hold the scanner so that I and ...” He didn't know what to call the scarred woman. “So that me and *Twitchy* could get away.” He felt guilty about using Herrera's nickname for her.

“Are you kidding me? He let himself get killed or captured for a fucking bag lady?” Herrera glared at Twitchy, who was leaning against the wall, her eyes closed. He ran his fingers through his greasy, salt and pepper hair.

“He might have gotten away,” Reynard swallowed to combat the choking feeling in his throat.

“Yeah, and he might have gotten captured. And they're torturing him now and finding out our entire plan.” Herrera turned his head and spat. Strands of drool hung from his lips.

“Why should we care if we lost Matsuda?” Amber dug her shoes into the dirt floor. “He didn't know everything we know but was always telling everyone what to do.” Reynard just barely saw a stray tear leaking from the side of her left eye.

“Because he was able to fix all those old Enforcer weapons we're holding. I had them hiding in my basement for years. It wasn't until these yuppies,” Herrera motioned towards him and

the empty space next to him, “showed up at my door, asking for my help, that I made any progress.” Herrera sighed.

Reynard had known of Herrera for years as a member of his neighborhood but had only felt courageous enough to speak to him a few months ago. After Matsuda and Reynard’s wives died, they both got drunk on illegal liquor in the basement of Reynard’s house and admitted that they couldn’t keep pretending everything was okay. Every year prior, they had passed their Citizenship Examinations with big red A+s painted on their doors.

The Regime’s official word on the explosion that killed their wives was that terrorist groups were responsible, but everyone knew the Enforcers were targeting someone. They had decided that it was worth blowing up half a mall, civilians included, just to make sure they were dead.

Herrera’s bright red C or C+ was painted on his door every year, which is why Reynard and Matsuda guessed he would help them do something illegal. No one ever had a C-. They would have been taken away before that.

Since Reynard realized he could no longer tolerate living under the Regime, in this godforsaken country, he needed Herrera for his weapons. His willingness to break rules. His lack of family, career goals, or concern over his reputation meant he wouldn’t ever be motivated to sell him out. He needed Edwards and his younger sister, Amber, who had contacts in the Neutral Zone. He couldn’t risk annoying them so much that they abandoned him; otherwise he’d have no way of escaping.

“It’s not much further, right?” Reynard hugged his knees. “We’re sure the Neutral Zone is safe?”

Amber rolled her eyes.

“The Enforcers can’t enter the Neutral Zone because a jamming signal causes their chips to malfunction.” Edwards sounded irritable; he had already explained this many times.

Almost all of the Enforcers, the police force used by the Regime, had chips in their brains that allowed them to be controlled by the Regime’s Central Command or one of the regional Command Branches. They were stripped of their own agency, at least when they were on duty.

“We avoid the Enforcers. We get to the warehouse. We get on the trucks. We get past the border. We get someone in the Neutral Zone to sponsor us. Then we’re golden.” Reynard repeated the skeleton of the plan to himself. Edwards had already explained to him that the trucks were used to transport animals from the Neutral Zone. They would be returning, empty, to the warehouse, where they would sit for a few hours before crossing the borders. The drivers and crew had agreed to hide them inside to make it past the border guards and wall.

“Are you chickening out? You wanna go home?” Amber took her small flashlight out of her pocket and shined it in Reynard’s eyes.

Reynard turned his head. “I can’t go back now. I lied and told my boss and my neighborhood I was going to the Fairgrounds. If someone from Branch Command sees that my travel papers were never signed by Fairgrounds staff—”

“Matsuda was a really smart man.” Edwards looked up from the notebook in which he was writing and interrupted Reynard. “But anyone could see he was depressed. He was looking for an

excuse to die. This woman, whoever she is, seems to know things. It's not good we lost someone who can fix weapons. But from a tactical point of view, she is more useful in getting us to the border—at least for now.”

Edwards turned to look at Twitchy. She was rubbing her forehead against her knee, her eyes still closed. If Reynard had any, he would have offered her some pain medication. But Herrera had forced him to toss all of what he owned—he said legal pain pills were purposely addictive and a higher dose than necessary because the Regime liked stoned, easy-to-manipulate people.

“Jesus, Edwards, you could be a bit respectful about the man we lost.” Herrera pulled a hand-rolled cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Reynard was nervous about the skunky smell of cheap and chemically altered marijuana wafting somewhere, like towards Enforcers with dogs. Just because Herrera's drugs were smuggled from the Neutral Zone didn't make them any less dangerous, Reynard wanted to say. But he didn't have the energy to argue.

“Everyone's always losing someone.” Amber shrugged. “I'm not saying Matsuda didn't matter, but at this point, we can't waste time mourning anyone.”

“Well—that's true.” Smoke wafted around Herrera. “Some of us have been losing our whole lives. Before the Enforcers were chipped and mind controlled, a bunch of them beat down my door while me and my family were watching TV. They took my parents and my sister, and I never saw them again. We were the wrong kind of people. I only survived because I hid in the cupboards. I've just been losing people since.”

Reynard exhaled. He had heard this story before. Herrera liked

telling it to remind everyone that he had been stewing in his loss longer than most other people.

“We all better hope that Twitchy is trustworthy,” Herrera mumbled after he had smoked enough to calm his nerves. “We don't know a thing about her. How did she know my name? How does she know this stuff?”

* * *

Reynard managed to fall asleep. He often dreamed about his wife, about somehow stopping her from going to the mall that day. Today, he dreamed about Matsuda, too.

“No, you leave. I'll stay with the scanners.” Reynard wished he had said to Matsuda. “You're useful. You take the woman and go. I don't know anything like you do. I'm just a big, clumsy accountant. I'm not made for this stuff.”

Amber woke everyone up. “The sun is already low in the sky.” She looked out the doorway with her arms crossed and a grim expression on her face. “It's safe to start moving.”

They took their gloves, scarves, hats, and goggles out of their bags and covered their skin before heading out into the sunlight. They were headed towards a small town, which once had been a small city, near the border, hopefully their final town before crossing. Edwards knew of a hotel where the owners did not usually check if their guests had proper travel papers.

Towns near the border tended to follow fewer of the Regime's rules and have fewer active Enforcers. This made them feel both safer and more scared. The Enforcers they might encounter out here could be more aggressive. Yet, Reynard was looking for-

ward to sleeping in a bed.

They passed by a blue cabin. A small child in a well-made brown sun-suit stepped out of the house. Someone with money must have been caring for this boy, because his suit even included a breathing apparatus exhaling white smoke from either side. Small children, especially wealthy small children, made Reynard very nervous—this boy might go back inside and tell his parents that he saw five people he didn’t know walk by his house.

Luckily, the kid walked towards a short tree next to his house without giving them a second glance. He pulled sheets of tinfoil off the wrapped tree, which bore limp leaves and tiny, rotting apples. Now and early dawn was the only time the tree could be exposed and get sunlight. Reynard resisted the urge to stare; many years had passed since he’d seen a living fruit tree outdoors.

As they approached the town, they decided to split into two groups; Edwards with his sister, and Reynard with Herrera and Twitchy.

“Nothing will happen now,” Twitchy told them, but they couldn’t risk drawing attention to themselves. Edwards and Amber went ahead to the hotel while the others waited near the barren trees on a hill overlooking abandoned residential districts of the old city. Reynard counted stars, Twitchy counted to herself, and Herrera smoked another joint. After an hour, they figured anyone who had noticed Edwards and Amber pass by would have forgotten them, so Reynard, Twitchy, and Herrera made their way into town and to the hotel.

The city center, now the entire town, had just a few tall office

buildings and some large municipal centers. The edges of the old city and the suburbs around it had broad streets and old, multifamily homes stacked next to one another. As the population had shrunk, the citizens had moved towards the old downtown and left the rest of the city to rot. They stepped over broken telephone poles and frayed wires in the streets and kept distant from the houses and old stores and fast food places because there was always a chance someone was hiding in them or that they would collapse.

When Reynard was a child, he used to be afraid of an abandoned house in his neighborhood because his brother told him that rabid raccoons lived there. Now he would have loved to see any wild animal living among the ruins. The only animals he saw now were kept by humans or were stray pets or rats and pest insects that survived only in densely populated areas.

“If the Enforcers stop us, they’ll ask us for a city pass or travel papers. When they see we don’t have the right ones, they’ll bring us in for questioning. And then they’ll find our guns in our bags. And then they’ll kill us. Don’t get stopped.” Herrera reminded them.

When they got closer to the city center, they put Herrera’s hooded coat on Twitchy and pulled the hood over her head so that her scars and the bright yellow cloth were covered—she wouldn’t let them remove the cloth. Wearing just small bits of bright colors wasn’t technically against the Regime rules, but doing so often attracted Enforcer attention. The Regime also liked people to look clean and healthy. Women and men layered cover-up on their faces and kept their hair in neat, approved haircuts.

From their backpacks, they removed shopping bags and boxes

stolen from Enforcers that were made with a material that blocked weak scanners. They put their pistols and other weapons inside the boxes and then into the shopping bags.

Herrera and Reynard walked on either side of Twitchy. Once they reached the old downtown, they avoided making eye contact with normal citizens who passed by them while carrying their own shopping bags. Shopping was one of the few public activities encouraged by the Regime, even though most stores sold nearly identical products.

People wearing glowing metal bands that marked them as Underclass looked up at them as they passed. The Underclass were not approved by the Regime to engage with normal society but were too harmless or weak for the Regime to bother jailing. Occasionally, Enforcers would round them up and force them to do menial civic jobs, like pick up trash before an important government person visited.

Reynard sweat through his bottom layer of clothes. They kept a wide berth from Enforcers, who, dressed in black and silver gear and heavy steel boots, occasionally stopped people to question them.

“Don’t walk too fast.” Herrera slowed his pace. “We already look strange. But we’re lucky—they probably think Twitchy has cancer.” Enforcers did not like to bother people with cancer. The Regime funded very little healthcare, and the number of cancer patients rose every year. Bringing attention to them, especially on crowded streets, tended to inspire political unrest.

The hotel was actually a repurposed office building. Their room occupied part of the sixth story of a fifteen story building. Most of the rooms weren’t open for guests to use, and only part of the

building had electricity. The rest was filled with broken computers, ripped up carpet, cubicles that had fallen apart, and still-glowing exit signs. Eight mattresses had been placed in their room as well as an old rotted leather couch. The windows looked out onto the city’s flickering lights.

As much as they didn’t want to risk getting burned, they were planning to do most of their travel during the day, when fewer people and fewer Enforcers would be outside. When the sun started to go up, they’d leave and walk to the west edge of the old city to the warehouse and hopefully make it there before the sun got too bright. There, they’d hopefully wait till the trucks arrived.

They each chose a mattress and napped on and off, wondering if they’d actually make it to the Neutral Zone and if life would really be better. Twitchy sat on the leather couch, still counting and looking out the window.

They were told by the Regime that the Neutral Zone was lawless and filled with roving gangs that attacked people not wealthy enough to own mansions and hire armed guards. But the ozone there was still intact. Reynard dreamed of red and yellow flowers, the smell of grass after rain, crisp air, singing birds, clear streams running over his toes, and sunny days he could enjoy. Lately, he often thought that being stabbed a hundred times was a fair deal for a day at a real park.

Fields could grow in the Neutral Zone. Farm animals could be raised there. Reynard remembered chewing soft, juicy meat between his teeth. Most of the population of his country only got meat rations once a month. Those with high up positions in Central Command and in Branch Command Posts got to eat meat more frequently. Some years ago, some people demanded that

the Regime begin mass cricket farming as an environmentally viable way to replace the lack of protein in people’s diets. Most of them were killed in an explosion that the Regime claimed was set off by “terrorists.”

Malnourished people didn’t resist as much.

* * *

The sun was hours away from coming up when Reynard was jolted awake by Twitchy’s voice.

“I know this part,” Twitchy squeaked through hard breaths. “They’re coming soon.”

“Who is coming?” Edwards sat up on his mattress and rubbed his eyes.

“Enforcers.” Herrera was staring out the window and running his fingertips over his weapon. “They’re going to inspect the hotel. I saw one of their cars at the building next to us. We’re unlucky enough to come on a night they’re doing a sweep of local hotels.”

“Is there another way out of the building?” Amber was already on her feet and pacing. “We can’t just go through the front door.”

“We go out through the back parking lot.” Twitchy snapped to attention.

“Won’t that trip an alarm?”

“Not this building. I know. I watched it already.” She shook her

head fast before she wrapped her arms around herself. Amber had already grabbed her bags. The men exchanged glances but did the same. One by one, they exited. Twitchy led their group down a dark hallway.

Reynard gripped his pistol tightly, nearly jumping at the sound of dripping water, an opening door, and a moving elevator. They crept down the six flights of stairs in the dark. Twitchy pushed against a fire escape door that wasn’t budging. Herrera shoved her to the side and told Reynard to slam his large body against it as hard as he could. The door swung open, and they exited to the garage parking lot. Twitchy took the lead again as they dashed across puddles and the empty lot, down the winding ramp, and onto the street. She stopped before stepping out, looked both ways and then turning right towards the mostly empty part of the old city. Reynard didn’t look back as they ran down a highway while avoiding tripping over cracks and broken asphalt, the streetlamps becoming less bright and steady.

“Inside here,” Twitchy commanded when they reached an abandoned storefront. The door wasn’t locked, so they followed her inside. Twitchy shut the door behind them. “We will stay here until I tell you to leave.”

Reynard felt his hands sweat around his pistol. He’d never shot a man. But he had practiced in Herrera’s soundproofed basement a few weeks before they started their journey.

From what he could tell in the dark, this store had once been fairly large. He could still see old bottles of pills, makeup, and toiletries scattered around the floor and shelves. Spiderwebs and dust danced in stray streaks of light that managed to sneak inside. If there were spiders, there were insects, Reynard realized, which likely meant people still used these buildings.

Edwards peeked outside around the edge of a large curtain covering the old storefront window.

“They’re right outside.” His finger hovered over the safety of his pistol.

“I know.” Twitchy put her face in her hands and then looked up as her fingers pulled her bottom eyelids down. “If we stay quiet, they won’t come in. They—the next scene—” She squeezed her eyes shut.

“We can’t just wait here,” Amber insisted, her whole body shuddering. “This store must have a back door. We should just go out the back.”

Twitchy shook her head vigorously. Her hands gripped the yellow scarf around her head.

“No, in this scene—you can’t. Please. Wait. They. I can’t. What they do—”

Herrera wrapped one arm around her waist and put his hand over her mouth. Her eyes widened, but she stopped moving.

“I’m going to the back door.” Amber turned on her flashlight and gripped her pistol. Twitchy struggled in Herrera’s grip.

“Are you sure?” Edwards looked nervous.

“I’m just gonna take a peek outside. It’ll be fine. They’re patrolling, but I don’t think they know we’re here. But if we stay here, we’re sitting ducks.”

“But Twitchy,” Reynard protested. “One of the men should—”

“Don’t give me that chauvinistic bullshit. Twitchy is freaking out right now. The faster we get out of here, the better. I’m a faster runner than all of you. And they don’t usually kill young people.”

“Even those carrying pistols? If you get caught, and they find the weapon, they’ll know you had help. Give your brother the gun.” Herrera looked at Amber and then at Edwards. Amber grimaced but placed the gun in Edwards’ trembling hand. He checked the safety and put it in his belt.

They watched Amber with her flashlight walk across the floor of the store. She got to the door for the back room and pushed it open. She held the edge so it wouldn’t swing noisily shut behind her. And then they held their breath, waiting for her to return.

The store lights, now more dangerous than ultraviolet sunrays, flicked on. Then the siren rang, a horrible shriek piercing their eardrums. They heard the voices of the Enforcers yelling commands, coming from outside the front of the store and the back. Herrera let go of Twitchy, who ran towards the left side of the store. Edwards stopped dead in his tracks. Herrera shoved the end of his pistol into his back.

“If you try to go after your sister, I will shoot you dead. There’s nothing you can do. Follow Twitchy.”

Edwards looked at Herrera for what Reynard thought was a lifetime, but he finally turned and dashed towards Twitchy. She led them to a side exit where she punched a code into the door. It opened, and they followed her into an indoor mall. She kept running until she finally stopped at what used to be a large clothing store. They tried to catch their breaths as they shined flashlights across naked mannequins, piles of hangers, and empty shelves.

Reynard leaned against the wall and dropped onto his butt.

“Why didn’t you tell us the alarm was set on the back door?” Edwards turned Twitchy so that she faced him and squeezed her shoulders. “Why didn’t you explain?”

“She tried, you idiot,” Reynard grunted from the floor. “Herrera wouldn’t let her talk.”

“Fuck you.” Herrera pointed his pistol directly at Reynard. “She wasn’t saying anything useful. The crazy bitch was just babbling. How was I supposed to—”

“They won’t kill her. I’ve seen it.” The woman spoke with unusual clarity. “They’ll capture her because she is young and they can use her. She will live. You have a chance to meet again. She will make a deal with them to keep her brother safe.” She glanced at Herrera, who lowered his weapon.

“I’m sorry, Edwards. I know it sucks. But she made her choice. And she’s an adult.” Herrera almost put his hand on Edwards’ back, but he instead dropped it back to his side.

“Barely.” Edwards’ hands released Twitchy, and his normal, blank expression returned to his face.

“Twitchy is right. We don’t have a lot of healthy young people. They might think she’s a rebellious teen, running away. She’s a tough girl. She’s the type of person they like. They’ll probably just stick her at a Reeducation Camp for a few months.” Reynard got back on his feet.

“Unless some higher up decides he likes her a little too much.” Edwards squeezed his pistol.

No one spoke for a few moments.

“It’s not totally safe here.” Twitchy broke the silence. “This is the dangerous part. If you see them, you need to kill them.”

“Them? Who is them?” Reynard scanned the room, feeling his palms sweat. Herrera looked a bit amused and Edwards was blank.

“Who the fuck are you idiots?” came a male voice from around the corner. From his clothes, they knew he wasn’t an Enforcer. His shirt was purposely torn and decorated in bright neon paint. His outfit wouldn’t have passed an Enforcer’s “proper attire” check. Before Reynard could decide what to do, a red laser burst landed on the man’s skull, exploding his head. A sizzling stump was left on his neck, and his corpse dropped to the ground. The smell of burned meat, something Reynard hadn’t smelled in years, suddenly reached his nostrils. He had to stop himself of thinking of a childhood Christmas when his mother burned a ham. Reynard turned to Herrera. Smoke wafted from the tip of his weapon.

They heard someone shouting. Reynard heard another very loud blast, louder than the previous, and a red beam burned a black, smoking mark into the floor a couple feet from him. He blinked, his vision blacking in and out and the sound of his blood vessels drumming in his ears. He looked ahead and saw a woman in a red jacket with a mini-cannon laser weapon, the external lights indicating it was recharging. She raised the barrel to shoot towards him again.

“Shoot!” Twitchy, from behind him, flipped the safety mechanism in the back of his pistol, wrapped her hands around his, raised the weapon, and pushed down on his finger so the trigger

pulled back. A red beam erupted and hit the woman directly on her forehead, exploding her head. The recoil of the firearm nearly made him lose his balance, but Twitchy helped steady him.

Reynard couldn't think. The next few moments were a blur until he heard Edwards say:

"I think there were just two of them."

"Who were they?" Reynard's eyes were finally focusing. Herrera was inspecting the body of the man.

"They have an Enforcer communication device." Herrera pulled it from the man's pocket. "They must have been one of the gangs that worked out a deal with the local Branch Command to patrol this area in exchange for leniency." He stomped on the device until it was thoroughly destroyed. "How did you know that? How do you know any of this stuff?" He got in Twitchy's face. She was now leaning against the wall, squinting her eyes shut.

"Because I've seen the movie." She breathed out hard.

"Stop, Herrera." Reynard approached him while trying not to look at the body of the dead woman. His wife would have loved that red jacket if she were still alive. And if she had been allowed to wear red jackets. "She's in pain right now. She hasn't betrayed us yet."

"Whatever. We probably shouldn't stay here."

"How do we know the streets are safe?" Reynard glanced around the room. "We could just as easily get caught out there."

"I think we aren't far from the warehouse," Edwards was writ-

ing in his book again. "If we make it there before noon, we can hide there until the trucks arrive."

"Reynard." Herrera was now in his face. "Do you think we should head towards the warehouse? If we get off schedule, we risk missing the trucks."

"Honestly, I have no idea. I don't know about any of this shit. I don't know how to survive." Reynard's voice got louder with each word.

"So? You're still a man with a fucking brain." Herrera matched his loudness but then looked around and lowered his voice: "And we need to make a decision together. No one is going off again alone like Amber did."

"I don't know. Ask Twitchy." Reynard gestured towards the woman.

"Hey." Herrera approached Twitchy. "Did you see this part of the movie?" He shoved the map in her face and pointed his flashlight over it. "We want to get to that warehouse circled in red. Can we go now or should we wait? Hey!"

She took the paper in her hands and stared at it while mumbling something unintelligible.

"What's the time?" she asked clearly.

"3:54am."

"The day of the week?"

"Tuesday."

“Yes. Yes. This part. We can go. Now. And fast. But we follow the roads like this. Pen.” The three men fumbled for a pen until Edwards handed her one. She drew a slightly meandering route on the map and then handed the pen and map back to Edwards.

With Edwards in the lead, and then Herrera, and Reynard with his arm linked with Twitchy’s, they began walking the path drawn on the map through the mostly empty city streets. They saw just a few people with shopping bags ambling home and some Underclass. Reynard tried to stifle his growing excitement as they got closer to their destination. Feeling just a little bit of happiness and hope was nearly as overwhelming and dizzying as watching two people get shot. Still, he needed to be careful; although they didn’t see any Enforcers, any of the people they passed could be informants.

The sky was pink by the time they reached the abandoned warehouse. A rusted door moved without much trouble when Herrera pushed it.

“Edwards, you take the woman and sweep the right side to make sure we have no company. Reynard and I will take the left,” Herrera commanded. Before Reynard and Herrera could get very far they heard a voice.

“Stop!” They turned to see an Enforcer with his sleek laser pistol already raised and pointed at them. His uniform was blue, which even Reynard knew meant he was a Scout and not on normal patrol. Scouts patrolled different areas at random.

Herrera’s weapon was also ready. Reynard raised his.

“Don’t shoot. This is a C920. It will shoot a spray of lasers wide enough to hit both of you. You don’t want to die or lose a limb,

do you? I know I don’t. We can talk about this.” The Scout’s voice lacked emotion. Like any other Enforcer, he was chipped. This warehouse was close enough to the border that the signal between chip and Command was probably weak. They had a little time before Branch Command was notified of their presence.

Before they could make a decision, they heard a scream and saw Twitchy rush at the Enforcer, a large knife in her hand. She stabbed it into the Enforcer’s gun hand. He didn’t scream, but he immediately dropped the weapon. He tried to pick it up, but she kicked him in the shin. He reached and grabbed both of her wrists. She struggled to break free as he stared at her, focusing his energy on getting a picture of her face on his chip.

Suddenly there was a loud blast from Reynard’s immediate left, the red streak zooming through the air in what Reynard perceived as slow motion before it hit Twitchy’s back, smoke and blood spraying out. Her body collapsed, the Enforcer started to fall forward, and there was a second blast, this time hitting the Enforcer in the side of his head, melting half of his face and splattering his brains on the boxes behind him.

Reynard couldn’t move for a few moments as he stared at the corpses and the blood continuing to pool. Herrera breathed heavily next to him, and Reynard’s heart pounded in his chest. He could see Edwards’ empty expression from across the room.

Reynard approached both bodies slowly, still holding his pistol in both hands. His eyes rapidly scanned the room, even though he was mostly sure the Enforcer had come alone based on his rank and the fact that no one had come to his aid.

“Why’d you shoot her, too?” he shouted back to Herrera when

he was sure they were alone.

“There wasn’t a clear shot. We couldn’t wait for her to play games. I had to destroy the chip in his head before it was able to transmit information about us back to the Command.”

“They’ll realize that something is off when they stop getting any signal from his chip. They’ll send more Enforcers to this area, and we won’t have her to guide us.” Reynard felt his throat tighten as he approached the pool of blood behind Twitchy’s back and looked down at her scarred face.

“Herrera was right to shoot him as soon as possible. A cheap chip in low level Scout going offline isn’t worth investigating. But images of men with guns and a woman attacking an Enforcer would be.” Edwards was watching him with his pistol still ready.

Reynard knew that arguing with the other men after the fact was useless, so he didn’t. Instead he looked back to Twitchy’s body, feeling guilty and sick. The woman had given her life to save Reynard and Herrera—he didn’t think anyone was capable of that kind of selflessness anymore.

He noticed a black tinge on some of Twitchy’s scars, especially near her right ear. He squatted before reaching gingerly with his left hand toward the sunflower-colored cloth around her head. He pulled at it, exposing more black burn scars concentrated around an infected sore above her right ear. He swallowed rising bile as the smell of rotted flesh hit his nose.

“It’s where the Enforcer chips are implanted,” he spoke to himself. “Come here,” he called to Herrera and Edwards. He heard them creep towards him.

“What is it?” Herrera snapped.

“She was an Enforcer. Her chip must have malfunctioned. That’s why she was so strange. It was leaking inside her head, poisoning her. I’ve heard it happens from time to time.”

“So I did her a favor by shooting her.” Herrera turned his head to spit. “She was dying a slow death, anyway. I guess that also explains how she knew my name and about the patrol schedules of the Enforcers. She was probably assigned to keep tabs on us before her chip broke.”

Reynard exhaled louder than he meant to but adjusted the cloth over Twitchy’s head so that the sore was covered again. When the other two guys looked away, he also closed her eyes. Reynard moved Twitchy’s sleeve up and saw the small numbers all Enforcers had tattooed on their inner elbows.

“Six hundred ninety-eight. That’s a pretty low number for an Enforcer. But if she was one of the first chipped Enforcers years ago that makes sense with her age, and if the chip was old and she was working near the border, that’s probably why it malfunctioned. No wonder she was so whacked out. This was probably the first time in over two decades that she had control over her own body for more than a few hours in a row.”

“She’d been watching her life like a movie.” Edwards’ face expressed a brief moment of interest before hardening again.

Herrera shrugged.

“Chip or no chip, those assholes, especially the first couple thousand that signed up to become Enforcers, knew they’d get an implant that would make them tools of the Regime. No one

was forced back then.”

“Yeah, but most didn’t know that the procedure was permanent.” Reynard squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. “Maybe she made a deal to save someone she loved.”

“I’d rather be dead. If you made a deal with a devil, you don’t have my sympathy.” Herrera spat at Twitchy’s corpse. Reynard winced.

“We’re nearly at the border. After we cross, we won’t have to worry about any Enforcers anymore.” Edwards’ voice was flat. His eyes wandered towards the door. They heard a *thud* and nearly jumped out of their skin. Reynard grabbed his pistol, got to his feet, and whipped towards the noise. “Oh, it’s just a cat.” Edwards breathed out and all three men relaxed. The black and brown tabby approached the men with her tail straight up.

“Are you so used to death that you’re not scared of guns and corpses?” Reynard watched the animal rub against his leg. She was probably a stray, but her presence suggested there were people hiding out and living in these warehouses. He shivered.

“Funny.” Herrera stared at the feline, his face contorted in a weird grimace. “My sister had a cat like that before the regime took her away, except it had a white belly. That girl used to make poor Mugsy ‘go to school’ with a bunch of stuffed animals. She probably woulda become a teacher if she were still alive today.”

Herrera removed one of his joints from his pocket and lit it.

Reynard watched him as he closed his eyes. He looked from Herrera’s face to Twitchy’s face. Reynard could see the resemblance around the shape of the eyes, now that both pairs were closed. The realization suddenly dawned on him.

He remembered that he told Matsuda when he was drunk that he was done pretending that everything was okay. He was done hiding from unpleasant things. He was ready to become a man of integrity and to leave behind the complacency and denial he had developed in order to live under the Regime.

“Herrera. I think she might have been your—”

He stopped himself when he noticed the streaks of orange sunlight that fell across the floor. He thought of how quickly his skin would burn if he stood in those spots. What kind of solace would the truth give Herrera? Not like he could save her now. Maybe he wouldn’t have wanted to, anyway.

“Hm?” Smoke rushed out of Herrera’s nostrils. Reynard glanced at Edwards, who was staring intently at his map—probably going over the plan to avoid worrying about Amber.

“You should take Twitchy’s knife before we leave. She probably would have wanted you to keep it.” Reynard motioned towards the weapon.

Herrera shrugged. He walked over and removed the knife from the corpse, wiped it clean on the dead man’s shirt, and then put it in his pack.

Wolf Girl Relishes the Wolf Moonrise

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

In January, howling starts before
The Wolf Moon fattens, rouses appetites.

Lupa unzipped her human flesh, which masked
Her wolfishness, peeved that outsiders forced
Shape-shifters to conform when traditions
Created bonds, togetherness, and pride
In sharp teeth —carcass-shredding bold canines.

As dusk neared, she approached the meeting place.
The pack has punched through fog like ten knuckles,
Loud wolfsong paving twilight with unrest,
Aware their wilding will start come moonrise.

Lupa recalled another hunt. A beast
Resisted as she clawed its breasts, no give
In that tough hide —but sweet pink meat throughout.

Her tipsy parents, partying with friends,
Believed she's home in bed, not cleaning up
Intestines with her tongue, obsessed, moonstruck.

As words replaced gruff growls, she glanced around
To fold the scene like laundry, pack away
Red souvenirs, simplicities —unlike
Reprieves from hunger. Sly triumph will be
The windowsill she'll rest her elbows on.

*Note: January's full moon is often called the Wolf Moon, a name which
may date back to when wolves would howl outside villages.*



Voyant

by Carl Scharwath

Remnants

by Annie Tupek

Drawn by the sharp scent of pickles and the yeasty tang of fresh bread, we stand at the side of the road, toes at the boundary. Head bowed, face veiled, toenails overgrown into talons that dig into the gravel up to that line but no farther.

The night is ours. The land is ours. The air. The insects. But not the road that cuts through our valley. An ancient thoroughfare, our valley holds more bones than stones, something easily forgotten when the warm sun shines down on fields of wildflowers. We lurk, bound within that tranquil daylight beauty, freed only by the argent moonlight that turns the land gray and cold.

The wind carries the aroma of sweet jasmine, heady and intoxicating, and always beneath it, the smells of humanity. Tonight, the air's human tone is undiluted and immediate.

A dark shadow walks the road, dim lantern in outstretched hand drooping, feet stumbling in exhaustion.

We raise a hand for help. Our victim sees the soft countenance of youth behind our eyes. When the hand is taken, we pull. We clutch him close, drag him into the wild, and slash with nails long and calcified into claws.

Blood, black in the moonlight and already festering, stains the dusty cloth that cloaks this body from head to foot. For a moment, the hunger is sated.

I don't recognize my own body, hair tangled clumps, corpse-gray skin that hasn't felt the sun's touch for a lifetime. My once fine dress shredded to tatters.

These brief post-feeding digestions are all I have now, my only differentiation from the others, united as we are in subservience to the one.

I was one, once. I remind myself. A prayer I pray while our body devours the latest unwitting traveler. I was one. A wealthy woman of consequence, a life of luxury and ease. I wanted for nothing. My husband loved me, my children sought my council, my community revered me. I'd been blessed with all one could ask for.

These blessings meant nothing when the only thing that mattered was taken from me. News of my husband's death washed my world into monotone. I raved, lost in grief.

They confined me to my rooms and the garden. Meditations. Concoctions. Potions. Nothing helped. The winds blew through the garden and the world went round in circles. I grew thin and gained stamina from restless pacing. One day the garden gate was left open.

The road to the university passed by my garden and my feet led me down it. A hope that the scholars there might ease my suffering. My body knew the way even if my mind could not always follow.

That I made it to Almaya Valley was nothing short of miraculous, for it is a five-day journey by foot from my home. I must credit divine intervention, and so I can only accept this as my fate. Though I have no recollection of the night that I became we, I have some idea of it, knowing what I have done to others.

Moonlight shrouds Almaya Valley. The souls of the dead gather, visible as fog and mist. I wonder why a traveler would cut through it at night. I wonder why I attempted it.

Two cozy inns, one at each end of the valley, control the supply of travelers. How did I slip by unaware and unwarned of the danger? The kind and generous innkeepers are willing to trade a destitute traveler an hour or two's work for a night's rest to keep them from crossing the valley at night. I know these things because we know these things.

Tonight's satiation wanes and my awareness of the others grows. Victims from long ago. Remnants of personality inhabiting this world I have been banished to.

There's a man, a regal, venerable man. A king, I think, or a sage. His long hair and trailing beard are the purest white and he gives the impression of a golden throne and crimson raiment, though all I see is gray.

We spoke long ago. I asked question after question, but his answers revolved around himself, no clue to the details of my fate. That I had to work out for myself. Nor would he say anything about the others.

His voice has faded. Now, he wears a hollow expression and hunkers in place like an old tree. Gnarled and steady. He does not move. I dare not touch him for fear of breaking him open and finding a shell around nothing.

The others are women. Laid out in a vast line of marble biers, each one as fresh in death as in life and draped in the finest silks and cloth of gold. They look as though they will blow away at the slightest breeze and have nothing to say. Long ago, the last in line spoke, sobbing. She does not respond anymore. The next bier in line is reserved for me.

Perhaps one day I will be at peace like them. Time has become meaningless and there is only this compulsion to consume.

I hope for the rarest of rare, a woman traveling unaccompanied, that I might take my place among the others. Let my thoughts dissolve into the collective and not have these agonizing post-feeding memories of my former life.

There is relief in the sustenance, something akin to pleasure in the fresh, metallic spurt of blood across my lips. But beneath that is the pervasive taste of my own death and decay, cloying and rotten. There's another smell among the sweet jasmine, a perfume of citrus and salt and sea that reminds me of home.

We lift our head, fluids still sticky on our skin. Approaching footsteps plod the road. The ubiquitous hunger pangs propel us into the hunt. We bound to the roadside to lure our next victim.

The Slide

by E.W.H. Thornton

Hello class, welcome to Mortality and the Photographic Image in Popular Culture. I know that's a mouthful. I originally just wanted to call it Photography and Mortality, but one of my colleagues told me it sounded too much like I was trying to be clever, and I had to agree. I'll be your teacher for this semester, Professor Melinda Baines, spelled like it sounds.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. Photography and videography are so ubiquitous these days it's possible taking a picture was one of the very first things you did as a child after developing fine motor skills. When I was your age I was still trapped in an era of darkrooms: cramped enclosures of hideous, unnatural red light and vats of noxious chemicals, something that's probably as difficult for you to imagine as growing up without television is for me.

It always amazes me that students still want to study photography at a university level, and I appreciate all of you making the effort to learn more about the art of freezing a moment in time. Since cameras are so ubiquitous and easy to use now, this course will focus more on theory than practice.

To give you an idea of the sort of broad approach I intend to take, I'm going to begin by showing you a few photographs from history and discussing how they relate to one another, linking past and present.

_ low steady white noise of small fan spinning deep within com-

plex of mechanical guts_

Speaking of the past, that whirring sound you hear is the cooling fan of the ancient Leica slide projector I'm going to be using to display the photos. I hope you'll accept this bit of nostalgia on my part. Before slide projectors became commercially available, their primitive seventeenth century ancestors were called magic lanterns. There's a hint of the miraculous in that name that still appeals to me, a sense of romance I feel connected to by using this ancient thing, so I beg your indulgence in letting me cling to this sliver of a bygone era.

My T.A. will be our cameraman, manually changing the slides so I don't have to retreat to the back of the classroom every time I need to show a new photograph. Please give him your gratitude and consider it a foretaste of the glamorous intellectual life those of you contemplating grad school can look forward to.

It's time to view our first photo. If all the content warnings in the syllabus and the name of this course weren't indication enough, please be aware, I *will* be showing you disturbing real life images. Consider this your final warning, and feel free to remove yourself from the classroom if you think it'll be too much for you.

No one?

All right.

Let's proceed.

Darkness, please.

Slide.

_ dry click of slide moving in projector flooded by incandescent radiance _

This photograph of Evelyn Francis McHale is popularly known as Sleeping Beauty, and it's easy to see why. With her serene expression, posture of graceful repose, closed eyes, and the way she's gently enfolded by soft, pillowy fabric, she is beauty personified, a fairy tale come to life.

But she's not alive. On April thirtieth, nineteen forty-seven, Evelyn McHale committed suicide by jumping from the observation deck of the Empire State Building. She fell eighty-six stories, a distance of one thousand and fifty feet. The material cushioning her in this photo isn't fabric, but the metal roof of a car caved in by her body's impact. Note the crystals of broken glass, scattered like diamonds on satin.

This photo of her fresh corpse, published worldwide, has left us with two enduring mysteries: Why did she take her own life, and how did a human body traveling at one hundred and seventy-seven miles per hour collide with steel and remain perfectly intact, not a hair out of place?

The question of “how” has been largely dismissed, the perfect beauty resulting from her violent death written off as a remarkable coincidence.

The question of “why” is less easily ignored. Evelyn McHale left a suicide note, the first sentence of which reads:

“I don't want anyone in or out of my family to see any part of me.”

The mass publication of this photo can seem to add an additional note of tragic irony to her death—however, if we look at it from another perspective, it's possible to interpret it as Evelyn getting what she wanted, all her pain and despair eclipsed by an immortal image of sublime beauty.

Beauty can be a mask.

Even in death.

We'll return to this image—in the end, we always will—but for now we'll be venturing further back into the past; ninety-three years, to be precise.

Slide.

_ shift as carousel twitches with rise of one slide and fall of another in choreographed unison, twin sounds mingling into one isolated shudder _

This photo of a landscape riddled with dozens of cannonballs is largely agreed to be the very first instance of war photography. Popularly known as Valley of the Shadow of Death, it was taken by the British photographer Roger Phenton in eighteen fifty-five during the Crimean War.

It is also fake. It has been indisputably proven to be staged, with the cannonballs added after the battle was over.

When the era of modern photography first began, there was great hope it would make for a more just and honest world since photographs could only capture exactly what happened. By removing the human element from recording events, mistakes and lies

would be eliminated, leaving only truth.

Needless to say, the opposite happened, and people immediately began using the new technology to lie.

Slide.

*_ dry twist of interlocking plastic and metal snap up through
whirling fan's placid hum _*

This photo, taken by William H. Mumler in the early eighteen sixties, is widely believed to be the first example of Spirit Photography, which purported to capture ghosts on film. The appearance of this pale, transparent silhouette was the result of a simple error in the development process. There is no possible way William Mumler wasn't aware of his mistake, but he didn't let that stop him from claiming to be able to photograph people's departed loved ones. The practice of spirit photography flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when enterprising frauds used double exposures to insert ghostly figures into normal portraits. In retrospect putting that much effort into deluding mourners wasn't necessary, not when people wracked by grief were just as willing to see those they once loved in blobs of light and clouds of dust, so many airy nothings.

Slide.

_ cracking jolt of components realigning _

This is one of the so-called Cottingley Fairy pictures taken in nineteen seventeen, purporting to show real faeries captured on film, later revealed to be nothing more than cardboard cutouts from a popular children's book. A famous defender of the photo's veracity was the author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, something that still baffles people today because he created Sherlock Holmes, a

character who epitomized skepticism and reason.

People like to think intelligence can reveal truth.

They're afraid to believe otherwise.

Slide.

_ louder uneasy shift of images forced apart _

This, taken by Paul Trent on May eleventh, nineteen fifty, is the McMinnville UFO Photograph. It is, of course, a pie tin suspended on fishing line, but people believed in it so strongly it established the flying saucer trope that's still with us today.

We assume we're less gullible now, which, of course, only proves we're not.

In a way these counterfeit images are more honest than real, unstaged pictures, because they give us what we really want. Even when it comes to true images of real-world horror, we want to be torn, to feel the screaming nothing between truth and lies.

The following photo illustrates this.

Please brace yourself. Seeing this *will* hurt.

Cameraman.

Slide.

_ collapse of displaced tumblers driven through absent space _

This photograph is known as The Vulture and the Little Girl, taken by photojournalist Kevin Carter in nineteen ninety-three

during a famine in Southern Sudan.

Note how the vulture perched on the ground just two feet away from the collapsed child seems to have no eyes, its face appearing as a mask of bleached bone, its beak narrowing to a hooked point as it peers down at its victim with savage indifference. It could be death itself, captured an instant before it swoops forward to steal the life of a child already ravaged by hunger and neglect. The image cuts us to the bone, so much that our first instinct is to reach into the photo and save the little girl.

The subject was eventually revealed to in fact be a boy named Kong Nyong, who survived the famine only to perish in two thousand seven. Though the photo would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize, Carter faced criticism for stopping to photograph the starving child instead of immediately helping him.

Carter was even accused of waiting for the vulture to shift position so he could capture a perfectly framed shot.

There is zero evidence that happened, and the fact that the photo raised public awareness of the ongoing disaster and led to increased foreign aid is beyond doubt. Carter's personal feelings regarding the public reaction to the photo are not known. His suicide one year after the photo's publication would seem to speak for itself, but we should not jump to conclusions.

The average shutter speed of an analog camera in nineteen ninety-three was one sixtieth of a second, which means, in viewing this image, we're experiencing about one thirteen millionth of what Kevin Carter saw within the span of a single hour that day.

In chronicling war and famine Carter bore witness to nightmares we can't imagine, things no single image, no matter how moving,

can convey.

Photographs do not just capture the image they represent, but the mind of the person who took them. They do not just capture light, but also darkness, casting a shadow we step into only to find it deeper than anything in our most sinister imaginings.

We sink.

We drown.

Try not to look too hard at this next image.

Slide.

_ shift of edge carving up through haze of noise as whispers emerge through dull fan drone _

This photograph of Kevin Carter dead in the driver's seat of his car was never released to the public, and you can thank our cameraman for obtaining it for us.

The beauty is piercing. Intoxicating.

As was the case with Evelyn Francis McHale, it's easy to mistake death for sleep, sleep so profound and serene we envy whatever perfect dream flows beneath it. The way he's draped across the driver's seat in a state of such profound comfort—he is a dream himself, an exile from a different place where timeless beauty is as natural as rot and ruin is in ours. He is vital and real, a sigh of pure grace, yet he is, indeed, dead. The hose running from the car's exhaust pipe and in through the driver's side window makes that abundantly clear.

It also means that what we're looking at should not be physically

possible.

Carbon monoxide poisoning ravages the body of the person it kills, turning their skin a hideous, unnatural red. Kevin Carter was not found until days after he died, during which time his corpse was rotting in a hot car.

He should not look like a statue carved by a Renaissance master.

He, just like our Sleeping Beauty, left a suicide note.

Four words.

“Don't look.”

“He's inside.”

Have you ever wondered why, when a character dies in film or television, the hero so gently and tenderly closes their eyes? If the eyes are really windows to the soul, we may think once the soul has departed the eyes have become empty, and so must be hidden to preserve the corpse's dignity.

This is a lie.

The reason looking at a dead person's eyes is unbearable is because nothing changes in them after life ends. Looking at their eyes only makes us realize there was nothing there to begin with, that everything we imagined we saw was a projection on a blank screen, us seeing what we wanted to see. This is why morticians provide the invaluable service of sealing the eyes of our deceased loved ones shut with superglue. Our mind naturally revolts at the truth, and subconsciously knows it must shield itself at all costs. The alternative of staring death in the face only to see our own empty reflection is too hideous to imagine.

I'm sorry if you're getting uncomfortable. The slide projector runs hot, and the air in here doesn't circulate.

The windows don't open.

I've tried.

Cameraman.

Everyone.

Slide.

opposed segments grind amidst dry leaf rustle of remote formless murmurings

These are examples of photographer Kiyoshi Hagiwara's Landscapes with a Corpse series from the year two thousand eight.

The project was a collaboration between Hagiwara and different female models who personally designed their own perfect death. The models were asked to choose the location they wanted to be found in, their position, their method of death, the clothes they wanted to wear, their makeup and facial expression and accessories. Once staged Kiyoshi Hagiwara would take hundreds of pictures, then collaborate with the model to determine which single photo was the most beautiful, the most perfect.

The results are breathtaking, to say the least. The tragedy only enhancing the beauty, the empathy, and we can feel our own mor-

I'm sorry, give me a moment ...

Sli-

Slide.

_ sob cut off forced down as springs punch gears contort whispers ascend _

As you can tell from my reaction, the passage of time has done nothing to diminish their impact.

I didn't know that part of me was still there.

As I was saying, we can feel our own sense of mortality sing in harmony with theirs.

Naturally, the Landscapes with a Corpse series was a sensation, with praise lavished on Kiyoshi Hagiwara and the models.

This only made our Cameraman's revenge more cruel.

After viewing her portrait, the model Yuki Shirakawa remarked that a part of her regretted not really dying, since she would have to live out the rest of her life knowing her real death would have no such beauty, that it would be graceless and ugly and totally beyond her control.

She was right.

Slide.

_ misaligned objects dashed against one another voices dissolving into seething boil _

Yuki Shirakawa suffered a fatal aneurysm in her apartment. Her husband, who was traveling for work, returned five days later. In his statement to the coroner he said he saw what appeared to be a foaming liquid in her eye sockets. It was only when he looked

closer that he realized what appeared at first glance to be liquid was in fact maggots, writhing pools of idiot hunger.

By now, class, you'll be finding it difficult to move. You're beginning to feel that the hot, stagnant air has developed a physical weight that presses in on all sides, leeching away your strength as it threatens to seep within.

Slide.

_ savage break something vital gives way amid deep churn of black waters _

Hiromi Fukuda attended a party on a yacht. It was only after it returned to port that people realized she'd fallen overboard. A massive search and rescue operation was undertaken, but she wasn't found until four days later, when a fisherman hauled her up in a net along with his daily catch. By then ocean scavengers had gnawed away her body's soft tissue, devouring her ears and lips and nose. You can see what little remains no longer resembles a face, appearing more like a skull that was dipped in putrid gray wax.

We have our Cameraman to thank for these images.

If you look at the syllabus I passed out earlier, you'll find it's blank.

If you have a map of the university campus, you'll notice this classroom isn't on it.

You can try to reach the doors if you want to, but it would be a wasted effort.

They no longer lead anywhere.

Slide.

_ agonized cry rising through pitched drone of air churned through whirling blades _

Kaneko Masuyo's plane flight was forty thousand feet over the Pacific, halfway between Tokyo and Buenos Aires, when her appendix burst. There was no doctor on board but, with her life in the balance, crude surgery was attempted. It did not work. The first class cabin was abandoned by the other passengers when her screams became too much to bear. When the plane finally landed emergency medical technicians found her soaked in blood and bile, her abdomen ripped open, the nail file she'd attempted to finally end her life with still lodged in her neck where it had snapped in half.

In creating Landscapes with a Corpse, Kiyoshi Hagiwara and his collaborators provoked someone they didn't understand.

He was born in the gaps between what really is and what we're willing to show, the dark recesses where the lies we tell ourselves fester. He was there when cavemen first painted on walls, images that showed them bravely attacking giant predators instead of fleeing for their lives.

Photography changed everything. Every forced smile, every staged display of affection, every flaw hidden and pain obscured. We nourish him with what we hide. The more we starve ourselves, the more we feed him. For those who can no longer endure how broken they are, for those willing to give him everything he wants ...

An arrangement can be made.

Cameraman is just what I call him. The instant he's inside you'll know there is no real word for what he is and what he does.

By now you're beginning to feel him behind you, sensing him in the same dim way you sense every lie you invent in order to survive.

Don't look yet.

If he takes from you, there will be nothing left.

Only look when you're ready to give.

The creators of Landscapes with a Corpse stole his blessing. Presumed to use it as their own.

They were punished.

Slide.

_ the scream of metal slicing into metal the chitinous rustle of swarming insects _

Kiyoshi Hagiwara's next exhibition was called The Slide. Landscapes with a Corpse had been such a success he was able to dictate that there be no preview viewing. Instead The Slide was immediately opened to the public.

When the gallery owner was asked why he consented to display such photographs, he said the frames were empty when they were hanged. He said he thought it was some kind of artistic statement.

All the models from Landscapes with a Corpse were there, their true deaths on full display, bodies incinerated and dismembered and gutted and flayed.

You're beginning to wonder why our Cameraman chose you.

He didn't.

If you're here it means there's already a void inside you, a place where the burden of lies has torn you apart, carving an opening.

That's where you slid through the lacuna between what's shown and what's hidden.

That's where he got in.

You could never have found this place otherwise.

Slide.

_ tear of ripping skin dry hiss of a thousand thousand scuttling vermin _

The centerpiece of The Slide exhibition was the photographer Kiyoshi Hagiwara himself, in the flesh.

All of it, every drop of blood and scrap of tissue on display.

One attendee said it appeared as if Hagiwara had been peeled apart from the inside.

Naturally this single, still image can't do the piece justice. We can't see his lungs inflating and deflating. His heart pumping. His tendons twitching, his intestines contracting, his lidless eyes quivering and alive and empty.

Note his vocal cords, exposed and taut like strings on a violin.

It managed to articulate a single phrase. All the attendees heard and understood, despite many speaking different languages.

“The Slide.”

It's a descent you're all familiar with, the downward pull on your lives and yourselves, dragging you under as you silently plead for someone, anyone, to reach out.

To see how you're coming apart.

To see you at all.

It was what I asked for a long time ago, though I didn't understand the arrangement I'd made until I began to fall.

I don't know her name anymore. Our Cameraman took that.

I know I loved her. With every fiber of my being, I loved her.

And I could never be what she needed.

I couldn't pretend anymore.

I watched Manhattan's skyscrapers shoot up around me, a vast range of concrete teeth clamping shut.

Everything instantly stopping, the raw fact of metal and glass shattering everything I was.

Cameraman.

Everyone.

Slide.

_ door slamming closed forever immersed in pure silence _

We return to Evelyn McHale, to our Sleeping Beauty. We now know what she dreams of.

What I dream of.

I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you about who I am, sorry I forced another lie on you. I do it because I want to give you the introduction to him I never had.

I know it's difficult to see the resemblance between the woman in the photograph and me, to believe I was ever capable of becoming this perfect vision of porcelain skin and crumpled steel.

We call dead bodies remains, but it is her, our Sleeping Beauty, who endures, while I am the remainder. What is left.

The fact that you're here means you've been falling. Falling for what feels like forever.

Our Cameraman is here to catch you.

And to feed.

I can't say what will be left of you when he's finished.

It will not be painless. You will break in places you did not know existed.

Fighting only makes it worse.

Trust me. I know.

Doubts grow fangs that plunge deep.

Lies sprout claws that pierce clean through.

Peeled apart, from the inside out.

_ sound without form rising and encompassing _

Please.

I swear.

Whatever happens.

Whatever he does to you.

Remember.

Now and forever.

You.

Are.

Seen.

_ rises to crescendo and falls, taking everything as it fades to cold refuge in ancient nowhere, the dry final act, shedding time like so much dead skin while ideas crumple to ashen shards, the return to alien home of pitched contorted slumber, picked apart and at last spilled open and held _

Dark Siren

by Irina Tall



Cloaked in Starlight and Doom

by Jennifer Crow

Cruel, in the way only the confident can be cruel, she looses
tumultuous multitudes, schools them in violence, sings
destruction over a city's grave. Some call her queen, or witch,
or temptress, but she answers to none, her name continually
erased from the lore that spawns her. True power needs
no name, data points and anecdotes churning in endless
permutations to make her faces—or the masks
which conceal and reveal a whirl of identities,
each as false as the last, every one true in some corrupt
and careless way—and true power mocks piteous cries
for power has no pity, no conscience. Lessons of gods
taught her that, back before the world understood
time, when stars danced in their constellations
and angels gathered pins, putting their heads together
to whisper creation's secrets in the ears of demons.
Cruel being, unbending and arrogant, she twists
existence around her fingers and plays with lives
like a game of cat's cradle, hands weaving disasters
as she peers into the night. Stars form patterns,
assure her of her beauty, her magnificence,
the slow and painful decay of her enemies
in the crumbling structures of their envy. Endings
weave from beginnings, eschatology begotten
by the first breath entering the world,
and she smiles, baring teeth as sharp as the light
that settles on her shoulders, a cape of menace
more troubling than the darkness at the heart
of galaxies and goddesses.



Intruder

by Binod Dawadi

The Creeping

by C.J. Subko

I don't remember who I was before the Creeping.

I was a woman, yes, although I never felt like more than a girl, and my skin was that angry mottled white that is so erroneously prized. It still is, I think, white, although veneered in the tenebrous hue of granite and things long dead.

Before, I was little more than a mouth to speak and ears to hear, and, doing very little of either, most days I could almost make myself entirely invisible.

Now ...

Now I am the wind beneath the door.

Now I am the dirt caked underneath a gravedigger's fingernails.

Now I am everything.

* * *

I was dead. Not the permanent kind of dead but the dead of "shoulds" and "no longer" and "never again." Of stories untold and potential unexplored.

I hardly left my bed except to piss or shit or force down half a sandwich every other day, enough to keep my sagging stomach from retching up bile. Otherwise I lived in a putrid nest of un-

washed blankets with water and pills and entertainments on hand.

Sometimes I'd play a video game. Sometimes I'd stare for hours at the wall. Sometimes I'd rake my nails down my arms to feel something.

Only nothing ever felt any different, just the same gray haze that had engulfed me body and soul for weeks.

* * *

It happened very slowly, the Creeping. I observed it one day, from the flat of my back, at the topmost corner of the room. It was a spiderweb thread of black. A nothing. A crack in the paint.

I closed my eyes. There was nothing to interest me here, nothing to satisfy my craving for novelty.

At least, not at first. Ten minutes of staring at my eyelids, however, and I was very ready to reconsider the crack.

I opened my eyes.

As I watched, the line began to ... to creep. Inch by inch, a trail of black bleeding into ice crack patterns like the surface of a frozen pond, only so very small and delicate as to resist my eye's attempts to capture it.

I opened my eyes wider. Pulled my covers up to my chin. No. That couldn't be. I hadn't seen that ... move, had I?

Perhaps it was foul water, a drip spiderwebbing into a lattice while I watched.

No, too dark, like ink more than water.

Or perhaps ...

No.

There was nothing magical, nothing sinister about it. It was just a trick of the light.

Only a trick of the light.

* * *

I counted out my pills. Abilify, 30mg, one round white pill. Effexor, 300mg, two bicolored capsules. Lithium carbonate, 90mg, two round white pills. Omeprazole, 20mg and one pill, violent purple, just to shake things up.

I had lain them out on my blanket when I was struck with the sharpest sense of déjà vu. My heart stuttered, a broken dotted line. I'd done this before! I'd done this before! Fearful, uncanny dread settled into my bones and threatened to pulsate into tears. Uncanny. *Unheimlich*. Unhomelike.

Then a cackle pealed out of my mouth, the first real laughter I'd managed in weeks.

Because *of course* I'd done this before. Of course! I'd done this yesterday, and the night before that, and every night before that

onward and forever. Sometimes the pills were different colors or had different unpronounceable names, but it was all the same shit, different day.

I slammed back the fistful of positive poison and gulped them down, hoping maybe this time for a miracle.

But even though the pills could cure me of my depression, they'd never be able to cure me of myself.

* * *

No, it was definitely getting bigger.

I'd been staring at the black spiderweb of cracks for an hour or so, determined to discover whether the web had, indeed, grown from its dusting of lace two days before. Three? Difficult to keep track of time, given the circumstances.

I thought about getting a ladder from downstairs so that I could get closer, poke and prod at it to see if it was mold come to kill me, but the motivation for that thought only lasted the amount of time it took to think it. Of course I wasn't going to *go downstairs*. I was going to stay here, where it was safe, where none of the demons of the outside world could find me.

So instead I watched, watched, while the lines crept into a more intense, more dread filigree, a flat ironwork just for me.

* * *

You can never go back to a moment in time before your depression.

They won't let you. They will have seen you at your worst, and

their perceptions will lock you there. Even on your deathbed, they'll still treat you like they did thirty years ago when you were in your darkest hour. When you were annoying. Frightening. A burden.

I don't have thirty years to tell you about, but I have enough. Enough shattered friendships. Enough "you vent too much" and "you cry too much" and "you *are* too much."

So what, praytell, do we do with these unkind words?

Well.

When people ignore and dismiss you constantly, you teach yourself to shut down.

They will ignore you so long and so readily that you will cease to exist.

My only recourse was to retreat within. Within the walls of my room. Within the walls of my body.

Deep inside, where no one, no one could ever find me.

* * *

I opened my eyes to a bleak swathe of black creeping down the brittle paint of the white wall. Only it wasn't just creeping downward, not anymore; it was creeping *outward*. It was a dark, flat, fathomless black, like someone had torn off a strip from the world just like you'd tear off wallpaper.

Still cocooned in my comforter, I inched closer on my knees to the edge of my bed to investigate. Peered closer, closer, until my nose was inches away from the blackness. Almost shivered

from the burn-cold wafting off of it like ozone.

What *was* this? Mold? Water? Paint? Ink?

I swayed a little closer. A little closer. Squinting my eyes. Trying to see deeper into the black.

And then—

GROAN.

I scrambled back, my heart pounding, and flipped my covers over my head and didn't come out for a full day.

Because I had learned two things in that moment:

One. It wasn't mold and

Two, and the most important ...

The groan wasn't a groan.

* * *

It was a word.

"You."

That's what the groan said. Just one word. "You." I'd been up all night ruminating on the singularity of it. You, as in me? You, as in ... god forbid, someone else?

The wall made no other sounds. Eventually I got up the courage to creep back towards it to inspect. At least, from a safe distance. I wasn't about to touch it, afraid I'd be sucked into an

alternate universe, or contract some deadly virus. Every possibility had occurred to me from a brain fed on novels, and none seemed quite the same.

Close up, it just looked blank. Not flat, precisely, but endless. It was a hole, that much I could tell, but there was no obvious end to it, and the edges seemed to creep and pulsate as I stared, wavering like a heat mirage.

But no matter how long I waited there, nothing happened.

No more creeping. No more groaning.

Hm. Well.

I crawled back towards my pillow. It was late, anyway.

* * *

I woke with a start.

The bed, it was shaking, raucously like an earthquake, but we don't get earthquakes here, and even if we did, I'm pretty sure the sound coming from the hole in the wall wouldn't be part of one.

It was a high-pitched wailing, the sound of something dying—or the sound of something already dead. It thrummed through me, plucking out notes of fear and dread.

In a rush, I picked up my phone, then laughed mirthlessly, put it down. Who was I going to call? No one I knew wanted to hear from me. Even my inner demons were sick of me. The police wouldn't believe me.

I pulled my covers over my head and resumed my stupor, while

the wailing played a dreadful tune behind my head.

* * *

Three days went by, I think, and I'd been too afraid to emerge from my cocoon even to eat. I drank water, at least, and ran to and from the bathroom as fast as I could, afraid that something was going to climb out of the wall and *get me*.

The wailing wasn't constant, but it would pick up at intervals, when I was on the brink of sleep, when I was lost in the labyrinth of my thoughts, that preternatural moan sharp as knives slicing the air into ribbons.

I shuddered in my blanket cocoon. It was my safety, my security, it always had been. Now I just needed to ask more of it. I tightened the covers around me and counted down from one hundred by sevens and prayed, to a God I didn't really believe in, to make it stop, to make everything stop.

* * *

A week of sleepless nights had staggered past by the time I noticed the vein. It was one on the underside of my wrist, bisected by an ovular burn scar, and it was black.

And its ends were creeping, creeping, branching out like a tree, like the void in the wall.

I didn't have the energy to shriek, but I wanted to. My bones screamed instead. What was happening to me? What was this?

Had the Creeping done this?

Or was the darkness in me all the time?

* * *

My days became divided, between the usual sleeping or pretending to sleep, and observing changes in the Creeping. By the end of a week, all the veins in my arms were black, and my fingertips had curdled into a dusky grayish color like I'd dipped them in ash. By the third day, the dusty color had crept up to my elbows.

I was becoming a gargoyle; I was becoming a corpse. I worried about this in a way, but in a quiet, muffled way.

What could be done?

Nothing, nothing.

* * *

The wailing wasn't always senseless moans. Sometimes in it I could catch the imprecations of a monster.

"You fucker, you're a piece of shit."

"Go kill yourself."

"Don't you just want to die?"

"You're the worst sonofabitch in the world."

It made me want to laugh. It made me pull my covers over my head and go back to sleep.

Perhaps these thoughts were meant to torment and ensnare me, but they were so similar to the thoughts in my own head that it was almost like welcoming home a vicious companion.

Hello, old buddy.

Hello, my friend.

* * *

I couldn't tell you the point at which my sanity began to slip into many consciousnesses. It happened slowly, then all at once. I was me, and then I was us. I was the universe, and all the mysteries therein were open to me and it was so beautiful and so terrible that for the first time in months, I sobbed.

I was the wind beneath the door.

I was the dirt under the gravedigger's fingernails.

I was me, and you.

I was all of us.

And I was alive.

* * *

Thirty-one days under the onslaught of the Creeping and I still lie here, curled in my bed, our bed, pondering the mysteries of the universe and snoring from time to time. The Creeping wails its horrors and shakes the bed a little and I curl up into my blankets and I dream.

Have I thought about leaving? Sure. But even if I did decide to leave, where would I leave to?

My ghosts are all inside me, and they're not letting go.

Notes on Monsters I Have Loved

by David Sandner

Remember: when monsters come to dance, ask them to leave their shoes outside. Your human guests may track in mud, but your monster friends will leave a viscera that no deep cleaning will ever get out again.

When monsters stop for tea, put an extra lump of sugar in every cup, for your monsters need all the sweetness you can spare.

When monsters ask you to bring something to the potluck, politely decline. They love you, but there's nothing to be done when you turn out to be the tastiest dish.

When monsters gossip, listen with rapt attention, but never, ever share what you learn. Take all secrets to the desert, dig a hole, and yell it to the underworld. Bury it forever. Try not to even think about it again.

When your monster friends beckon from the woods while you are safe inside, simply wave as if you misunderstood what they meant, then close the curtains and double lock the doors. Those were not smiles that glinted in the gloaming.

But some fatal night when the wilderness claims your heart, go with them beneath a gibbous moon and howl ... for even if you lose yourself and forget your human form, your monster friends will see you home and safe to bed ...

where you will awake in wonder, and with an abiding discontent that will see you through all the terrible days and pitch black nights that lie ahead.



Gleeful Arrival

by Janis Butler Holm

Delivery

by Simon MacCulloch

Morning. Doorstep. Bundle.

Rags. Clothes. Blankets.

But

Pink. Bald. Head.

Doll. Bin. Lift.

But

Soft. Heavy. Floppy.

Baby.

Baby. Cold. Dead.

Phone. Ambulance. Police.

Baby. Doorstep. Dead.

Dead?

Dead.

Happens. Another. Tomorrow.

But

Quotas. Increased. Distribution.

But

Rules. Edict. Vatican.

But. Single. Retired.

Octogenarian? Homosexual? Presbyterian?

No. No. No.

Well. Eligible. Mandatory.

But

Latitudinarian? Heretic? Abortionist?

No! No! No!

Well. Tomorrow. Goodbye.

Body?

*Bag. Bin. **Goodbye.***

But But But

Click.

Morning. Doorstep. Bundle?

Bundle. Bundle.

Twins.

Thank You and Goodnight

by EA Mylonas

Playing music live sucked Ruth's energy, no matter how much she loved it. Being left alone was all she wanted afterwards. A woman stared at her from across the bar with a memory in her hands and she knew she wouldn't be that lucky.

Unsteady, the woman stumbled through the Saturday night crowd to where Ruth was sitting, then stood a little too close for comfort. The memory jumped out of her hands, landed on Ruth's lap.

"Can I help you?" Ruth wiped the memory's excretions with a napkin and handed it back.

"You're his kid, aren't you?"

"Everyone's someone's kid."

"You're Dave Hartford's daughter. You're Dave's girl."

Ruth tried to smile through clenched jaws. Dave Hartford's fans always showed up at her gigs. Didn't matter that her name wasn't on the promo posters. Always coming up to her wanting to talk. About their favorite Armada albums, about their tattoos of her dad which they insisted on showing her.

Oh, their grievances about him selling out.

She couldn't hear the woman well above the din of the bar, but

didn't feel like leaning in either. The woman smelled of stale sweat that cut through the piss-stink of spilled beer. In the bar's half-light, streaks of gray flashed insolent through her dyed hair.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm Dave Hartford's daughter."

"I knew it. You have his eyes. Cat eyes, yeah."

"Thank you. I hope you enjoyed the show."

"I knew Dave. I knew your dad."

"That's nice."

The memory was worn down in places, discolored. Thumb-sized, comically bulky compared to modern ones that slipped into the ear without effort. A single eye twitched open at its center and shut again.

The woman set the memory on the counter and scratched scabs on her left arm.

"I met Dave at his last show in Newcastle. Right after you were born."

"That's nice. Did you enjoy the show tonight?"

"I just got here."

Ruth glanced over at the merch table, hoping to catch Kris' eyes.

Skinny Kris. Throat tattoos and full sleeves and taller than any one she knew by at least a head. Scary skinny Kris. Most times, he just had to stand straight and scowl, which had gotten them out of trouble in Glasgow. But he was too busy now to notice her, selling download codes and swag, patches and stickers with the band's logo, making friends, *cultivating a following*. Things she was happy to let her drummer handle.

The woman leaned in, hitting Ruth with her odor.

"I needed to talk to you. This is my most precious memory. It's of your dad. It's why I came over, to show it to you. I had to come see Dave's little girl."

Ruth nursed her drink and waited for the offer she knew was coming.

"It's him and me backstage in Newcastle right before he died. I'd hate to let it go, but it can be yours. Two thousand quid. You got the money for it."

Finally, getting to the point.

The woman offered the memory to Ruth and a squeak emanated from it. Kris still wasn't looking her way.

Ruth took a deep breath. "Were you a band aid?"

"It wasn't like that."

"That a yes?"

"He was nice to me," the woman's voice cracked.

"Listen ... Do you realize how many people have sold me their memories of Dave? How many concerts and random meet-and-greets I've experienced?"

"But this is special."

"Sure is." Ruth looked at the woman's left arm that was covered in tracks, how she was scratching them. "No bloody way I'm slipping into *your* head."

"But this is—"

"Found yourself a ghoul, Ruthie?" Kris appeared over Ruth and glared at the woman.

"Yeah, looks like."

"Come on, love," Kris said to the woman. "You're done here."

He put a hand on the woman's shoulder and led her towards the exit, ignoring her pleas, ignoring the wiggling memory that she was offering to him now.

The gig had felt good. Thirty-minute set. Six songs. Smooth night until *then*.

Kris' squeezed her shoulder on his way back to the merch table.

"Thank you," she said.

After last call, Kris brought the van around the back of the bar. They inspected the doors and the windows, checked the engine

in case someone had tried to mess with it like in Birmingham, then loaded up their gear.

As they were driving away, Ruth thought she caught a glimpse of the woman outside the front entrance whispering to the memory.

* * *

A pub in Sheffield.

First in a four-band lineup. A couple of them they had played with before. All doing the toilet circuit, paying their dues.

The “stage” was a corner beside the toilets where they sound-checked while people trickled in.

“We’re ‘Hit the Lights!’” Kris’ screeched and rolled into a driving double-bass pummeling. Ruth closed her eyes and joined him with her guitar, howling into the microphone.

It had always been the two of them. Jamming together since they could play.

Banshee and the punk.

Frantic. Take-no-prisoners Noise.

Capital N.

Her. always playing with her eyes closed, face hidden behind a shock of curly hair.

Him, in ratty black clothes, T-shirt worn inside out to hide the

logos.

Facing each other, spitting verses at each other, call and response, before they plunged together into the chorus, open-throat bellows. War screams in key.

She didn’t care about working the crowd. The posing and strutting her father did. With her eyes still closed, she couldn’t see the rowdy crowd. Didn’t care.

She rested her foot atop Kris’ bass drum and launched into a solo, her fingers finding their way around the frets through pure muscle memory.

Songs transitioned, flowed into each other. A pause only to change tuning. She opened her eyes and focused on her guitar while Kris worked the audience.

“Any Sheffield United fans here?”

The entire pub cheered.

“I am sorry for your poor life choices,” he said and ducked a mug of beer hurled at him.

“‘Transmission’!” someone shouted. Snickering. Ruth looked up but couldn’t see who had said it. Only tiny spots of orange light from the eyes of those who were recording the memory.

“Fuck off, mate. The car shop is next door,” Kris said, and this time people burst out laughing.

There was a guy like that at every gig, calling for “Transmission” or one of the other Armada hits. All looked the same. Al-

ways in their late fifties, with holes in their earlobes where there once had been piercings, ancient tour T-shirt.

Kris glanced at Ruth.

She nodded.

And they both launched into “Grind” without counting in. No need to. Her guitar’s wall of reverb filled the bar to the rafters and she soared again.

They blitzed through their remaining set. “Thank you, you’ve been fanfuckingtastic!” Kris shouted the moment they hit the last chord and she ran away, letting him receive the applause.

She had once told Kris that, if they made it big and played on stages with proper space, she’d put him up front where the lead singer ought to be while she stayed in the back. The way irises lit up when memories were being recorded distracted Ruth in the mid-set darkness. Pinpricks of light, like animals in a blacked-out forest. Since their first gig at age fifteen, she had always kept her eyes shut.

She went straight to the bar to catch her breath. Kris would handle the merch table. Three more dates. Hartlepool, Sunderland, and the big one, Newcastle. Then, back home to London for a week before heading out again, this time to the South. Reading, Brighton, Plymouth.

Rinse, repeat.

Hoping to catch a label’s eye.

There was never a discussion about using her name to pull in

favours. That’d be a slippery slope, and who knows how soon they’d ask her to play dress-up in Dave’s iconic—ridiculous—red flamenco shirt and write songs people could dance to? How soon before they saddled them with a bassist?

Or forced her to get a new drummer?

At least they didn’t have to rough it out sleeping in the van like other bands. The woman was right, she did have money. The Armada back-catalogue was still worth a lot. Enough to ensure them a clean bed and a hot shower every night on the road. That was something she could compromise on.

Over at the merch table, Ruth could make out Kris’ scraggy figure hunched over the woman with the memory, listening to her with his arms crossed. He turned and locked eyes with Ruth.

Scowled.

Then he turned to the woman again and nodded. They both started moving towards her.

“Hey, Ruthie.”

“Et tu, Kris?”

“Ruthie, we need to talk.”

“Alright. Talk. What’s going on? What did she say to convince you?”

“This is Anita.”

“So, she has a name.”

“You might want to hear her out. That memory of hers, she says it has ‘The Hush’ on it.”

Ruth let out an exasperated sigh. “Fuck’s sake, Kris. Come on. There’s no such thing as ‘The Hush.’”

The woman stepped forward, lifting the memory up like an offering. “You should have it.”

“Nonono. There’s no such thing as ‘The Hush.’ Okay? Enough with this myth. And how come you have it?”

“He played it for me.”

“Oh, bollocks he played it for you.”

“It’s true. He played it for me in Newcastle. Before he died.”

“That’s convenient. How come you’re selling it to me and not some collector? This is worth a lot more than two thousand.”

Kris nodded to Anita. “Tell her what you told me.”

“Because Dave was a good man.” She grabbed Ruth’s hands and pressed the memory into them. “You never got to know him. He was a wonderful man and you never got to know him the way I did. You should have this, not some random.”

Shocked, Ruth looked at the fleshy pod rocking back and forth, humming to itself.

She glanced at Kris, tried to read his mind in that almost-telepathic way of theirs. Asking him for advice. Asking him if he had noticed the tracks on Anita’s arm, the scratching. But Kris

averted his gaze.

“I swear, if you’re fucking Dave in this—”

“No, no. There’s no sex in this one.”

Another look at Kris, who was chewing on his thumb.

“Two thousand, was it?”

“Three. It was three.”

“I’ll give you two and I never want to see your face again.”

“Come on, it’s the happiest moment of my life. You have the money.”

Ruth shrugged. With a whimper, Anita caressed the memory and placed it in Ruth’s hands. Ruth transferred the money with her phone and Anita shuffled away, leaving misery in her wake.

Kris picked up the memory and studied it. “What if?”

Ruth didn’t respond. She took the memory, wrapped it in a napkin, and stuffed it into her pocket.

They drove to a Holiday Inn outside the city, parked the van out where they could keep an eye on it, and got a twin room.

Kris got into bed in his clothes and, after a few minutes, was snoring. Ruth spent the night staring at the ceiling.

* * *

They finished the tour at a club next to Newcastle University. A corner of the St. James Park stadium peeked between the rooftops, where Dave Hartford had played his last concert. Where he had played “The Hush” for Anita.

Allegedly.

After he died, the band faded away. Never got a new singer, never officially broke up.

For a few years, the others in Armada had tried to keep in touch. Desmond, the drummer, had showed up for her seventh birthday.

Then, nothing.

She didn’t know if any of them was aware that she was playing music. Just as well. She and Kris would make it on their own.

But not if she played like this. They finished the gig with Kris carrying her. He improvised fills and went berserk during breakdowns, but she knew he wasn’t showing off.

She was missing notes, falling out of tempo, though no one seemed to notice. Kris sped up or slowed down, adding a beat here or there and making it sound deliberate.

Making it sound good, even.

“I’ll drive,” she offered by way of apology once they had finished packing up the van. He nodded and jumped in the back, where he fell asleep against the drum bags. It was six hours to London down the M1, but she never slept well after gigs anyway and she could use the quiet time. In her pocket, the memory shuffled.

With the sky turning a shade of coal gray, they reached the outskirts of London, driving through its still empty streets. Warehouses rolled past the van’s windows, which soon gave way to parks and gentle crescent roads and then the glass buildings of the financial district. They drove over the Thames and past the clubs of Brixton, past David Bowie’s childhood neighborhood around the corner from the Academy. Soon, they were in Croydon and Ruth was pulling over in front of the warehouse they practiced in. They unloaded the equipment inside and drove to Kris’ in the Jamaican neighbourhood.

“Love you,” Ruth said and hugged him.

“Love you, too. Good show tonight.”

“You had a good show. I messed up.”

“Yeah, you did mess up.” He tapped his ear. “You’re gonna use the memory?”

“I paid for it. Might as well see what’s in it, yeah?”

“No one’s forcing you to.”

“A little late for that talk.”

A small hesitation. “If ‘The Hush’ is in there ...”

“None of the guys in Armada ever heard ‘The Hush,’ Kris. It was just talk.”

“And your mum never mentioned it? No recordings? Nothing?”

“Do you think she’d tell me after I sued her for the back-cata-

logue rights? Knowing her, she'd destroy the masters, just to spite me. I can't bloody well call her up after two years and ask."

"If the song exists—"

"Even if it exists, it might still be rubbish."

"He could be banging pots and it'd still become a hit."

"I'd prefer that, a bunch of noise. I don't know what I'll do if that woman is telling the truth."

"Will you be okay? Need me to keep an eye on you?"

"No. I'll be fine. Get out of here, go get some proper rest."

She watched him enter his building, then drove to her own place close by and knew she wouldn't be able to sleep. Never mind the exhaustion from the drive. Too many thoughts. Too much brain static.

Once she made it inside her single-bedroom flat, she filled a mason jar with saline, dropped the memory inside, and placed it next to another dozen jars lined along a shelf on the wall. Every single one housed a memory, roughly the same size as Anita's. All of them worn out, callused.

On labels taped to the canisters:

Bataclan, Paris, '98

Red Rock Amph, Colorado, '00

BDO, Sydney, '02

She sat on her bed, channel hopping into the night, amplifier buzz still ringing in her ears.

Sleeplessness always got worse when they toured. Standing in front of all those people night after night left her tense.

She found one of the many documentaries on Armada streaming and pressed play.

Her father's face stared into the camera, then faded into grainy video footage of his bagged body being taken away on a gurney. In the background, surrounding the ambulance outside a hotel, were orange pinpricks from the eyes of the gathered crowd. A title read "Rock star Dave Hartford dies of accidental sleeping pill overdose." Fade out, fade into her own face as a baby, sitting between her parents. Rock royalty.

Dave Hartford slumped on a velvet couch with the band, smirking at the camera.

Dave Hartford smashing bottles against the wall of his dressing room and laughing before Armada's manager manhandled him away.

Dave Hartford crooning at the Royal Albert Hall, walking into the crowd, hundreds of hands reaching out to touch him.

This was all she knew of him. Documentaries, music videos. Fan memories. Fragments and passed-on impressions. And the world they painted seemed so far away from the world of bars and pubs she played.

There he was, peacocking across the stage with his head tipped back. Conducting the crowd, commanding them. So unlike her.

Where was that footage from? Moscow? Berlin?

The camera swept over the crowd and kept going, kept going, kept going. Everyone singing with Dave Hartford and him singing to each and every one of them personally. He raised his arms and a roar shook the stadium. Close-up shot of his face, dripping in playful arrogance. Cat eyes that he shared with her.

Images of his funeral. The band. A few family members. Her mum wearing a red dress and black shades with Ruth as a baby in her arms, standing out amongst the dark suits.

Beyond the cemetery walls, crowds of people gathered, blocking traffic. Crying, holding each other, as if they had lost one of their own.

But they *had* lost one of their own.

Was Anita there somewhere?

On the screen, the video for “Transmission” played with a voice-over.

“Dave Hartford had decided to leave Armada. In his press release, he announced he was working on a song as a farewell present to the fans, entitled ‘The Hush.’ A song that never saw the light of day. Rumours that Dave Hartford contemplated retiring from music altogether were never confirmed before his accidental overdose.”

She stood up, went to the jar with Anita’s memory.

Took it out and watched its single eye slide open, regarding her.

Taking a deep breath, she held it next to her ear and felt its tendrils slither inside her head.

* * *

This is a mistake.

Anita’s fingertips are buzzing, which means my fingertips are buzzing, and the champagne bubbles and the cocaine and whatever else is in her system is hitting her/me haaard and she keeps thinking, life should be more of this, should be more, and her thoughts and emotions are filling my skull until I am all drowned out.

I can hear thousands beyond the walls of these corridors leaving after the end of the concert. I can feel the concrete underneath her heels and the dampness on her skin. Her heart beating in her chest like a savage bird. And I can feel the pressure from the memory deep inside her ear, tickling her brain stem, recording everything she sees, everything she feels. Her thoughts. Her animal hunger.

Everything.

“Dave’s already in the dressing room,” the giant by her side says and he grabs her ass. It’s making Anita/me giddy, and I want to puke because of how okay she/I am with this.

It paid getting in early to get close to the stage. All evening I tried to catch Dave’s attention. Danced and danced and danced until I caught his eye as he ran from one end of the stage to the other and he smiled at me. Then, at the encore, he pointed at me and shouted something to the giant who stood in the wings. Bring her in.

A dark thought lurking in my mind like an animal at the back of a cave. Get him drunk, stoned, whatever. As long as the memory captures it, as long as he does something juicy. What I'll do after that, I haven't figured it out yet, whether I'll threaten to send the memory to a magazine or to his wife. But, he has money, he'll pay up. Rock stars are rich. Not like the rest of us.

So many turns through this maze, I never realized St. James was so massive. The giant leads the way.

And, finally, a door. The giant knocks. Desmond opens it and grins.

"Hey, you brought us new friends."

He brushes my cheek and it burns up as much from the alcohol as from the excitement. Suddenly Desmond is giggling with me as he steps aside and lets both of us in.

But the dressing room is much quieter than I thought it would be.

The band is sitting on a couch, on the floor, listening to music. There's women there too, looking as bored as they are gorgeous, with their perfect skin and hair and simple but expensive clothes. Tasteful.

I glare at them

(territorial, she doesn't know those are girlfriends and wives of the band, and their manager too)

and, although they ignore me, this is a victory and I stand a little straighter, a little taller.

If it comes down to it, I'll fight them. I'm a born fighter, like all women in my family, and I never back down, never take shit from anyone.

Desmond hands me another glass of something that tastes off

(tastes wrong)

burns my eyes, but whatever.

There's hooting and there's giggling and I laugh with him as the drink spreads and warms up my insides, making even the memory squirm inside my head, until an angry voice from the couch barks "Enough with this nonsense," but I keep laughing as the giant ushers me towards a side door. He knocks and opens it.

"Have fun, you two," he says, and Desmond is giggling like an imp behind him.

The door closes.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust because there is only a small light turned on above a vanity mirror. She's/I'm —

(get it together, this is what you paid for)

I'm having trouble focusing but I see him in the corner sitting on a stool, naked from the waist up, his red flamenco shirt lying in a pile on the floor. Leaning elbows on his knees, a lit cigarette between his fingers.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Dave Hartford asks.

My mind goes blank.

Blank.

Cat eyes.

(Like mine)

“All good?”

In the back of my mind, buried beneath excitement, a thought; he looks so different compared to thirty minutes ago, all slumped shoulders now, face full of lines.

Dismiss the thought.

“Oh my God, yes, you guys are amazing!”

He stares at me, stares through me, and, after what feels like forever, he says, “Thank you. That’s nice of you.” His words are dragging. “You’ll have to pardon me. I don’t sleep too well.”

That thought coming back now, more insistent, and I can’t ignore it anymore. How can he be so different, one minute running like a demon, commanding an entire stadium, and the next be this tired little man? “I loved you when you played ‘Transmission’!”

He sighs and I have the crushing feeling I’ve said something wrong. Any minute now he’ll lose his interest and ask me to leave.

“I hate that song, actually,” he waves his cigarette hand. “I’m sick of it. I wrote it when I was seventeen. I’ve moved on.”

“Oh, but it’s such a great song.”

That sigh again and a tired smile and I think I blew it.

“Thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

He stamps out his cigarette in an ashtray and tries to roll another one, botching it up.

“Could you?” he offers me the tobacco and the cigarette paper.

I nod and sit cross-legged down on the floor by his red shirt. I’ve done this a million times for mum, but today I’m botching it up even worse than him. As I roll, he stares into my eyes and it’s hard to hold his gaze and suddenly the alcohol and the coke and who knows what else make it a struggle to focus.

Suddenly, he stands up and walks around the room, accidentally brushing against a switch and everything goes dark.

“Terribly sorry about that,” he says and turns the light back on. This time there’s a smirk on his face, and now I’m busted, he must know about the memory recording.

He looks like the demon he is on stage. Arrogant. Powerful. Makes me feel like he’s about to toy with me.

Instead he comes and sits next to me and puts his hands on mine, soft gentle hands, and maybe he hasn’t figured it out after all.

“Listen,” he says in a low voice that makes me lean in. “I want to play a new song for you. Something I wrote, a bit different from what we normally play.”

“You want to play me a new song?”

*I don't remember anyone doing this for me, don't even know
anyone who can afford an instrument.*

"Yeah. Why not?"

I don't know what to say, so I nod.

*He stands up and grabs an acoustic guitar from a dark corner
of the room. Starts strumming, tuning.*

"I call it 'Hush.' A working title."

*The tobacco has slipped through my fingers and the room is
starting to spin—I'm feeling sick—though I can't say some-
thing, don't want to give him reason to stop. This could be even
better than I thought, this could be worth a lot of money,*

*but also
no one has ever played a song for me, only for me.
No one.*

"I'm listening."

*He taps a waltzy beat with his foot.
One two three, one two three.
Then arpeggios the strings. Slow and lazy his fingers move.
Not like their other songs.
There's no sunshine in this song.
There's no good times in this song.
Not like the others.*

*Weariness. That's what it is.
And he hums and sings and that velvety voice
cracks.*

*And my mind goes blank.
And the hair on my arms stands up.
There's a warmth spreading through my chest*

*and
I know that this time it's not the alcohol or
the drugs
or*

*whatever it is they've given me.
And I never cared much about music,
only about the musicians.*

*But, now I swear I can feel his weariness
talking to mine.*

*He sounds as tired as I sometimes do late
in the evening
when the neighborhood, unemployed
miners and factory workers,
grows cold and
even the strays get quiet.*

*And he sings about there being two of him,
the person they want,
and the person that not even he knows anymore.
And it's as if someone understands.
Someone finally understands
what it feels like
walking with a mask on that
in time
becomes your
face.*

He finishes.

*For a moment he remains still, only a finger moving, tapping the
rhythm as if the song continues in his head.*

He smiles.

"What do you think?"

Thoughts are becoming hard to form, so I give him a smile of my own. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, I wanted to try something a bit more honest. You know? Something that will never become a single. You’ve heard I’m leaving the band, yeah?”

I nod. Of course, I know. I know everything about him.

“What’s your name?”

“Anita.”

“Well, Anita. I never get to play music anymore just because I want to. I play for all these people and I don’t even know their names. So, thank you for telling me your name. Thank you for letting me play this song for you.”

“I like it.” There’s something else I want to say. “You seem tired.”

“I do, don’t I? I feel tired. All this touring ... It’s exhausting.”

“Maybe ... Maybe, I can do something about it.”

“No, no, no. Please. I’m flattered, but I’m married, yeah? Just got a baby girl.”

Don’t know how to respond. No one has ever said no to me. I want to say, Why does it matter? But that would hurt him.

“Listen. Actually, there is something you can do. Stay here with me for a bit, I’d appreciate it. It’s been ages since I just sat with someone.”

Outside the room, something shatters. There are angry shouts and Desmond hollering. Dave’s staring at the door and tapping out the beat on his guitar. One two three. One two three. The laughter continues and the smile leaves his face.

“Sure thing, love,” I say, and I mean the next words with every part of my soul, even as I’m about to pass out. “Anything you want.”

* * *

Ruth pinched her nose shut and blew with her mouth closed, pushing the memory out of her ear.

She rushed to the bathroom, head pounding.

Vomited.

Considered going back for the memory and flushing it down the toilet.

Instead, she picked it up from its tendrils, returned it to the jar, and crawled back into bed. Barely managed to send Kris a message. First time she’d miss practice in years.

Warned you, the reply read. *Feel better.*

The secondhand hangover was crushing. Cursing Anita, she surrendered to exhaustion and fell into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke again, it was late evening. She pulled a notebook out of a drawer and took her acoustic guitar out of its case.

Strumming, she tried to figure the chord progression of “The

Hush” before she forgot it. Wrote it down, together with all the lyrics she remembered.

No, that’s not right, she thought. C, G, then A. Then F. Simple progression, but good songs needn’t be complicated.

She had the basics of the song. Its structure. The details, though, felt wrong, and she found herself improvising fills and counter-melodies that weren’t quite right. Humming where she couldn’t remember the lyrics.

Not right, she thought. This is not even the same song. She tried to focus, but Anita’s memory was cloudy.

She kept at it deep into the night, plucking away at the guitar, until the neighbours banged on the wall. Before turning in, she stuck a note on the jar with Anita’s memory.

St. James Park, Newcastle, ’03

Then, as an afterthought, she added:

St. James Park, Newcastle, ’03 --- The Hush

* * *

She showed up to the warehouse at noon the next day in sweat-pants and a hoodie, her curly hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Every band that used the warehouse had their own sound-proofed practice room, their own little kingdom. This early in the day, though, most of them were empty. She made her way to the far end where hers and Kris’ room was.

She entered to find him practicing blast beats and nodded.

Knowing him, he’d probably been there for hours already.

She didn’t mention the memory and he didn’t ask.

Without a word, she tuned her guitar, plugged in, and they started practicing for next week’s tour.

Kris didn’t say anything about the sloppy strumming. Her slurred enunciation. They finished the first song, then immediately started the second one.

* * *

They packed the van and headed out. Got to Reading early. Rolled into the parking lot of a club with violet lights seeping out of its windows, crunching shattered glass under the wheels.

Despite its size, the club was almost empty. They set up and sound-checked. Kris got into an argument with the console engineer over an exposed cable, which he ended up taping himself in frustration. Ruth’s shoesoles stuck to the floor, making a sucking sound whenever she moved. By the time they were to start only a handful of people had trickled in. Ruth and Kris waited for another ten minutes, which turned thirty, ignoring the angry looks from the manager.

Kris glanced at Ruth and she nodded.

“We’re ‘Hit the Lights!’ Go!”

Kris launched into his double-bass beat. She turned towards the dozen people who had gathered. Threw her head back and smiled, strutted around the tiny space she had. Standing as close to the audience as she dared, she windmilled her strumming

arm, only to knock someone's glass out of his hands.

People laughed at her. At the terrified look on her face.

She turned back to the mic stand facing Kris and stayed rooted until the end of the set.

When they finished, she got a beer from the bar. Found the guy whose drink she had spilled and thrust it into his hands, muttering an apology.

"Aren't you Dave Hartford's kid?" he said as Ruth was turning away.

"No, I'm not."

They got Chinese takeaway from around the corner and came back to the parking lot. They stared at the fresh key scratch that ran along the length of the van for a few minutes before silently getting inside. Turned on the radio to a classic rock station and ate as Pink Floyd came on.

"Nice swing back there," Kris said through a mouthful of noodles.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she flicked bamboo shoots at him.

He smiled. "It means your head isn't in the now Ruthie. This isn't a question, it's a fact. And I don't expect you to tell me why, though I can guess."

"What do you expect?"

"I don't expect nothing."

"It's your band, too."

He took a deep breath and packed the rest of the food away, tossing the chopsticks out of the window. "One of these days, someone will notice us. We'll get a record deal. There's this electricity in the air, you know? Like the stars are lining up."

"Did you notice—"

"In Sunderland?"

"Yeah, at the back."

"Only guy in the pub with a blazer. No idea which label he's from." Kris wiped his hands on his jeans. "We'll get a record deal, Ruthie. But there's no point if we're not having fun. I'm not saying this in a hippie sort of way. Quality will suffer."

"We can't quit," Ruth muttered, thinking about Dave looking tired. "What the hell are we supposed to do? Stop playing?"

The club's violet lights turned off. After a few minutes, the staff trickled out of a side service door, got into their cars, and left, leaving the parking lot empty except for the van.

"My dad ... He wasn't how I thought he was."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Don't know. I used to think that everyone owned a piece of Dave except me. Armada, my mum, the fans. But no one really

did. I think he knew Anita was recording him and he wanted to leave an honest glimpse of who he was. But even that was distorted.”

Ruth tapped out the beats to “The Hush” against the steering wheel and hummed the first few bars. It felt like a different song.

“There was this exhaustion in him. Like he had enough. So different to how everyone remembers him. The most honest memory of his that I have belongs to a woman half out of her mind. I can’t watch that memory again. I can’t.”

Kris didn’t say anything.

They sat quiet, the radio filling the silence.

“Kris? Could you step outside with me for a second? Turn off the radio.”

They had parked underneath a lamppost that illuminated the van in a harsh white circle. She went around the back and opened the

rear door, motioning for him to sit on the van’s floor while she picked up an acoustic guitar and an amplifier.

“Thank you for not asking about ‘The Hush.’”

“It’s for your ears only.”

She set the amplifier on the ground and sat on it with the guitar. “Kris, I hope we never make it big. I hope we remain on the precipice of great things, eating noodles in a van in a parking lot in wherever the hell we are. No expectations from anyone other than ourselves. And no legacy to fulfill.”

Kris grinned and shook his head.

Ruth tuned her guitar, running through the chords. Then, she rested her fingers on the strings and smiled through her fatigue.

“Thank you for joining me for my rendition of Dave Hartford’s ‘The Hush.’ Listen closely, because I’m only going to play this once.”

Contributors



MAIA BROWN-JACKSON is a Pushcart-nominated, award-winning writer whose second poetry collection, *Gifted*, opens for pre-orders in September with Nyeria Publishing. In her spare time, she volunteers with a Yazidi NGO, accidentally starts studying quantum physics because several hours ago she looked up the qualities of neutrinos for a poem, and wastes time with the world's sweetest, clumsiest cat. You can find more of her work at maiabrown-jacksonwriting.com.

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BARBARA CANDIOTTI is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

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EMMIE CHRISTIE's work includes practical subjects, like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects, like unicorns and affordable healthcare. Her novel *A Caged and Restless Magic* debuted February 2024. She has been published in *Factor Four Magazine*, *Small Wonders*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. She also narrates short stories and loves bringing stories to life out loud as well as on the page. Find her at www.emmiechristie.com.

com, her monthly newsletter, or BlueSky.

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In the past quarter-century, **JENNIFER CROW's** work has appeared in many print and electronic venues, including *Uncanny*, *Analog*, and anthologies like *Along Harrowed Trails* and *Under Her Skin*. A Rhysling Award winner in 2023 for her poem "Harold and the Blood-Red Crayon," she will have work in upcoming issues of *Kaleidotrope* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* as well as her poem in *Penumbra*. Those who'd like to know more about her writing can catch up with her on Bluesky: [@writerjencrow.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/writerjencrow.bsky.social).

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DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her award-winning poetry and prose have appeared in over seventy journals, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Lightspeed*. For more about her work, including her Elgin-placing poetry collections, *Bounded by Eternity* and *From Voyages Unreturning*, see www.deborahldavitt.com.

* * *

BINOD DAWADI, a polymath from Kathmandu, Nepal, is a beacon of creativity, intellect, and activism. Armed with a master's degree in English, Dawadi wields the power of words to enact



societal change. His journey as a writer, teacher, artist, photographer, model, and singer is a testament to his boundless passion and talent.

Dawadi's artistic endeavors transcend conventional boundaries. His digital paintings and photography capture the essence of his surroundings, while his literary works provide profound insights into the human condition. His commitment to social progress is palpable in every stroke of his brush and syllable of his pen.

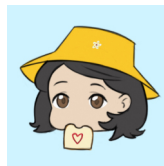
As an advocate for change, Dawadi actively participates in global events and exhibitions. From the "International Art Festival" in Korea to the "Creating People's Side Virtual International Exhibition" in Hungary, his work has graced prestigious platforms worldwide. Each exhibition serves as a testament to his unwavering dedication to enlightenment and transformation.

In addition to his visual artistry, Dawadi's written works have left an indelible mark on the literary world. His contributions to esteemed publications such as *Prodigy Published*, *Poetry Soup*, and *ILA Magazine* have garnered widespread acclaim. Furthermore, his authored books, including the iconic "The Power of Words" series and "Serenity's Ecstasy," serve as beacons of inspiration for readers worldwide.

Beyond his artistic pursuits, Dawadi's involvement in education and activism further solidifies his role as a catalyst for change. As a teacher, he imparts knowledge and wisdom to future generations, nurturing minds to think critically and creatively. His advocacy efforts, exemplified by his participation in events like "Speak Up Be Heard," underscore his unwavering commitment to social justice and equality.

In every facet of his life, Binod Dawadi embodies the transformative power of art and words. His journey is a testament to the belief that through creativity, education, and activism, meaningful change can be achieved, one brushstroke, one sentence, one melody at a time.

* * *



FLAIRIART is a Filipino digital artist who specializes in creating speculative works often inspired by folklore. Her art has been featured on the cover of *Factor Four Magazine*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, and *Promised Protagonists*. You can

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Born in Ukraine and currently residing in California, **ELANA GOMEL** is an academic with a long list of publications, an award-winning writer, and a professional nomad. She is the author of more than a hundred stories, several novellas, and seven novels of

dark fantasy and science fiction. Her most recent fiction publications are *Nightwood*, a fairy tale about monsters, marriage, and exile, and *Girl of Light*, a historical fantasy. Two more novels are scheduled to come out this year.

She is a member of HWA and can be found at <https://www.citiesoflightanddarkness.com/> and on social media.

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JANIS BUTLER HOLM served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor

in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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AARON KNUCKEY lives and writes in the shadows of Wisconsin's many moraines. His work has previously appeared in *The Deadlands*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and elsewhere.

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HUIJIA LI is a Singaporean-Chinese who enjoys myth, history, folklore and classical Chinese poetry. Her work has appeared in *Augur Magazine*, *Pandan Weekly* and other small press anthologies. You can find her online at jia-writes.com.

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Native New Yorker. Poet. Writer. Dramatist. Member: BFS, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild. In 2024 **LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO** had three poetry books published in 3 different countries; two titles won multiple awards. In 2025 two titles are forthcoming: *Cancer Courts My Mother* and *Vampire Verses*.

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SIMON MACCULLOCH lives in London and contributes poetry to a variety of print and online publications, including *Reach Poetry*, *Spectral Realms*, *Altered Reality*, *Bowery Gothic*, *View from Atlantis*, *Black Petals*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal* and others.

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EA MYLONAS is a speculative fiction author, whose short stories have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *OnSpec Magazine* and *Fusion Fragment*.

The Hush, his critically-acclaimed debut novel about a town where speech is banned, was released in 2022.

Originally from Athens, Greece, he has spent the last couple of decades traveling and working throughout the world. In that time, he tended to wounded loggerhead turtles, baked bread for a Michelin-star restaurant, and wrote dialogues for video games.

He is an advocate for the climate cause, sustainable living, and anti-corporatism, which bleed into his fiction.

He currently resides in Port Angeles, WA, with his wife and a pack of cats and dogs from various dimensions.

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JENNIFER JEANNE MCARDLE usually writes short speculative fiction and works in animal conservation in New York. Her story, "The Mules" was a Brave New Weird 2022 winner. Her website: <https://jenniferjeannemcardle.blogspot.com/>

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EVA PAPASOULIOTI is a Greek writer of speculative fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*,



Nature Futures, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for the Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards. She lives in Athens with her spouse and their two cats. You can find her on X/twitter and Bluesky @epapasoulioti and on her blog plothopes.com.

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JADE SCARDHAM is an artist and writer focusing on fantasy, horror and sci-fi. She particularly enjoys writing creepy stories and designing creatures and characters. You can find her on Bluesky (@arcanepixels744.bsky.social) and Instagram (@arcanepixelsart).

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D H PARISH is, like Dr. Jekyll, a physician by day who indulges a darker side by night. His short stories have appeared in multiple horror anthology podcasts, including *Creepy*, *Scare You to Sleep*, and *The Morbid Forest* as well as in magazines print anthologies, and

his novella *The Bodies* was just published. He lives with his wife in Pennsylvania. More information is available at dh-parishstories.com.

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DAVID SANDNER is a member of SFWA and the HWA. He grew up in San Francisco and works at CSU, Fullerton (which archives Philip K. Dick's and Frank Herbert's papers, among others). His novel of

music and strange magic, *Egyptian Motherlode* (co-written with Jacob Weisman) is forthcoming from Fairwood (November, 2024). Novella *His Unburned Heart* (about Mary Shelley and her husband's heart) recently came out from Raw Dog Screaming (May, 2024). Anthology *The Afterlife of Frankenstein: Mad Science, Automata, and Monsters Inspired by Mary Shelley, 1818-1918* appeared from Lanternfish (Nov, 2023). For more on his creative work and scholarship on the fantastic, see david-sandner.com.

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C.J. SUBKO is a dreamer and a dabbler. She has a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Michigan State University and a B.A. in Psychology and English from the University of Notre Dame, which makes her highly qualified to think too much. Her short fiction

publications include *Inner Worlds* (May 2025), *Small Wonders* (November 2024), *Morgana le Fay* (Flame Tree Press; March 2025), *Red Line* (From Beyond Press; August 2025), and *The Deadlands* (April 2025). She is a member of the HWA, SFWA, and Codex. She can be found at www.cjsubko.com.

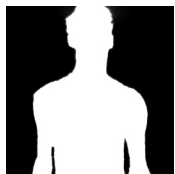
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IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*.

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E.W.H. THORNTON's work has appeared on the *NoSleep* podcast, in the *BlazeVOX Journal*, *Horrific Scribblings*, *Unorthodox Fiction*, *After The Storm Magazine*, *Dark Dead Things*, *Liminal Tales*, *Reader Beware Magazine*, *This Exquisite Topology*, and the *meat4meat* anthology. They maintain a blog presenting magazine content from pre, mid, and post

World War Two era America. It can be found at <https://thegildedcentury.tumblr.com>. They also occasionally write about the more bizarre, lurid, and tragic aspects of video game history at <https://www.giantbomb.com/profile/lostsol/blog/>.

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Originally from the Midwest, **ANNIE TUPEK** went on a road trip to Alaska and never returned home. After spending over a decade in the frozen tundra, she moved south and now resides in Oregon. She is a licensed private pilot and when not making up stories, she can be found exploring the Pacific Northwest by land and air.

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YULIA VERETA (she/her) is a Polish writer of Ukrainian origin who is now living her third life in Katowice, where she works as a translator and is a poet on a good day and a disaster-maker on a bad one. Her speculative works have been published in print and online, among others in *Star*Line*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Leading Edge*, *Penumbric*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *ParSec*. She is a 2022 Best of the Net Nominee.

When she isn't working, writing or cooking, she tries to remake her stationary time machine into a smaller portable model, since the one she currently owns does not fit into the elevator of the 12-story building where she lives and constantly becomes the source of strange questions at airport customs.



Communion

by Barbara Candiotti

(full image)