

penumbric

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My Muse is Music

How do music and
musicians move your
work?

Rockstar Ending and
David Bowie: An
interview with

**N. A.
Rossi**

plus

Bob Ritchie • Franco Amati • Josie Levin •
Grace Wagner • Arasibo Campeche • N.C.
Krueger • Elby Rogers • Cory Swanson •
Novyl the Mysterious • Carl Scharwath •
Anatoly Belilovsky • Umiyuri Katsuyama •
Darien Dillon • Jennifer Crow • Colleen
Anderson • Avra Margariti • Gerri Leen •
toeken • T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

It's been five years since David Bowie passed. I imagine some people have forgotten about it by now; five years is a long time in 21st century years, as 24-hour news and a broadly applied Moore's Law make everything that happened a year ago seem like last century, and the relentless beating given us by the coronavirus (aided and abetted by timing itself to appear just when certain governments wanted to pretend science = politics) has made the past year even longer. But I still remember sitting stunned at my computer and staring at the news, unaware that he'd been sick, just assuming he'd keep existing for as long as I would, that he was one of those figures that would reinvent himself yet again just when you thought he was gone, and ... well, just not being able to complete coherent sentences, much like this one.

It was, I suppose, no coincidence that he'd just succeeded in reinventing himself yet again, putting out *Blackstar* just days before he died, with two videos that introduced yet another character to his pantheon, Mr. Button Eyes. At the time, many remarked that it was the perfect farewell letter to his fans. For me, as N. A. Rossi says in our interview in this issue, or at least a character of hers says, I would have been happy if he'd come back out of that wardrobe in the "Lazarus" video and kept on going.

At the time, *Penumbric* was mothballed, so I had no chance to pay him any tribute in print (although I did shave my waist-length hair and give it to a cancer charity for wigs; that was the last I've seen of my Jareth-style *Labyrinth* hair ... at this point, I'd look like I was only growing the back half of it back if I tried). But now ...

I wanted to have an issue dedicated to not only Bowie, but also music and musicians' influence on authors (or indeed any type of artist). How does music influence our work? Does it play in the background? Does it inform characterization? Can it send us down

certain narrative paths and not others? Do we sometimes manage to create a written milieu that inspires the reader to intuit our stories' musical score? I didn't want to just blather on about this myself, so I (very thankfully) had the help of three authors, Lenore Sagaskie, Callum Pearce, and David Busboom. We discuss these influences in the article that begins this issue.

Little did I know, however, that I'd be able to interview an author who was literally creating Spotify playlists to go with her work—and who was a massive Bowie fan as well, having commissioned art for her book covers that's heavily Bowie-influenced (and beautifully designed by artist Tim Doyle). We speak to N. A. Rossi, author of the Rockstar Ending series, at length about Bowie, music, and inspiration.

The works in this issue, both written and artistic, sometimes have a direct link to music and sometimes don't—at times a little imaginative license may be required to make the connection, but I love everything. "A Visit from the Beatles" by Bob Ritchie and "Regret in Blue Sharp" by Arasibo Campeche have very obvious ties to music—and also sometimes feel like music, somehow. There are also a few of what feel to me to be Bowie-inspired pieces: "Ghost in Orbit" by Jennifer Crow and Avra Margariti's "Radio Silence" have distinct echoes of Major Tom, as does (for me, anyway) Grace Wagner's "Asteroid Impact." Other pieces are not so direct, but to me "felt" musical in some way: Franco Amati's "The First Metaphor" reminds me that music is metaphorical, and Cory Swanson's "The One I Fell Into" feels like a magical mystery tour of artistic endeavor. "Red Shoes" by Colleen Anderson sends me dancing up some incarnation or other of the yellow brick road, albeit "dancing" might be the wrong word; "The War God" by N.C. Krueger feels like an ancient song of war; Anatoly Belilovsky's "Apocrypha" and Umiyuri Katsuyama's "The Early-Morning

Garden” seem stories made visual in very few words, like songs; and Darien Dillon’s “Mnemosyne in Formalin” and Gerri Leen’s “The Hit” seem very much songs themselves. Not always happy ones, mind ...

toeken’s art again graces this issue with *Engine#3*, which looks like music flying silently into the sky, while Elby Rogers’ *Deleting the Dream Machine* reminds me of what happens when the musical colors will finally not be contained. And I suppose dream and fantasy images do remind me of music: both Carl Scharwath’s *Troupe* and Novyl the Mysterious’ *College City of Trebay* take me to fantastic realms. Josie Levin’s animation in *2020 Animation Reel* sometimes feels like dancing, sometimes transformation. And did I not mention the cover art yet? Thank you so much to Novyl the Mysterious for creating *Inspiration Creation* for *Penumbric*, illustrating in a single piece what I’ve been struggling to convey for several hundred words!

The Road to Golgonooza is taking a little break this issue, but there are several pages of T. Motley’s whimsical artworks to tide us over. Jesper Nordqvist’s *Mondo Mecho* does continue, although, amusingly, I failed to realize when I was putting it in the last issue that there were only two pages left of the first section of the work ... and then also that the natural break in the next bit wishes everyone a Happy Christmas! I think it’s becoming sort of a tradition here in the opening new issues of *Penumbric* to be just askew of where you’d expect us to be—horror in December, a wintry-looking August cover —so I’m just going to run with this and wish you all the very best of holidays. You may apply this retroactively or forward in time, as you wish. And the best of all possible new years!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric



THERE HE WAS AGAIN. Sometimes in a dress, often androgynous regardless, almost always with amazing make-up, exactly the kind of person most parents would have told their kids to stay away from, all sparkly and glam and flouting all the rules and traditions and mores of society. (Not that my parents ever said any of this, and my guess now is that it didn't really matter to them, but I suppose, as in every teenager's head, I imagined I was being quite the rebel.) His music itself, his lyrics, the stories he told ...

My Muse is Music

We ask authors
how music and
musicians
impact their
writing

There he was again: David Bowie, influencing the way I dressed, the way I thought. Later, I would wander around science fiction conventions dressed as his Jareth from *Labyrinth*, my blond hair spiked (as it usually was anyway), saying various lines from the film in what I imagined to be an accent approaching his—terribly creepy things like “Just let me rule you, and I will be your slave,” which you could get away with at a convention but nowhere else, really. (A friend of mine at the con actually said, “That’s frightening,” and I in



PICTURED: Bowie's *Labyrinth* costume, on display at Seattle's EMP museum, 2014. My own costume was nowhere near this elaborate, and the only pictures of that are lost in the pre-digital era.

There are many songs by Led Zeppelin, for example, that are firmly lodged in Middle Earth; there are many songs by many bands that take Orwell to heart. But we don't often talk about the influence that music and musicians have the other way round: how do they influence our writing, our storytelling? I don't mean, of course, that we take literally the lyrics of a song and write out the story told therein in long form. But how do songs, either in the focused listening or as background, as feeling, enter into the tales we tell?

I can, of course, tell my own tale, which as you may imagine has a fair amount of Bowie in it and ultimately is just me prattling on again. But what of others? In addition to this issue's interview with N. A. Rossi, author of the Rockstar Ending series, I asked authors Lenore Sagaskie, Callum Pearce, and David Busboom what music did for them.

* * *

Just in general, I'd love to know what musicians/music influence your writing, and in what ways. Is there an artist who has a deep and underlying influence on a lot of your work? Or do you have specific songs that have sparked entire stories or characters? Or kinds of music/instrumentation?

SAGASKIE: I am one of those people who can't go one day without listening to music. It's a strong presence in my daily life and it serves many purposes: it calms me down when I'm anxious, it lifts me up when I'm down, it helps me relax, and it inspires my writing. Music is very much tied to memory, and in my case, tied to specific memories. I remember what was on the radio when I had my first kiss. I remember most of the songs I skated to as a teenager. I listened to a lot of Elton John when my first marriage ended. I don't know if it

my dramatic haughtiness thought she was telling me my accent was spot-on. Sigh.)

He was there in all those moments, not even in an obsessive way, but in a respect way, an influential way. So how could Bowie not be an influence on my writing?

We often discuss songwriters who've been inspired by written works.

was something that I did intentionally, or if Elton John was more prominent on the radio at that time, but to this day there are certain Elton John songs that transport me back to that time when I was trying to get my life into a new normal routine. I listen to a lot of metal, and System of a Down and Gemini Syndrome are two of my favorite metal bands and are frequent additions to my playlists. System of a Down has a political focus and I find that listening to them helped me during the world-building process of my writing. Gemini Syndrome, and their *Memento Mori* album, has philosophical perspectives that have been compelling when I've been wrestling with existential issues within my stories. I think it's safe to say that music has had, and still has, a significant influence on me.

I can say with absolute certainty that specific genres of music have influenced my stories and characters. I've listened to a variety of music when writing the books in my series. When I'm developing my characters, I often find myself listening to music that I feel that the character would listen to, and I try to listen to that music when I'm writing scenes in which that the character is featured. Sara, The Air Vessel in *The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox*, uses her abilities to conduct objects on the wind to the song "Shambala" by Three Dog Night. The genre of music was indicative of the type of music the character liked, and I felt the song was ethereal, which complemented the scene I created.

I believe that specific songs can grab your attention in many ways. I love Van Morrison, and his ability to add specific rhythm to a song and enhance it with vocalizations is superb. "Glad Tidings" is a favorite song of mine because it moves very fast, but he utilizes "la la la" refrains that keep the music moving at a happy, fast pace. If I am writing a story that moves at a fast pace, "Glad Tidings" will be at the top of my writing playlist.

PEARCE: David Bowie is a big inspiration. On my life in general but also in some of the stories I tell. There is such a range of work, you can likely find music by David Bowie that sets the right mood for anything. When you are in the planning/first draft stages, it can be nice to have some background music.

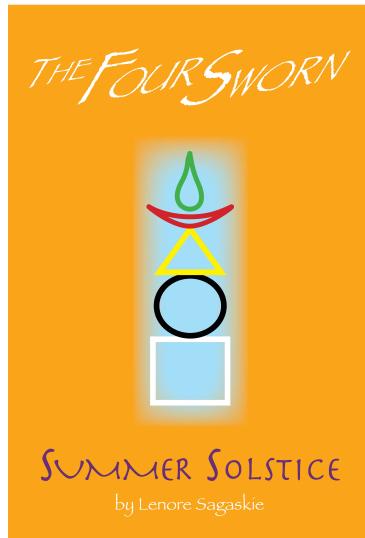
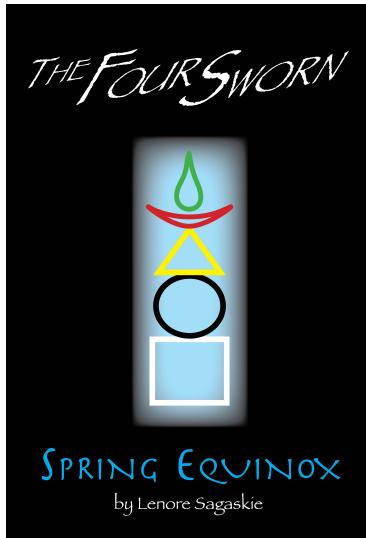
About the authors

LENORE SAGASKIE is a fantasy and horror writer from Canada living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. The first two books in her fantasy series: *The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox* and *The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice*, are currently available on Amazon. Her horror/comedy film, *Out of the Grave*, is in post-production indefinitely. Lenore is writing the third book in The Four Sworn series, and her next short film, *Rage*, is currently in pre-production. Her first feature length film, *Be Wild*, is in pre-production. You can find Lenore lurking on Twitter and Instagram as @lenorewrites, and on Facebook as herself.

More about **CALLUM PEARCE** can be found at Callumpearcestoryteller.com

DAVID BUSBOOM is the author of more than a dozen short stories, most recently "Ahead of Dragons" in *Planet Scumm #9*. His debut novella, *Nightbird*, was published by Unnerving Books in 2018. His other fiction has appeared in such venues as *Shock Totem*, the *Norwegian American*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He currently edits a pair of scientific journals and lives in Central Illinois.

JEFF GEORGESON is the managing editor of *Penumbric*. In the long-ago times, he may have written some short stories. He also works on some pretty science fiction AI.



PICTURED: Covers of Lenore Sagaskie's The Four Sworn series

I have written a story about a Ziggy Stardust type character before. I also have had one brewing for a while about his song "Valentines Day." It wouldn't be a retelling of the story he tells in the song. More inspired by the themes.

BUSBOOM: There's no one band or artist I can name that influences my writing more than any other, at least not so far, but 20th-century rock is where I draw most of my musical inspiration. As for specific songs, my story "From the Dusty Mesa" gets its title and some of its imagery from the Handsome Family song "Far from Any Road," which is probably best known as the theme song for Season 1 of HBO's *True Detective*. That story was written in direct thematic tribute to the show, so it seemed appropriate at the time (I also just love that song). There's also a little Warren Zevon in that story, with a character named Carmelita who is loved by a junkie, etc. My story "She Said She Was a Magic Mama" is named after a line from the Frank Zappa song "Camarillo Brillo," but is otherwise unrelated. The most musically-influenced/inspired stories I've written so far are probably my Midnight Witch crime stories, all of which are set in the

1960s and '70s and feature a lot of rock from that era. Those are mostly very short and fairly violent, hopefully hitting like a good, quick hard-rock single, striking fast and wrapping up before you get bored.

GEORGESON: Well, my general influences obviously include Bowie—not only getting in your head with ideas from the lyrics (whether explicit or just felt), but also as permission to reinvent oneself, or as moods. With Bowie, there's a vast arc of different sounds, different inventions going from the Ziggy times and songs like "Life on Mars" or "Ashes to Ashes," to the songs on *Heathen* or *Earthling*, to the Brian Eno-influenced *Outside*, to *Blackstar*.

However, even for me it isn't just one bit of music or musician—when I was a kid, I played The Strawbs "Deadly Nightshade" whenever I wanted to be in the mood to write some kind of dark fantasy, or The Alan Parsons Project had a lot of fantasy-feeling songs, or Earth, Wind & Fire; later, Sting, Berlin, Nine Inch Nails, Bauhaus, Skinny Puppy, Ministry, Garbage, In the Nursery, Mark Lanegan, and many, many more influenced or played background during my writing. Currently it's often music I don't even understand most of the lyrics of—like Band Maid. It's the feel of the music that leads me in these cases.

I do often come up with theme songs for characters, so that when I'm writing specifically about them/from their PoV/writing their dialogue I play that song, at least to start with. I'm rubbish with dialogue, so setting a mood really helps me get into character.

How do songs/musicians just sort of grab your attention? With vocals, instrumentation, etc?

SAGASKIE: I find that when I'm listening to music my attention is first grabbed by the rhythm of the song, then the vocalization. I enjoy music that deviates from the norm or does something just a little bit different. One of my favorite songs by Enya is "Boadicea." The rhythm of the song is strong from the beginning, but the vocalization is just humming. Its simplicity with its combination of rhythm and

vocalization makes it unique and it grabs your attention.

PEARCE: Vocals usually but also the look. I've always been drawn to glam, but I also like some darker stuff. I think both come into my writing a little.

BUSBOOM: Strong and/or interesting vocals grab me the quickest, I think. Anything from Rob Halford's exospheric screams to Leonard Cohen's subterranean latter-days growl, as long as it's unique enough to make me sit up and listen to the lyrics. That's not to diminish instrumentation at all (Halford still needs those unstoppable dueling guitars for it to be a Judas Priest song, after all), it's just that when I'm listening to music with vocals, it's the vocals I tend to latch onto most.

GEORGESON: It can be the vocals (as with Bowie or Lanegan). However, often it's the feeling of the song as I get going, which often turns on the overall instrumentation—whether that be a more hauntingly symphonic sound as with In the Nursery, or the hard-driving guitars/drums/vocals of Band Maid.

Do you think a writer's own musical abilities (or lack thereof) influence whether or not music is a part of/an influence on their writing?

SAGASKIE: I can't speak of other writers' experience, but I was raised with music. My father played several instruments when I was growing up, and we always listened to a variety of music genres. I don't play the violin with the proficiency of my father, but I played the French Horn (F) for 11 years. I also played Trumpet and Alto Horn. I have a genuine love of music and I believe that the writers I know that also have a genuine love of music mention music in their work and not only listen to music when they write, they also impart that feeling into their work.

PEARCE: I'm not sure. I think writing has a beat to it, so you have to have some idea. I never really learnt any musical instruments aside from very basic stuff in school. I decided this year to start learning to play the violin. I don't think it's changed my writing, but I'm just

getting started.

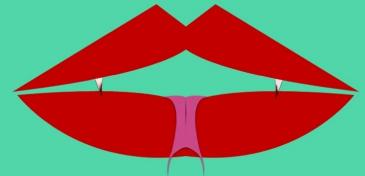
BUSBOOM: I think if a writer is a musician, that will almost certainly find its way into their written work somehow, whether in the subject matter, the style, or something else. I'm not much of a musician myself, and maybe that's why music isn't a bigger direct influence on my writing, but it depends entirely on the individual.

GEORGESON: I am so totally not a musician, so I can only speak from that PoV ... I suppose it influences the way I listen to the music. I'm not always able to pick out just what's being done with what instrument in what signature with which notes; I'm not generally able to separate the various instruments into tracks in my head, so it sometimes takes something very specific to get my head to listen to, say, the drums as a separate thing. I'm trying to train myself to do this a bit more, but that's not related necessarily to writing, just a sort of thing I'm interested in.

However, I do think music can be a huge influence whether or not one is a musician oneself. I'm my own proof of the "not" side of it, and my guess is an actual musician has that influence running through their lives like blood.

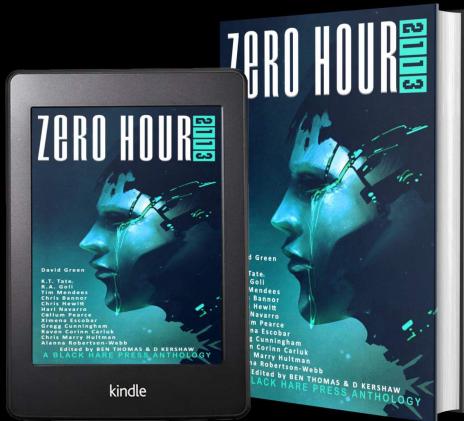
Do you think music has different kinds of influence in different cultures and eras (in terms of written works)? (For example, Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic as part of Afrofuturism.)

"POTENTLY SEXY AND UTTERLY CREEPY"
—NATHAN CARSON AUTHOR OF STARR CREEK



PICTURED: Cover of David Busboom's *Nightbird*

NIGHTBIRD
david busboom



PICTURED: Cover of *Zero Hour 2113*, in which Callum Pearce's "Children of the Bionic God" appears

SAGASKIE: I do believe that music has different kinds of influence in different cultures and eras. I believe that Electronic Dubstep was very influential in the Steampunk genre, specifically Jim Butcher's Cinder Spires series. Horror author Stephen King always references music in his works and it's very indicative of the era the characters evolved in and a great way to reference their age and where they grew up, and even culture.

PEARCE: Yes, I think it has to—sometimes, just because we see something related to those things so often in film and TV. If you hear a certain type of music you can imagine the type of film it would be associated with. For me, stories are little films in my head that I have to try and describe to people. So in some ways you imagine the background music you expect to hear for that genre or age. If you asked me to write a film set on the LGBTQ scene, for example, set in any period, I would have a list of go-to songs to set the mood for myself and probably mention in the story.

BUSBOOM: Of course! Your example of Sun Ra and Afrofuturism is

spot-on. Not sure I have another to add off-hand.

GEORGESON: Definitely! I think there's an interconnection between the different creative arts, that you see influences twining between them throughout history. In the West, music, writing, and art all influenced one another in the Renaissance (albeit at different rates and at different times). I also think there's an integrated feel to these arts within and around other cultures. I think Afrofuturism is a good example (see our interview with Ytasha Womack in the August 2k20 issue); I think China, Japan, and India definitely display this as well.

Finally, music in games and films helps set up the whole "feeling" of scenes. Is there a way to do that in a written work? Can you get the reader to intuit your background music?

SAGASKIE: I think there is a way to use music to convey the feeling of scenes in written work and it's something I like to do by referencing songs within the work or even subtle reference. In Stephen King's book *The Stand*, he referenced a song, "Baby Can You Dig Your Man?" that hit the pop charts in his book. The song and reference to it helped to illustrate how music that was popular in the world before continued to live on despite the evolution of the song's creator or the change in society.

One of my favorite fantasy authors is Terry Prachett. In his book *Soul Music*, I think he does an amazing job getting the reader to intuit the music as rock, mostly because the name of the band in the book is "The Band That Has Rocks In." The fact that the music has actual rocks used as instruments stirs the imagination. In book two of my series, *The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice*, one of my characters learns to use a cell phone and program songs as ring tones. One song causes the character to panic when they hear it because they are avoiding the character that was calling. I believe the reader clearly understood the emotion that song evoked. I'm currently working on the third book in my series, *The Four Sworn: Autumn Equinox*, and music is an integral part of the story. The story begins 200 years in the past when singers selected from around the world to sing a song of peace are mysteriously turned to stone. It is my hope that readers will not only intuit the background music but also the intent of the

music and the importance behind performing the song and its significance.

I think that writers understand words have power. Music has the power to evoke memory, heighten our senses, and convey emotion. I think it's a challenge for writers to emulate its ability to conjure that feeling through writing. Sometimes we fail, but when we succeed, music brings another layer to the story by subtly stirring other senses. In doing so, we create a strong tie to memory. The reality is that's what all of us ultimately want as writers—readers to remember our stories.

PEARCE: Yes, sometimes just blatantly putting the title and throwing some odd lyrics in works. It can break up a scene and set the mood at the same time. It can be done more subtly where you pick out what stands out to you about that song and work that in. Or sometimes the video that went with it. Take images from that, and people who know it will make the connections.

BUSBOOM: I think there is a way to do it, other than direct reference, but I couldn't say with any sense of authority how best to go about it. The idea of structuring a scene on a paragraph and/or sentence level to match a particular piece of "soundtrack" music sounds kind of appealing to me, but I've never consciously tried it.

GEORGESON: God, that would be so cool, wouldn't it? I think at its best writing kind of does that, although the more song-like it is the more easily it does so, so poetry is probably closer to that than stories. I think that through the cadence of sentences, word choice, and so forth one can get a feeling going. In this issue I totally get that

with "A Visit from the Beatles," for example. One can make a sort of musical painting. And I think that possibly if one is listening to music whilst reading, one can sometimes get a sort of cognitive dissonance going on if the music and the story just don't grock.

* * *

Final thoughts

I began this article thinking primarily about writing and music, but ultimately, I think just applying the idea of a two-way street between them is quite limited. It's really a sort of multiverse of streets going all directions. All creators—whether visual artists, lyrical artists, word artists, whatever—are influenced by others just by virtue of living in the world and being aware of it. However, it's still really interesting to see what one group of creators says about the influences of others. As Neil Gaiman has said, "I think it's really important for a writer to have a compost heap. Everything you read, things that you write, things that you listen to, people you encounter — they can all go on the compost heap, and they will rot down, and out of them grow beautiful stories." I'd broaden that from just writers to everyone who creates, and not just your experiences in the present, but with the past.

Also, I think what Lenore Sagaskie said at the end of that final question bears repeating: that words and music both have power, and that when we are successful, the intertwining of music and writing creates a strong memory of our work in readers' minds. And, as she says, "the reality is that's what all of us ultimately want as writers —readers to remember our stories."

PICTURED: Tim Doyle's
original cover art for
Rockstar Ending



You're old. You're tired. And a burden on society. So just follow the guidelines. Listen to the music. It's not suicide. Not really. Not when you can have a

ROCKSTAR ENDING

An interview with N. A. (Nicola) Rossi

MUSIC AS AN ASSIST TO SUICIDE—or used by the government to put one over the edge—could be a dark place to start in a series that integrates music as extensively as Nicola Rossi’s Rockstar Ending books, but then, they started life as a short story, “One Last Gift,” which won a dystopian fiction award from the Orwell Society. However, music is used in not just sinister, but also uplifting ways. This extends into the “real” world as well, as she has created Spotify lists to accompany her works. And ... there’s a lot of David Bowie involved. We were very happy to catch up with her via Zoom in London to talk about her books and experiences with music.

* * *

Your series includes a lot of different ways of integrating music and musical influences; one in particular that seems very interesting is that you’ve created these Spotify lists. How did you come up with that idea, and are these songs that you listened to whilst writing the books, or ... ?

They’re pretty much songs that I’ve listened to all my life, really. There are very few ... probably the Post Malone song. “Rockstar” is one that is outside of my normal playlist, but I saw it at the gym. And, oh, it had “rockstar” in the title. So it was irresistible.

One of the ideas in the book is that people are manipulated into deciding they want to sign up for voluntary euthanasia partly through their Spotify playlists. So they’re fed songs that make them think that suicide will be a good idea. Now, that’s a vast oversimplification of, and a big stretch over what is actually possible, certainly at the moment, but I thought it would be quite a neat thing. One of my friends said to me, you only have to put “pensions” into a search engine, and before you know it ... we’re only a hair’s breadth away from a Dignitas advert appearing onscreen. So I thought Spotify is a place where people would be surprised to have their musical choices manipulated and changed. So it’s partly that. And also, I suppose the whole, the word “rockstar,” that comes from ... when I was in a corporate job, someone kept talking about wanting to hire a rockstar



PICTURED: N. A.
(Nicola) Rossi

executive, and I thought, what does that mean? And, you know, why is that not me? [laughs] And the whole idea of someone coming in and being like this big glamorous warrior who was going to turn things around. That's the story behind that expression.

So if you were to have a manipulative social media campaign, wouldn't it be great for someone to create something aspirational? Who doesn't at some stage in their life think that a Rockstar lifestyle might be fun? I've seen numerous advertisements where they use rockstars to sell everything from airlines to insurance—even butter! In my book there is a limo transfer to the disposal centre, so when you go off for your—um, this isn't a spoiler, because it's quite clear from the beginning that this is what's going to happen—one of the ways you're sold the rockstar ending is that you get the limo transfer and

they make you feel really, really special when you're going off to this place. I just thought there was a lot of rock and roll imagery around something glamorous and aspirational, so that kind of fed into it as well.

Yeah, even if you're sort of antiestablishment, you still have that sort of, Oh, I could be like a punk rock star. There's something about music and celebrity that really almost goes together in a way that it doesn't anywhere else ...

Yeah, and it works at a pretty deep emotional level, doesn't it? People have a lot of strong emotional associations with different kinds of songs. They can take you to a really happy place, or remind you of particular situations.

Right. In a way, it's like how certain smells can suddenly remind you of childhood or something.

Yeah, absolutely. A random example, it isn't in my book at all, but the song “My Boy Lollipop”. I remember hearing it when I was really tiny in a ski resort in Italy with my parents. Whenever we go past ... this place—I've gone back to it, because I'm half Italian—to Roccaraso, I always say to my husband, “Ah, that's l'Ombrellone bar where they were playing ‘My Boy Lollipop.’” You know, so those things, they can stay with you for a lifetime.

David Bowie does seem to figure largely in your books, and obviously is an inspiration for the covers. How did he end up in that position?

Well, I suppose because *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* was the first album that I ever got as a proper grownup—as a teenager, someone who chooses their own record. I must've been about 14, 15, and I went to one of my cooler friends at school and said, “I'm really interested in getting into music, what should I do?” And she said, “Well, I will ask Christine Cox, because she's the coolest person I know, and I'll come back to you with some advice.” And so my friend Julie came back and she said, “Christine Cox says

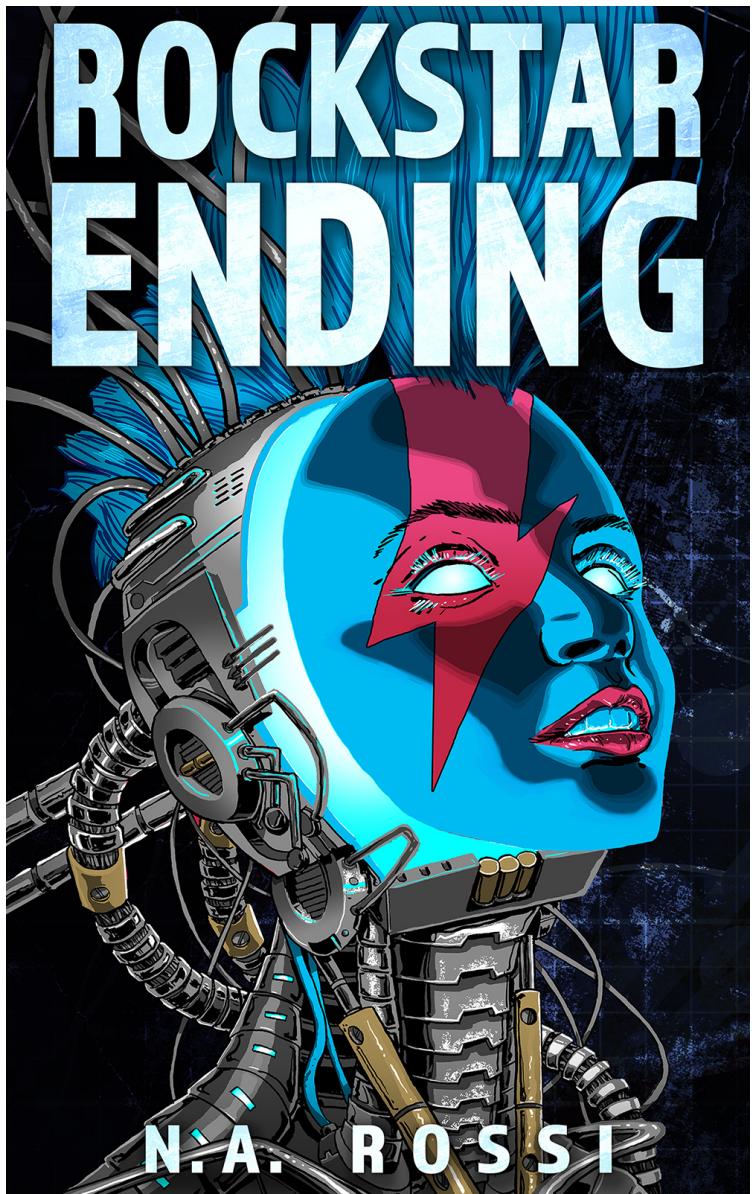
David Bowie, *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.” So off I went to the shop and bought it, and I’ve still got the vinyl copy, you know, with all the words printed on it. And I used to play it, and like so many of my friends that I know, I know all the words to that album. When I was supposed to be doing my homework, I was singing every word of it. *Diamond Dogs*, too, because I just thought they told phenomenal stories. And “Space Oddity” as well, the whole Major Tom thing. And so ... he was just so different. He was someone who was guaranteed to annoy your parents, for starts. Because he represented so ... I mean, my parents weren’t particularly strict, but they still found his appearance shocking, you know, because of the androgyny and the make-up and the ... there was just so much about him that was designed to be challenging, wasn’t it? But I thought that was just all brilliant. And he did seem so brave. And then I watched the *Cracked Actor* documentary when that first came out in the seventies. I was completely bowled over by that. It’s very hard now to see it all in full, but parts of it are on YouTube, and they showed it on BBC a few months ago. It’s footage of the Hammersmith Odeon concert where he killed Ziggy Stardust. So they show you that, and there’s a lot of behind-the-scenes filming. In particular there’s something that I refer to in *Rock On*, actually, where he’s talking about his outfits. So he gets out the white kimono, and he goes, “Yamamoto Kansai Dry-Clean Only.” And I thought, “I’ve learned the Japanese for ‘Dry-Clean Only’! I went to school the next day and said, “Ah, did you know that in Japanese Yamamoto Kansai means Dry Clean Only?” I hadn’t a clue he was actually a fashion designer.

He was from such another world, and he understood so much culturally, so I do really love David Bowie. I never saw him live. I think there is a huge community of people who have an imaginary relationship with him, you know [laughs], and that’s just how it is with people’s icons, isn’t it?

I ended up down a lot of strange musical roads, but I always seemed to return to Bowie. I was very into science fiction and fantasy, so when he was in Labyrinth ... you could both like him for how cool he seemed and want to be him, but you could also like him because he



PICTURED: The cover of *Rock On*, second in the Rockstar Ending series (cover art by Tim Doyle)



PICTURED: Cover of *Rockstar Ending*, first in the series (cover art by Tim Doyle)

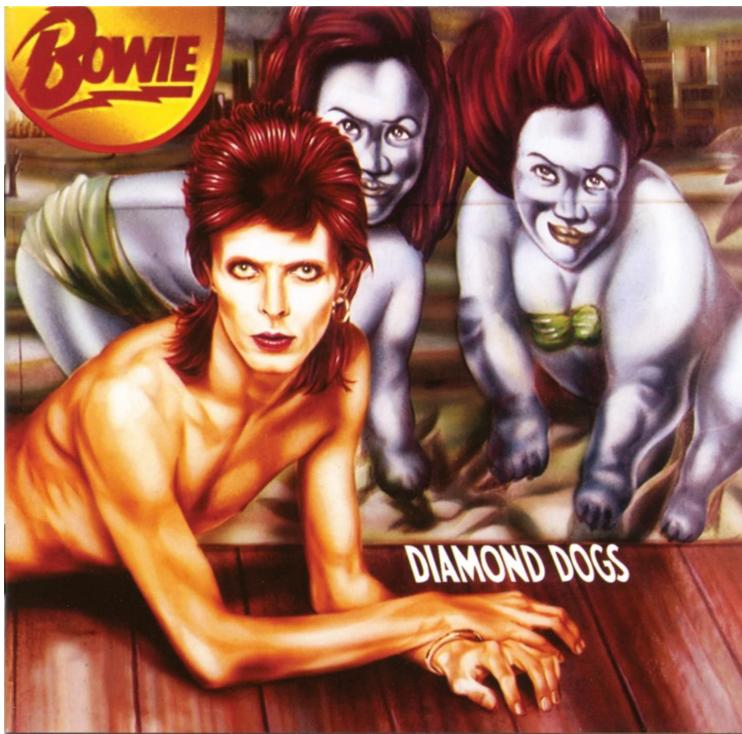
looked so glamorous.

The Man Who Fell to Earth is such a moving film. It's just terrifying, that moment when they change him and you know he can't go back. I don't know that I can bear to watch it again, it's just so sad.

I think I only saw it all the way through in the last few years, and even today it's still a good watch. Are there other musical influences for you, or on your writing?

In terms of music, I was thinking, I've got to put more Led Zeppelin in there. "Stairway to Heaven" is another song which really seems like it's leading you away from life, into another world. So I have that as another song that's played. If you were a hard rock fan being targeted by the Rockstar Ending campaign, you would see "Stairway to Heaven" coming up on your music feed a lot as well. I have most of the Led Zeppelin albums, and I saw them twice at Knebworth. I went both weeks, so I did actually manage to see them at least, which is something, isn't it? Better than I managed with David Bowie. By the time I was going to concerts, he was doing stuff that I wasn't that interested in. So when he went into the global tour, his Serious Moonlight tour, "Let's Dance" and all of that, I was at university in London, and I got on an exchange to go to the States. I ended up in Dartmouth for the summer. Everyone there had tickets to see Bowie on the Serious Moonlight tour, and I remember saying, "Oh, it's not really my thing, you know." But at the frat parties it was really all they played, and I would get up and dance to that usually. But ... I didn't think he'd sold out exactly, but I thought he'd gone, like you say, too mainstream. But then *Blackstar*, he just comes back with the most phenomenal moment.

There's a bit in *Rockstar Ending* ... the main protagonist is a woman called Lexi, who is a teacher, and she finds out about all the bad stuff going on. She has a partner called Bob. He is an IT geek. Bob is the Bowie obsessive, and there's a moment where ... this sounds a bit cheesy and I hope it works in the book ... but he keeps saying to her, you know, I'm not sure this is really happening, not exactly that you're imagining it, but it can't be as bad as you say. And he goes off and discovers that his friend's father is becoming



PICTURED: Covers of David Bowie's albums *Diamond Dogs* (1974) and *Blackstar* (2016)

depressed and is thinking of killing himself. He goes into this man's house and he sees his Spotify playlist, and he sees the adverts that are coming up. And this guy says how much he's been enjoying listening to the song "Don't Fear the Reaper." Bob goes back to Lexi and he says, "You know, I think you're right." He actually says to her, "This is genocide." And they go back and they listen to the whole of *Diamond Dogs*. There's a moment when Bob really misses David Bowie, and he says, "I just wish he would come back out of that wardrobe." In the "Lazarus" video he kind of gets in ... and you know, if you miss him as much as I do—how pathetic am I? [laughs]—you know, I'm looking around the room now at my wardrobes [laughs]. There's something about that that's dreadfully poetic ...

It's like The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe ...

Well, exactly! Because he has meant so much to me, I wanted to pay a tribute to him in the most legal way I could. I couldn't face writing to record companies or people who owned his lyrics to be able to quote directly from them. I know people have gotten into hot water by printing the words to songs without permission... So that's another reason why I had Spotify playlists, because I thought well, then people can listen to the songs and they can maybe understand how Bob feels when he listens to all the lyrics of an album, and they say, "We'll ... jump in the river holding hands." That sounds like the only thing that those people in *Diamond Dogs* can possibly do to make them happy.

So the books are also a tribute to him. He is such a huge cultural influence. You can see the Bowie Lazarus mask on the cover of *Rock On*, with the terrifying button eyes. I have some characters living in a

place called Lazarus House. It's a presbytery that becomes a safe house. The priest who's in charge hasn't a clue about the Bowie angle, but the readers know.

So I've talked about music being used to manipulate people in a negative way, but in *Rock On*, there is a group of people who have been at risk of getting a Rockstar Ending, or getting an Ending—most of them are too poor to qualify for the Rockstar version—but they're living together in the safe house, and Bob is worried that they're going to be targeted again. So he sets up an offnet server with a load of happy songs. While they're in the house, they can't listen to any music with suicidal ideation. They're all things like "Happy," or he even puts in "My Sweet Lord" to keep the priest sweet. He's trying to beat the corporation at their own game. And of course there's "Let's Dance" there as well, because they're trying to keep them moving. Bob tries to turn the tables using music.

But as well as the actual music being enjoyed in the books, I draw on wider music-related imagery. One of the things Bob does in *Rock On*, because he's so obsessed with Bowie, he has this sideline—he makes Faraday pouches for people to keep their phones in, and they're all printed with bootleg Bowie covers. So I put those in there. And other people have different ones that aren't necessarily Bowie. So just the way people try to bring music into their lives in all sorts of funny little ways.

Bowie went through so many different incarnations. Do you find that you write in ways that are influenced by each of those?

I would say *Space Oddity*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Diamond Dogs*, and *Blackstar* are the four that I have drawn on most of all. Oh, and I'm just in the middle of putting "Ashes to Ashes" in the latest book, but that's not out yet. There's an angle for doing that ...

Is that book part of the same series?

So book three, *Rockaway*, which I'm working on at the moment, yeah, I've just popped "Ashes to Ashes" in there. So they keep bubbling up ...

"Ashes to Ashes" is one of my favorites through time ...

Yeah. He did the New Romantic thing before anyone else really with that Pierrot figure.

Right. I remember seeing that video on a local station that did music videos, before MTV was around, and because it was over the air and wasn't one of the main stations, it was often a bit staticky, which fit right in with my growing punk-rockism, where if you weren't listening to it on a thirdhand cassette tape that sounded like someone recorded it in their bathroom or something, then it wasn't authentic.

It's interesting that local TV thing, isn't it? I grew up in the northwest of England, and we had a television programme ... have you seen a film called *24 Hour Party People*, have you heard of it?

I haven't, no.

OK. It's a very British thing. There was a guy called Tony Wilson, Anthony Wilson, and he ran a nightclub called The Hacienda in Manchester, and it's where the Happy Mondays ... Well, he was the manager for Joy Division for a while, and he's famous because they didn't have a contract. Very much an intellectual, situationist kind of a guy, and there is a great film called *24 Hour Party People* which is about his life. It's done in a very funny way. But he was also on local TV. He was a news reporter for local TV, but he also had a music programme called *So It Goes*, and he was the first person to have Blondie on television in the UK. On this unconventional little local TV show, he had the most amazing acts. He was extraordinary.

So now, where would someone be if they were doing that? They wouldn't be in a TV station, would they, because TV's gone too corporate.

But "Ashes to Ashes," that video was totally groundbreaking.

Yeah, and he continued in that vein, maybe not with every video, but definitely as time went on he was always trying to be doing something a little different.

Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, I was never really into Tin Machine, but one of my readers, I had a competition in my newsletter for people to tell me what concerts they'd been to, just because I was trying to get people to engage. I had some lovely ... I had someone who'd seen Led Zeppelin at the Pontiac Silverdome, someone who'd seen The Clash on a Mississippi riverboat, someone who'd seen a German folksinger I'd never heard of, and someone who'd seen Tin Machine in Glasgow. It was at a time when Tin Machine, well, no one liked them, and she had a t-shirt that said she did like them. I think it actually said "Fuck you, I love Tin Machine." She said, "He saw my t-shirt ... here's this video footage and he made a sign." It's true! I've seen it. Bowie made the rock horns salute. Tin Machine was never my thing, but we talk quite a bit about music, nevertheless.

He had a brief Jungle phase I think, which was never my thing, but I think "Lazarus" is a real return to form.

Do you expect that music will also play an important part in future novels and short stories?

I certainly think that as long as I keep going with the Rockstar Ending series, they've got to have the playlists, because the music is such an important part of them. So certainly this series, as long as I keep going with it ... [laughs] I started off with one book, and then I started describing it as a trilogy, and now I've started calling it a series, so I think I'm going to see how I feel. What I've said to myself is I'll finish the third one, and then I'll focus for a while on the marketing a bit more. I really want to have the three together with the covers by the same artist [Tim Doyle], and have a physical box set, and then I'd love to see it on the screen. That's another whole work package to try and get that done as well. But I think it would work quite well, again, because of the music.

You know, look at the way people use music in drama now, even something like *Mind Hunter*, or even something like *Westworld*; the way they use music in all of those dramas I think really adds something, drawing on contemporary music. Oh, *The Sopranos*, there's another example, the way they use the theme tune for that, or

the way they brought in John Cooper Clarke. Do you know John Cooper Clarke?

No.

He's someone very British as well. He was a punk poet. He still is a punk poet. And for a while he had a sort of missing period when he was taking a lot of heroin and living with Nico, the woman who was with the Velvet Underground. So they lived together in a sort of haze for many years, and then he came out of that, he said because everyone he knew was really worried about him and it wasn't fair on them, and he's been touring again. He did a poem called "Evidently Chickentown" in *The Sopranos*. You wouldn't think that you would put a piece of dissonant punk poetry in the middle of *The Sopranos*, which is about an Italian American gangster experience. But it works brilliantly. So I think it's very interesting the way that, TV dramas, they've become very catholic in the sense of, they draw in lots and lots of different kinds of music to add to the dramatic experience. That's like what I'm doing with my books. It brings in another dimension.

It's also really good shorthand. So there's a scene in *Rock On* where there's a work party, and it's a Noughties Party, and so two of the characters, one comes dressed as Kylie Minogue, and the other one comes dressed as Madonna. So there's "Can't Get You Out of My Head" and Madonna's "Music" that they use, and there's Ali G in the pimp tracksuit that he wore in the video for it, and I think it just sums up a moment in time, and it instantly brings in references. And you could go so far as to ... I sit watching the YouTube videos of these songs to remind myself what they're like, what it was like at the time, how I might draw on that outfit, to put my characters in a particular costume, because again, it's shorthand for being a rock star, essentially. And these two female characters, they turn themselves into rock stars temporarily, at a party where they're celebrating the success of the Rockstar Endings programme. I hadn't even realised I did that until I just told you, but I did [laughs]. The subconscious is a terrifying thing, isn't it?

Another device I've created is a fashion exhibition where they use

the outfits of Pete Burns, who was in Dead or Alive, and, again, I just had a lot of fun with that, because I was watching his videos and all his different outfits, and I thought, well, Bowie had his fashion exhibition, which, again, I never got to, but I'd been looking at a catalogue, and I thought why not do that about a punk figure? Why wouldn't you do that?

So do you find that, because you've used music in this way in your writing, does that create a different, or better, interaction with your readers?

I think I'm still looking for readers all the time. One of the reasons I noticed you is because speculative fiction is such a peculiar genre, because it's adjacent to so many different things, and I struggle with working out what genre I am. Speculative fiction fits it. It's kind of political, the way Orwell's political, but I think it's funnier than the books you usually find in the speculative fiction realm. But yeah, the readers I've had the most interaction with tend to be people who love music. I have one reader who's bought the poster of the Tim Doyle illustration and sent me a picture of it in pride of place, on his wall. I was talking to a poster shop nearby, they're selling the artwork, and they said there are Bowie fans who collect everything. But I'm not sure the Bowie fans who collect everything are always interested in [the] reading. You know, if you think of a Venn diagram, a Bowie fan, you're going to love the music, you might not necessarily read

the same books he read or any of the other stuff. Or you might be interested in fashion or something ... I think because he had so much appeal, definitely there is an emotional engagement with people who get him and like my books. I have noticed that with some of them. And it's deep.

N. A. Rossi's Rockstar Ending series can be found on Amazon (Rockstar Ending at mybook.to/RockstarEndingPaper and Rock On at <http://mybook.to/RockOnPaperback>) or at other booksellers. You can also find the prequel novella, For Those about to Rock, free from the author in return for signing up to mailing list (<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/qct6iehw5t>) or to buy on Amazon (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0821H5YDC/>).

The Spotify playlists are at:

For Those About to Rock: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/370EIRqS4g7ArE8l0lPbVc?si=huW3KDeVT-qpjTBFeAgbZA>
Rockstar Ending: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0yHChmj7qM6l8eUppa0nhA?si=wB_5AR15SvSJEjHmR3OqlQ
Rock On: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/05CO2YDWWJVJMARY4jtebJJ?si=NjHdcNS2RCKI9NOUDUwpcA>

She can be found on social media on Twitter (@NicolaRossi), Instagram (@rockstarending), and others.



Engine#3

by toeken

A Visit from the Beatles

by Bob Ritchie

John, Paul, George, and Ringo dropped in, unhampered by their having been mostly deceased for the last 300 years.

I shivered as they tumbled, like resurrected puppies, through the separation field that kept the burning Puerto Rico afternoon at bay; my space had been cooled to a brisk 45°. Tedders, my ængineer, had learned from the instruction e-manual that though EntiDIIs don't perceive temperature, they require the higher density of chilled air to form properly.

"Hey." A little nervous, me. Reacting badly to the cold, my mucous membranes spilled clear liquid down my philtrum. I swiped at it with my cuff, leaving a trail of slime as if a snail had traversed my upper lip.

"Hey." John, recognizable because of his playful green border, dusted off his knees, shook Ringo from his broad forehead, and cracked one of the bit-books that I had set out for refreshment. "Great stuff, Proust. Filling."

"Boys?" I gestured at the serving tray that I had set up next to my production stool.

George moved forward, aura outstretched, "I prefer something lighter." He picked through the 22nd Century Gooftoids, choosing something by reconstituted-Tom. "I laughed so hard reading 'Still Life With Woodpecker' that I retched on my Gretsch."

I smiled. Maybe I would get through this. They seemed almost human. Surreptitiously, I deployed a mini-vac to suck up some stray dust motes floating through a broad swath of light.

I dropped the vac into a side pocket and butt-swiveled on my stool, the perfect host. "Ringo? Anything strike your fancy?" Maybe he smiled. I decided that he had. Mustache love. He paradiddled somewhere near the center of the fog body bending the light in front of me. His nasal voice said, "Me little tummy's all full up. But I'll have a smoke, if you've got one." *Sounded* smiley. You invent warm, happy breath when the Beatles are in your production chamber. But EntiDIIs can't really smoke, even if cigarettes didn't carry a mandatory five-year sentence in a 2072 Pinto. I shrugged. "Sorry."

Warm music tickled my cheek, beautiful. Paul. The cute one. Yes, he breathed melody. Words, no. It had been a condition of his storage. Paul had refused to be spirited away as an Entity-to-Digital Interface until he had been guaranteed that his musico-construct wouldn't be able to speak.

I had seen the original interview on YuckTu: "I'm tired of people criticizing my lyrics. Who says John had a lock on word play?"

So, not a word, not a syllable. Continuous liquid melody. And lovely and lively as only a McCartney tune can be.

"Settle lads. Carry on." I hadn't expected Sir George but recognized the gentle voice.

I rushed in. "I didn't, I mean—" I broke off and searched for feet. "That is, my budget." I tapped a little "d" for distress between my thumb and forefinger. "Tedders," I subvocalized, urgent but not willing to give full throat to my embarrassment.

Sir George's voice strolled down a soft chuckle, patted Paul's melody

on the shoulder, and assured me, “No, no. I do all the producing for the lads. Part of the package, as it were.”

I stowed my held breath in my pocket, knowing I would need it later. “Oh, well, fine.” I went ahead and made the introductions. “Lads, Sir, my name is Dean. This is my studio,” I gestured at the 10 by 10 cube, “and I’m hoping that we can make some music today.”

“A whistle is as good at a miss, I always say.”

Laughing at Ringo’s apt words, I jumped off my stool and squatted, stood, squatted. My personal interface was part brain-connect, part kinetiform. Producing—*co-producing*—the songs would push me to my limits. But I was in peak condition, having prepared myself with a month of cardiovascular training.

On an extruded lip of the near separation field, my music box glowed, waiting, needing only to be infused with the EntiDIIs.

“Let’s do this, boys, Sir.” I motioned with my open hands, sweeping the five vapor-limned EntiDIIs toward the music box. John walked into George. Paul climbed into Ringo’s cap. Sir George spread wide his field and gathered all together. Five breaths of liquid air coalesced around the blue-tinged, semi-translucent block. As they slipped between molecules, the faint blue glow wavered, steadied, morphed to the pale yellow of energized quiescence.

John’s voice vibrated in my auditory cortex, “Could you send up some eggs?”

One of the others chuckled.

“Tedders?” Worry.

A momentary hum, and then his answer filled my ear, “The manual doesn’t say anything about how to feed ‘em. The bit-books were supposed to satisfy ‘remnant human cravings.’ Page 16.”

“I’m just joking; we’re famous for it, aren’t we?” My mouth

puckered involuntarily. John’s Scouse accent tasted of sweetened lemon—sour, but not too. I smiled. It looked as if it would be an interesting day.

“So Wrong You’re Right, take 2.” Sweat froze on my forehead. The chorus required a 100-meter dash on my part. Tedders, voice all business but pixels bright with delight, added, “Sir G, if I may, the arrangement feels too clean to me. Any ideas to muck it up a bit?”

Though a musician in my own right, I was little more than a facilitator for this gig. That the creative process had jumped the rails and now traveled a route all its own bothered me not at all. The Beatles EntiDIIs were the best that Out With the InMusic, Ltd., had to offer. Thousands of “new” Beatles tunes had swelled the official canon over the past three centuries. Only the die-est hard fans remembered where the original list ended and the augmented one picked up—everyone else rejoiced in the Fab Four’s continued output. Today we would add “So Wrong You’re Right,” “DeSign Says,” “Pick Up the Peace,” and “Love Doesn’t Know July.”

George licked his guitar on the bridge. Five notes of perfection.

The click of Paul’s plectrum snapped forward in the mix, a percussive pop that we would have to EQ down but not eliminate.

Ringo flashed the ring of cymbal, shot the staccato snare. Beats and counterbeats, he juggled hits in dexterous hands.

“. . . right,” sang John.

“. . . riight,” sang Paul, sang George, slathering on tart layers of tonality.

“Sir G?”

A saxophone growled, two measures; a distorted cello screamed from high strings, challenging, menacing. Eight beats of music battle.

Roadhouse piano—out of tune enough to jangle—dashed through the arrangement, trailing jags of melody in its wake and spitting cherry pits between swills of gin.

“Dean?”

“Fab, Sir George.”

“Please, call me Millie.”

“Right, then . . . Millie, boys. A little loose on intonation when you’re singing the ‘mor’ of ‘tomorrow.’ Let’s take it again from the last verse.”

Ringo counted them in; the 16th-note at four-and sounded and away we went.

So, they were rocking on all four measures.

At the same time that my communicator began to chime, the studio lights dimmed, brightened, dimmed. The communicator’s chime turned to hollow “bong” and went silent. I groaned. The take was ruined. I fell out of my handstand and said, “Sorry, lads. We’ll need to break for ten.” I snagged a clean rag from the collection hanging from the separation field. I double-swiped my face and cheeks, mopping up the evidence of my exertions. I decided that it would be better if we backed up a bit and started from the coda. My arms shook from exhaustion. Morning would arrive too soon, so I would have to put my tired arms behind me and find the strength.

I tapped my knee with my index finger, waiting for the power to come back. The Death of Sparks chopped away huge swaths of voltage every midnight. The symbolic fluctuation of power was intended to remind us that electricity had not always been a free and easy feeling. Nothing essential was interrupted, but lights dimmed or darkened entirely, home freezers experienced temperature variations, personal communicators stuttered and hissed. Or, as had occurred with mine, disconnected the caller with a cheery “Try again!”

Paul’s concern stair-stepped down into a minor key, increasing in volume as the pitch fell until John overrode him. “Good boys and gulls shouldn’t run with sharpened policies.” He swept the open strings of his guitar. The jangle filled my still-dark chamber.

“Sorry, boys.” I mentally gnashed my teeth: Tedders had warned me about apologizing to the talent before, but it appeared to be part of my personality matrix, because I always forgot. “Everything will be back to normal in a few minutes.” I smelled tandoori chicken and added, “I can have Tedders call down for nickel beer and electron bursts if anyone is hungry.”

Ringo spoke up, “All this work, and I’m starving on empty. I’d love an apple.”

When I was a boy, my mother had known. That I would be a musician, that I would spend my days and nights lolling through fields of harmony. “That boy,” she would say, “that boy.” She never got past the single phrase, and I often wondered whether she had scratch in her record. I once had a vision of Mozart in tight pants, and Mom had claimed that that was all the evidence she needed.

“Tedders, apples for everyone.” Feeling expansive, as we had so far consumed less than half of the budget, I added, “And extra plasm when the juice returns.”

At my words, the lights brightened to full. Tedders spoke in my ear, low, so no one would hear. No one would: He was speaking in my ear. Something that appeared to have slipped through the racing electrons of his mind. The days of electronic perfection were long past. “Uh-oh, PlagOps.”

Already bent and with hands on the floor to resume my handstand, I stood, forcing myself to remain calm. I palmed the separation field, thinking, “head-sized opening” at it as I did.

August in Puerto Rico blazes, even at midnight; the heat shouldered through the opening. A genetically reconstituted mosquito followed, stopping to sup on my arm. What luck! Humidity backhanded me

and I staggered back a step before turning my attention to the white-robed PlagOps. “Yes?” Even though we were as original as I knew how to be, my face assumed the smooth innocence I remembered from successful childhood lies. Auto response to authority. No one liked the Ops, whose Latinish motto was “Ars canticum per plagiarus non est,” but everyone agreed that, in these days in which everything that could be created had been, they were a necessary evil.

The one on the left had a long nose and a selection of parrots caught in his armpit. He nodded, removing a ‘pad from the bag that dangled from the shoulder opposite the wildlife. “Your neighbor reported a repeated A to D to E7 progression. Anything to it?”

It looked as if the man had forgotten to shed: He was dropping hair follicles left and right. Several, swept up on the strong tropic breeze, sailed through the opening. I forced myself to leave the vac in my pocket and held back a curse: EntiDIs are remarkably easygoing and generally low-maintenance but are allergic to almost everything. Behind me, a series of crackles erupted from the music box. Damnit! I forced my downturned lips up and into a smile and explained, “It’s John. He wanted a basic blues shuffle and . . .”

The one on the right quick drew a disruptor and shot me.

* * *

My head hurt. My mouth was dry. A small mallet played xylophone on my ribs. I opened my eyes. I was in my chamber, but it was dark: The lights had gone completely out. The separation field was, apparently, set on semi-soft: The hard rays of the early morning burned my face, and the fingernail-wetting humidity told me that its permeability index must have been close to 50, maybe higher.

I struggled to sit up. The pain in my head went from distant thump to sweep-screaming slice. Taking care to move without joggling my cracked melon, I twisted around to look at the extruded shelf. Empty. I tapped my thumb and forefinger together.

Boom. “You awake?”

I winced. “Bring down the audio, Tedders, my head.” I put a flat palm against my forehead, ensuring that the odiferous feet sprouting from it would become imaginary.

Quieter, Tedders said, “I’m guessing a monster headache. Any other injuries?”

I did the left half of a head shake. The furnace pain that accompanied the move discouraged symmetry. “No—Yes,” I amended. “Ribs. But not too bad. I’m guessing that they bore the brunt of the disruptor.”

“Do you need a med?” I had modified Tedders so that he couldn’t automatically call, well, anyone. Illegal, but freedom of choice was frowned upon, and I guarded mine jealously.

I prodded my ribs. The xylophone playing had softened to patty cake. Still some rhythmatism, but tolerable. Though my head no longer boasted rebel extremities, I nevertheless needed something to take the pain down to merely crippling.

“Give me an analgesic. Nothing black.” Black market purchases were traced. I could get out of a prison sentence, but I didn’t want any marketing pirates getting hold of my history. Or I would be plagued by ‘bot ads for janissary dildos and YuckTu videos of rehydrated kittens.

My music box was gone, but the end of the world remained out of sight. The box was just the mechanism, the machine part of the EntiDI system. The finished files were stored in Tedders. Which made me think—“Were you downjacked?”

“No. They tried to get through the firewall, but the upgrade held.” Tedders was silent for almost three seconds. A universe of time to an ængineer. “What?” I asked.

“I did a diagnostic. No retrowipe.”

“How can you be sure? Nature of the beast, and all that.”

Pride and injured pride warred for airtime, “Come on, I’m Mitproof. Can’t be hacked. You know that.”

I nodded. My face’s overheating reminded me of the current status of the separation field. “Firm up, would you?”

Tedders didn’t answer, but a blast of bounced-back conditioned air and the abrupt cessation of burning rays informed me that he had complied with my instruction.

“So, it appears the Beatles have been kidnapped.”

“And Sir George,” added Tedders.

“Help!” But I couldn’t laugh. “How much am I on the hook for?” The analgesic had taken effect, enough that I could stand. I did. The ribs, still, but not much. The headache was a steady murmur of complaint that would make real focus difficult. I could just about think clearly enough to think clearly.

“Over 50,000.”

“That sounds like a lot.” I had no experience with monetary units. As was the case with most all quotidian matters, Tedders handled the cash.

“It is.”

I leaned on the extrusion. “Any ideas?”

Last year, I had opened my chest and hardwired Tedders with a hum that automatically cut in when he was cogitating. Almost inaudible, it was enough to signal that he hadn’t gone offline. He wasn’t supposed to do that without informing me, go offline, but the perfect consistency of electronic beings had been demolished decades ago by a virus that did no more than arbitrarily insert the occasional discordant command. I had once waited over twenty minutes for Tedders to tell me what strength sunscreen I needed for an excursion to the beach. Turns out he had (arbitrarily) gone offline and was

waiting for my “wakeup” call.

I was exhausted from the recording session, never mind the disruption to my consciousness. I called a chair up and sat, waiting for Tedders to suggest our next move. His low hum filled my ears, making me drowsy.

Just as I was about to drop off, the hum cut out and Tedders said, “They’re at El Morro.”

“Where?”

“El Morro. The 800-year-old fort in San Juan.”

“No, yeah, I know where—and what—El Morro is. I just . . . El Morro?”

An oil screen spread across the north separation field. The two men, no longer in PlagOps whites, were flying kites in the open esplanade before the old fort. Just as we tuned in, one of the kites, taken by a gust of wind-machine-blown air, slammed into the protective dome. The stick and paper construction crumpled and fell. I would have cheered, but I was still trying to understand what I was seeing.

The image zoomed in. Long nose. Tedders spoke. “Mickle SinTack. He used to play guitar for a Beatles tribute band, but he was exiled when he insisted on playing ‘Day Tripper’ with a swing beat.”

I closed my eyes, imaging the famous tune as described. I opened my eyes, “Hey. Nice. That would be decent.”

I could practically feel Tedders’s frown of disapproval. “You know that the Royal Academy of Historic Music—”

I cut him off. “Yes, I know.” Old argument. “What about the other guy? The one who shot me?”

The focus shifted from Mickle, reeling in his kite, to the other man. Only it wasn’t a man. In the voluminous robe and hood, long nose’s

—Mickle's—partner had been sexless, but I had assumed. Not a lot of female PlagOps: Women tended to have useful professions. Medicine, empirical ængineering, child proliferation. Only men cared enough about plagiarism to make a career of it.

“Holgertron.”

“Que, que?”

“Long story mangled under exigent wheels, she was born Holly Fulger. Girl meets robot, robot gets frisky, dad hires undiscerning mercenary car crusher. Holgertron.”

The logic escaped me, but Tedders had been programed in superevaluationism, so I let it go. I scratched the red bump left by the mosquito, careful not to scratch too hard lest the mosquito luck leach into the open air. On the screen, the woman had turned her back on the torn and broken bits of kite, was walking away from the mess and the fort. “Uh oh.” Bad idea, that. Since the Supreme Crust had outlawed the death penalty, litterbugs were shipped to French Guiana and force-fed cockroaches. No danger of malnutrition, at least.

“Do you suppose the red hair is real?” It floated around her as if it had its own, lower, gravity field. I'd read or swallowed something about that. First time I'd seen it in action. Nice.

Tedders hummed for two seconds, then said, “She has a public profile, but her cloud file is closed. You'll have to subscribe to a stalker site. Do you want me to sign you up?”

“No, no.” A spectacular mane.

“Is the MaqLev up?” I asked.

“Round-the-clock service commences at 0200. As to the route: All good from the La Guancha/Ponce station to Guayama. You'll have to grab a Googlico from Guayama to Caguas. The Union of Trinitarians and Ingenious Electronic Rocinantes is staging a holiday strike. It is scheduled through 2200. Regular service resumes in Caguas.”

Tedders paused, continued, “The Old San Juan station is still partially submerged, so you'll need to go to Cataño and catch a hydro in.”

All fluffy with thought.

Deciding, I kicked off my slippers and turned, pulling my neutralizer off its hanger and slipping it on. A cabinet with all of my hats swung open. A tongue extruded, at the end of which my San Juan hat dangled. I set it on my head, foregoing a mirror and trusting the gyroscope to set it at just the right angle. A pair of molecular sole protectors oozed up through the floor. I stepped on them, staying still long enough for them to conform to the bottoms of my feet. “Open up,” I commanded, “I'm heading out.”

The Disney landscapers had out-Puerto Ricoed Puerto Rico. Palm trees and flamboýans in full flower, white sand and feathery ferns of waving green, flapping elephant ears of plantain trees interspersed with multiple rows of plow-turned earth, all whipped past the separation field that protected the seating area. No sense of movement beyond the continuous blur of brown, magenta, white, and green rushing past. The train's ængineer had set the permeability to 40, allowing the myriad scents of green and wet and sweet and life to brush downy against damp skin, cooling.

In Guayama, I called up a Googlico. It arrived within seconds, already stuffed full with five passengers. Three in front, two in back. Small car, designed for an easy four, a tight five.

“Tedders?”

“Three minutes for the next one.” I contemplated the car, balancing the crowd against the unreasonable wait. Oh well, I shrugged and climbed in the back. The two already seated individuals were teens, leaning like a pair of tipped dominoes against the opposite door.

Asleep, it seemed. I sat, relaxed back. The door eased shut, but a loud scraping sound coincided with a grinding vibration, and the door froze for a moment. It swung open and slammed closed, almost before I had time to sit straight enough to avoid being conked on the head. “What the . . . ?” Sudden acceleration pushed me against the seat back. Okay, whatever. I noticed the barest aroma of fruit punch and surreptitiously searched each passenger for a drink bulb, but couldn’t make out who the lucky devil might be.

The car left the MaqLev station, gaining speed as it turned onto the access road. Full permeability (I presumed a faulty regulator) turned the outside breeze to a blast. I felt rather than heard the soft click indicating that the Velcro in my hat had activated. A hot trickle leaked from beneath. Heat and heat. The sweat of the teen pressed up next to me slicked the nyloodle exterior of my neutralizer. My entire trunk and arms, nice and cool and ready to run to Río Piedras; my legs, head, and hands crushed by the high-pressure heat and damp of a tropic afternoon. The temperature differential would kick the thermoelectric converter into overtime, which would keep the batteries chock full ‘o’ watts until either the differential scaled back, or cloud cover attenuated the sunblast feeding the right shoulder and arm solar collectors. Molten silver lining.

The car steered on to the ancient highway, 52, just in time for me to catch a glimpse of the Tits of Cayey, a famous local landmark.

The wind blasting my entire right side dwindled to a stop. A faint whine became a loud buzz and was followed by stuttering streams of cold air. *Click*. The Velcro hooks retreated from my hair.

Tedders said, “The car’s environment brain is doing the hokey pokey at a cybercafé in Denmark. I took over.”

I nodded, knowing that Tedders would pick up the temporary disequilibrium and interpret my move correctly. Still, I tapped my thumb and forefinger together, *Thanks*.

At delicious coolth, delighted squeals and cheery comments erupted from my fellow passengers in the front: A woman, a man, and someone old enough to be either one. They were speaking the northern Carrot dialect of 14th century China. Or so Tedders informed me, whispering neutral-flavored somethings in my ear.

I smiled at my now-awake neighbor, a boy-not-man-not-boy. He returned my grin and pushed the heel of his hand into my left eye socket.

Tedders said, “Do the same. Make sure it’s his left, your right. Greeting the wrong eye is considered an irrevocable pledge of fealty. You’ll have to move to the Mongolian steppes and serve as a Sundays-only stepstool until he reaches the age of majority in . . .” Tedders hummed. The boy jolted upright, eyes wide. His hand remained in place, but he looked at me as if I had just invaded his mind. Which Tedders sort of had: He had shot a tight-beamed burst of ultrasonic into the boy’s ear canal and measured the bounce off the tiny hairs inside to estimate age. “. . . six months. Then you will be released to serve his children in the same capacity until his death or his oldest child’s—well! boy *or* girl, quite the progressives—assumption to the throne.”

“They have a monarchy in Mongolia?”

“Lord no, not for centuries. This kid’s name is Julio Jake. He and his family are traveling back to Santurce where they own and operate a cheapeatery called *More Authentiquer Mongolian Barbeque*.”

I persisted, “But they’re from Mongolia?”

If Tedders had had hands, he would have steeped them before answering. “They are from a version of Mongolia that exists in three of the five databases to which you are subscribed and to which, therefore, I have access,” he said. “Other than that, their origin story is opaque.”

Right.

I put the heel of my hand into the boy's left eye socket and renewed my smile. He said, in unaccented NorthAm, "Peace beans," and lowered his hand.

"Peace beans," I replied, and lowered mine.

"Live in San Juan?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No," I said, "Ponce. I'm rescuing the Beatles."

Studying me rather more closely than I had expected, the boy said, "Groovy." He removed an em-smoke from a neck pouch and squinched his face, hard a-thought. The end sparked, turned bright blue, cycled to red and back again. A thread of steam twisted up and away from the bright end.

The older woman—the titular driver, as she was sitting in front of the token steering wheel—turned and spoke to the boy, "JJ, don't bother the man."

"It's okay," I said.

Tedders said in my ear, "Migue, no other name listed. The mother, I assume."

With what seemed to me to be deliberate nonchalance, the woman said, "I couldn't help hearing—" She remained swiveled, but paused to pluck the steering wheel from its place and hand it to the like-aged man seated beside her—"that you are rescuing the Beatles. Does that pay well, then? Beatle rescuing?" Sensitive ear mine, distinguishing between double *e* double *t* and *eat*. How had she known? She continued, saying, "JJ hasn't committed to the restaurant, and we so want him to do something monetary." She planted an elbow in the man's ribs; he grunted, grimacing, taking a timeout from tapping his fingers on the dashboard. She added, "Don't we, dear?"

"Sure," said the man. He hooked the wheel on a coatrack and went

back to raising and lowering his fingers. "Gimme a minute. Gotta finish." He added something that sounded very much like the word "anal," but which I figured had to be something in the other language.

Migue shrugged and said to him, "I know, but they can't let you disinter the pony without its explicit permission, so . . ."

He said, "anal" again. She shrugged again and brought her attention back to me and her son. "Our religion is just so interesting. Would you like—"

I didn't even bother subvocalizing, but shouted, "Eject me, Tedders!"

My seat shot up through the car's topfield. I dropped a handful of lightly salted popcorn on the occupants below, regretting that I hadn't had time to meet the other two. The chair's onboard jets took over and Tedders maneuvered me to a quaint little parking lot with a history (or so he informed me as we descended). We had already almost arrived in Caguas when the woman had fired her opening salvo at my belief system. Tedders said, "The MaqLev station is in walking distance."

Sure enough, three meters to my left, an infomercial announcing the wonders of the PR-MaqLev a-salsaed my ears, trumpets EQed too piercing and the bass more solid thump than sinuous thick.

I contemplated the walk, grumbling, "You know I have to avoid non-professional exercise."

Tedders said, "Don't worry; labor in the acquisition of materials is deductible. Those taxmen think of everything!" I had programmed the sigh out of him: too annoying. But it seemed he was trying to reverse my modification. Anyway, something that wasn't a sigh but wasn't a word hopped into my ear canals and took a squat.

Steam (100% not-faux) billowed from the single track and the speaker on the platform screeched with the metal-on-metal sound of

sliding drive wheels as the arriving train shuddered to a halt. Tedders had already bought my ticket. I swung off the boarding platform, landing with an audible thud in the half-full carriage.

Uneventful but for the equine protest.

Riderless steeds paraded up and down each car's aisle, posters demanding an expansion of the minimum-wage law to include geldings and mules plastered to their flanks.

I stopped one of the protesters and asked, "Any tips for the fifth?"

The blue roan, silver contacts flashing, snorted through his nose. Tedders translated, "'Fuckh offh, mateh.'"

I laughed and gave my companion a sugar cube, rubbing his cheek with my open palm.

Moments later, Cataño station hove into view.

The next hydro wasn't due for ten minutes, so I settled onto one of the plastic seats of the dock's industrial swing set and played with gravity. Laughter surrounded me as fellow passengers arced into the sky, high enough to slap the playdome's separation field. My stomach whoopsed, reminding me of the deal that the Earth and I had made when I was a boy: I don't attempt to break her surly bonds; she doesn't slam me unceremoniously to her surface: I relaxed until the ever-reducing pendulum was slight enough to allow me to dismount. The arrival whistle blew as I was hopping out of the harness. I tottered to the gangplank. The antiskid material felt like sandpaper beneath my feet. My sole protectors were naturally gripping (were, in fact, acting the Scheherazade to my caliphal extremities), so I didn't worry about slipping on the damp ramp.

A raucous "caw" sounded above me. Lovely bird. Real, I think. Lovely poop. I blasted the schmutz from my shoulder with a brief activation of the nyloodle field and reminded Tedders to renew my

subscription to *Ethnic Monthly*.

The hydro raced past the antique Isla Grande airstrip to the right. A biplane, coming in low, pulled up, avoided ending up in the Bahia de San Juan by less than a meter.

"I should rent one of those the next time I have to come up here," I commented to Tedders, "looks fun."

"I can hire it now to take you home, if you like." I watched the plane taxi to the end of the runway. The pilot climbed out, removing her helmet. A mass of red hair exploded outward to fall gently against the pilot's neutralizer-covered back.

"Glory be," I said.

"Indeed," answered Tedders.

"Do love me a coincidence."

"All hail the cheap device," agreed Tedders.

I thought the zoom in my lenses. Red filled my visual field. I clicked back one level.

"You didn't tell me that she had a beauty mark."

"I know how susceptible you are." Tedders hummed; I waited for more. "As you might expect, her genome isn't listed in her public profile. There's no way to know whether or not the mark is real."

I couldn't tear my lenses away. She was a way-fox, without a doubt.

The hydro began to simultaneously slow and sink. Now subject to the water's topography, the craft began to dip and sway. I gripped the rail to maintain my balance. "Real or not, I can overcome it. No deception is too great if she has the Beatles."

"Shall I message that last to her?" Excising the "sigh" code had been

hard enough. No way would I be able to get rid of the sarcasm. It was integral.

I ignored him. “Go ahead and see if she is available to hire. I hope she’s a better pilot than she is a kite flyer.” The near miss on her landing assumed greater significance.

I thought for a moment, then asked Tedders, “You’re sure that the tax code will let me deduct all this exertion?”

“The accountant will squeal, but I can ride his programming.”

I vaulted over the rail, fully activating my neutralizer as I did. My San Juan hat mewled in fear. Water. I forgot about that. I landed with a splash. The Velcro hooks turned to claws.

“Ow! Tedders, shoot him some hatnip. Get his mind off the H₂O-ness of the situation.”

“You ignored the materializer renewal notice. My metaphoric hands are figuratively tied.”

With the neutralizer keeping me afloat, I scissor-kicked my legs, using several arm sweeps to get me going in the direction of the rocky escarpment that bordered the extended airstrip on three sides. Six meters. It took me a few minutes, but at swim’s end, I found myself on a narrow strip of rocky beach. After shaking the water from my ears and soothing my hat, I mounted the vertical face, scaling the low cliff with a minimum of effort. Tedders’s advice on handholds and the sticky grip of my sole protectors helped.

Reaching the top, I let myself flop into the sparse weeds. Sprawled for a moment in the drying sun, I turned at a soft scrape.

Red. No, Tedders had told me her name. Something awful. “Holgertron,” I said.

She recoiled, blanched her face, said, “Pretend I’m pointing a weapon of pain or injury at you.” She had one hand bladed over her eyes,

which were squinted against the brightness of the afternoon sun. The other she held in the shape of a gun, the finger barrel pointed at me.

I held up my arms. Drops of water fell away from my arms into my eyes. Several hit my hat, which hissed in protest.

“What, no disruptor?” I went for casual, tapping to Tedders to call cross-enforcement.

Holg—*Red* frowned and the arm holding her hand sagged. “PlagOps yanked my converter. You know how long it takes to charge a disruptor using only those little solar panels that come in the box?”

Hot asphalt cooking my legs, I struggled to bring my body vertical and get my feet under me. “I really need the Beatles back.” She didn’t say anything. Only stiffened her arm so that her finger once more pointed directly at my forehead. My hands are pretty big, so I knew that I could outgun her. But already positioned and pointed, Red had the advantage.

I put both hands on the ground in order to get myself in a balanced squat. Red stepped back; her thumb wavered.

“Hold on,” I said, leaning forward a fraction, shifting my weight onto the balls of my feet, “I’m trying to get comfortable, here.” I watched her closely for any sign that she might be relaxing her guard, any sign that that finger might shift away from its precise and deadly aim.

“Stall her for five minutes. CE is on the way.”

I contemplated instructing Tedders to cancel the call. Control was heading my way on galloping feet.

Instead, I looked up at Red and asked, “Why? EntiDI rentals are pretty low. And even if you were a street musician, you could always use a free production shelter.” The nyloodle outer layer of her neutralizer, an attractive vest with an embroidered guitar—Gibson Les Paul—on the left-front panel, had alternating strips of real nylon

and she didn't have pierced ears—no way was she a street musician. Interesting that they were metal, though. Her ears.

I was surprised to see tears in her eyes.

"It's not like that. Really, but . . . Stay there. Really. Please? Don't move?"

I nodded but remained poised on the balls of my feet.

She opened her gunhand and touched the strings of the embroidered guitar. A jangle of notes sounded. "Just a second." She closed her eyes and brought her left hand to the fret board. She poised her right hand, her gunhand, over the strings. Deep breath and she began to play.

"Oh god!" I couldn't help it. She was awful. Without my willing them, my emergency hands clapped themselves over my ears. All thoughts of gunplay fled my mind, evicted by music so ugled that it made even 21st reggaeton seem beautiful by comparison. The original uncoordinated jangle of that first unintentional touch was a symphony next to the awfulness she was now producing.

A piercing siren cut through the noise. Never so glad.

She whipped her head around. Before she could fist her gun, I thrust up from my prepared squat and wrapped both hands around her wrists. Training for a session never seemed so fortuitous.

"Don't!" I commanded both her and Tedders. The neural whip that Tedders could deploy via my palms would be overkill; the knee that she was lifting to destroy my nuts would probably hurt.

Neither of them listened.

I woke up in the back of the racing firebulancecar. The pain I had

imagined was worse. Loosely webbed to the stretcher next to mine, Red curled and straightened, repeating the movement over and again and accompanying the cycle with grotesque grunts (that, remembering, were infinitely more filled with music than her playing had been. Rhythmic, too, so maybe there was hope).

My crotch was full of spikes.

The agent, seeing my open eyes, reached into a slit in his full-body neutralizer and pulled out a demerit pad. "The neural whipping is gonna cost you. You'll have to stay after jail."

I strained against my own stretcher's webbing. Reliving VR playground bullying long past, I let my voice turn sullen in answer. "She started it."

"Yes, and she'll be sent to the Principle Office." The 'caster on his forearm pinged. He lifted a hand to pause our conversation, turning his attention to his arm. "Sir."

The spikes had attenuated, becoming needles.

I realized that Tedders had not yet made his presence known.

"Nossir, she's still out."

At his mention of my companion in detention, I turned my head to look at her. Her ears sparkled in the low interior light. She uncurled one final time and her body gave a long shudder. The grunts became a sough. Still looking at his 'caster, the agent reached a hand out to the frame of the stretcher and touched a sensor with his extended index finger. The webbing cinched down on Red's now-still form.

"Is she okay?"

He ignored me, still focused on his lifted arm. "PlagOps? En serio?" He scowled. A fine layer of enmity coated his skin. What he heard

from the ‘caster on his arm wiped away the rancid oil, replacing it with a clean layer of deference.

“Of course, sir. Right away, sir.”

Lowering his arm, the agent stared at me with speculation so loud that I flinched from the decibel overload. Head pain from earlier violent assignations flared. I worked through the throb, struggling against the webbing.

“No trip to the Principle for either of you.” He pursed his lips and swiveled to look fully at Red. After a moment, he tapped the same sensor that he had before, and the webbing retracted into the stretcher bars. Turning to me, he reached out to do the same, but held off for a moment. “You’re not in trouble. Sitting up is okay, but no attacking. Got it?”

“Course.” Needles had become the stiff hairs of a roused Alsatian Shepherd.

First he swept the screen of his demerit pad. “I had your pal sitting in the corner, thinking about all reasons that you don’t deploy a neural whip. But the Captain said to let him go, too.”

Tedders’s voice erupted in my head. “Well I . . .”

I pressed my forefinger to my thumb, held it there. Tedders lapsed into silence.

The agent tapped the frame, the webbing retracted, I sat up. My head had an opinion about the sudden move. Palm to forehead, I held back the crowd straining to leap from my temple. A good moment for sprouting rebel limbs, were I so inclined. “Ham and cheese!” Bursting from pursed lips at full throat.

The agent cringed, but settled when I remained quiet. No full-length limbs, but I was certain that that bump humping into my lifeline was a little piggy going to market.

“Where’re we going?” I asked the agent, though I knew that the best answer would come from Tedders.

“CyberCrime.”

I released my grip on Tedders and let him speak. Vituperation exploded in my ear. I winced and waited. Finally, he said, “CyberCrime.” Before I could tap the question, he answered it: “My guess is that this is not about me or my little modifications. We’re two small potatoes. There is some major potato salad going on.”

In the other stretcher, Red sat up and cursed. Me, primarily, but assistants and cross-agents came in for some constructive criticism, as well.

The agent blanked his face and crouch-walked to the front of the vehicle. “Five minutes,” he threw back, then lowered himself into the passenger seat.

I couldn’t think of anything to say to Red. I nodded an unseen “thanks” or “okay” or “when’s lunch” to the agent but settled on silence as my best current strategy.

“The Beatles EntiDI is under attack by the BombylBee bug.” Double F for fortissimo. His voice stomped on the crowd in my head. Red’s hair had recovered and was once again a crimson nebula. The Captain’s feet left no visible impressions on her skull; nevertheless, her slitted eyes were narrower than a Billybaptist’s mind when contemplating evolution.

The Captain was a tall man with a wide trunk, big shoulders, and thick arms. His was the kind of body that you were careful not to put in the toaster or you would end up electrocuting yourself when you tried to pry it out with a knife.

“What did you think you were doing?” He spat, “Civilians!”

"I don't know, Captain, she and her partner came in, disruptors blazing. Overkill is only a word. What she did was an entire verse. And it wasn't in let's-C Major; it was you'll-B-flat minor." I turned to the slit-eyed monster and held out my hand. "By the way, I'm guessing that you already know my name, but let's make this formal. I'm Dean." Hang city. I withdrew my hand, probably only imagining that Red had burned her initials onto my palm. I turned to confront the Captain once again. Red face, warm feet, isn't that what they say? I wanted to peek under the desk—see if they were glowing. "You know, some kind of computer bug, I get it: obligatory patches and essential updates, but a disruptor to the noggin and Beatleknapping? And why PlagOps?"

Captain Excited sat back, letting the hands of his chair rub his belly. Some of the choler drained out of his face. More calmly, he said, "The BB bug is eradicating Beatles music. Not by killing the Beatles EntiDI, but by laying coded eggs in the songs that the EntiDI assists in creating. The eggs hatch and eat the music from the inside out. More than 100—"

"One hundred and twenty-six," said Red, cutting in.

The Captain frowned, but nodded, and picked up the narrative, "Okay, 126 pieces in the new canon have been destroyed."

Stunned to silence. "When you say destroyed . . ."

"We got this this morning." The Captain fingered a monitor out of his desktop and thought open a video file. In it, a song bubble was collapsing in on itself. Notes burst in shards from the collapsed bubble and floated in the remnants of the song's weakened gravity, seemingly unable to fall into the melody. "Times 126," said the Captain. He puckered, whistling the monitor back into the desk, and added, "You just be thankful I played it without the audio."

Grim, grimmer, grimmest.

In my ear, Tedders reminded me, "PlagOps, disruptor,

Beatleknapping, holding you at fingerpoint."

"Right." I pressed down on the tops of the chair arms, raising myself an inch. "It's bad. And if this lowly musician and producer can do something he will . . . I will, but," I sat back in the chair and raised my pinkie, "PlagOps," I raised my ring finger, "disruptor," I raised my middle finger, "Beatleknapping," I raised my pointer finger and, closing the others, aimed it at Red, "and holding me at fingerpoint."

Anger seemed to be her go to. Instead of looking abashed, ashamed, or alarmed, she attacked. Voice laden with sarcasm, she raised her forefinger. "Under that hat, you were a soaking-wet stranger appearing on the runway when I was in the middle of an op. At the same moment that I recognized you, I recognized that my having, mm, disrupted your day probably hadn't made me the light of your life." She raised her middle finger. "Whatever else we do, we have to isolate the Beatles and go over their construct." She raised her ring finger. "What the hell do you expect? You won't answer your communicator, your lights suddenly go out, the cube entrance disappears. Assume the worst and do your best, that's what the manual says." She raised her pinkie finger and then fisted her hand and lowered its controlling arm to the arm of the chair. Frowning, she turned to the Captain and said, "PlagOps."

He grimaced. "There is no way to tell when a song has been infected. And when it happens to one, any other song bubble in the immediate vicinity will also fall to the bug."

"But Captain, then you must isolate the original canon before something happens. It's priceless!"

He nodded and removed a water from a drawer, offering both Red and me one, as well. We accepted our waters and he continued. "We've done that. Of course."

Relief, sure, but I didn't see the remaining problem. "What, then?"

The Captain leaned his bulk over the desk and honked my nose. "I'll

get to that. You asked why PlagOps.” His chair groaned when he sat fully back. “The bug starts by chowing down on the tastiest bits of each song, the odd and enchanting harmonic progressions and sound experiments that differentiate a Beatles song from one made by a group of kids with guitars, drums, and a well-appointed production cube. So, extract the character and creativity and, often enough, what’s left?”

It hit me. I, IV, V7. The proto-change. The Ur change. Certainly when Neanderthals were getting tired after a long session of twistin’ the night away, one of the hairy lugs must have tossed a minor seventh into the fire in order to bring things to a final resolution. PlagOps. They had music theory at their mindertips and analytic chops that regular cops couldn’t access. Red and her partner hadn’t busted into my cube looking for plagiarized songs, they had done so assuming that the new, stripped-down piece that we had been working on was a gutted, about-to-implode neo-Beatles masterpiece. Strip away Sir Martin and the studio and what was “Strawberry Fields Forever”? I, IV, V7.

I didn’t want to nod, but I had to admit that it all made sense. And Red and Mickle. They came clear: The old *those who can’t do chase down those who might be able to bromide*.

“Yeah.” I nodded, scratched the side of my head. “But then we’re done here, right? She got the EntIDI,” I indicated Red. She turned away. “You’ll probably need to quarantine my recording, so I’ll have my ængineer cough up the tracks—be sorry to lose ‘em, but considering the stakes . . . Good of the nations and all that.”

The Captain had a rusty stain on his one cheek. It spread outward, coloring his entire face. He shot a look at Red. She squirmed in her chair. “I appeal to you,” he said, “as a red-blooded musician.”

Red, at my side, hid her face in a swath of namesake.

“Holgertron here took kind of a hard line with the lads, stormed the walls of the Bastille, as it were.”

“It was Mickle,” she averred.

The Captain turned the full force of his tension on her, shouting, “Don’t be a child. Of course it was you. Mickle couldn’t analyze his way out of a Gregorian chant. You gave the downbeat; he followed your baton.” Cap slammed the desktop with the flat of his forehead, making a dent in the what appeared to be genuine fiberboard. He pulled open a drawer and placed a music box in the concavity. My music box. I couldn’t know that: They all look the same. Still, screw up the trope if it wasn’t mine.

“This is an exact replica of your box, down to its right-spinning electrons. Holgertron tried to crack open the original and it blew. Mickle bore the brunt of the blast.” The Captain bowed his head. After a moment, he lifted his eyes to mine. Grimmed. Continued. “You know about machine DNA?” He shoved the box with a thick finger. I answered with half a head shake, back to the same asymmetry of pain avoidance. “Exactly: there is no such thing. But based on the notion that there should be, we cloned your original box from scrapings that we got off Mickle’s left eyeball. Everything as was, including the Beatles EntiDIs, the recorded tracks, even the weather.”

“Hot, humid, a 65% chance of rain.” I supplied.

He looked at me with new respect. “How did you know?”

“I was there, innit?”

The Captain nodded and leaned back. “We reached out to the owner of Out With the InMusic, a slicky boy from the Seychelles. He demurred, at first, but prudent application of armed insistence resulted in his handing over both his primary matrix and his cloud codes. I have an agent on the way to the server farm. I forbade the use of weaponized Milk Duds, but my man’s a cunning Git; he’ll find a way to destroy all the backups.” The Captain’s pensive look asked my receptive one to dance. “Yours was the only copy out.” I nodded, thought for a while. He thought for a while. Red thought for

a while. We all thought for a while.

My foot-tapping tattoo in 7/8 snagged his attention, bringing his focus back to the matter at hand.

"All interesting, Captain, but what do you need from me?" I bass-drummed the last word with a hard kick of my heel.

Instead of the Captain, Red spoke. "When the box blew, it destroyed the bug. Vapo-rubbed it completely."

I cheered, maintaining my applause until both she and the Captain took their final bows. As the audience filed from their seats, I asked, "If mine was the only copy of the EntiDI out, then that's good news, isn't it?"

Red lobbed my question at the Captain. He caught it deftly and resumed the explanation. "Good, but no longer enough."

I motioned for him to continue. He pushed a button on his desk and behind him, three sets of floor-to-ceiling curtains parted, letting in the last of the afternoon light. I could see from the view that we were high over Santurce, maybe 20 stories up.

He said, "Most people don't know this, but EntiDIs—not just the Beatles, but all of them—are programmed to leave a tonal watermark in every piece of music in whose creation they are involved."

"I didn't know that."

"What I said," replied the Captain, nodding. "The watermark helps with copyright issues, but it also offered the bug coder a handy home for his bug. It turns out that the steady diet of neo-Beatles music caused it to mutate."

I counted my fingers. "Mutate how?"

He sneezed.

"Gesundheit." Red and Dean duet.

He snuffled into a sudden tissue. An alarm sounded.

The Captain shoved himself to his feet, grunting with the effort of getting that body going. He leapt to the center set of windows and, with his free hand, punched the real-glass. A network of lines spread out from the point of impact. Red (not Red, red) splattered against the pane.

"What the? . . ."

Tissue covering his mouth and nose, he finger-painted the crimson mess across the glass. An image emerged. I recognized the husband in the Googlico. A shout built in my belly, erecting scaffolding across my lower lip. Red grabbed my arm, holding me back. The shout erupted, inarticulate anger and frustration. Clamping her hand in mine, I jumped for the window, rotating so that I would hit it with my shoulder. I smashed through, pulling Red along, trusting that our neutralizers would protect us from hungry glass teeth.

We fell, we fell, we fell. Wind and whoosh. Gravity happy to say hello. To say Gotcha! When the ground was closer than it was far, hat twisted in the air, flipping Red's and my bodies up, and landed softly on all four feet. Protected by our neutralizers from the worst of the physics, Red and I collapsed to the bare dirt, with her on top of me. Damned mixed blessings.

I didn't waste time. "Tedders, where's the restaurant. That family's. You said it was in Santurce. We're in Santurce." I pushed Red to her feet. Once erect and stable, she turned, offering me her hand.

"What are you talking about?" she asked as she pulled.

I shushed her with an uplifted finger.

Tedders said, "One block east, two blocks south. They're in what used to be an apartment building and which was turned into . . .

Okay, this is getting interesting.”

“Turned into what?”

Red opened her mouth to speak again. I kissed her hard, locking her tongue in mine to keep her quiet until Tedders finished.

“The All You Need Is Love Church of the Proototype.”

I unlocked from Red and said, “*Proototype?*”

Tedders hummed. A long one, almost 15 seconds. After twisting to check that the sun was behind me, I started east, pulling Red along with me.

Red. “What are you . . . where are we going?”

Tedders. “Typo.” Her voice at my ear and his voice in it made me realize that—“Audible, Tedders.” I turned to Red, “Red, Tedders, Tedders, Red.” In the face of Red’s explosion of questions, I held up my hand and explained, “Tedders is my æssistant and my æengineer.”

“Are you nuts? Personal aids were outlawed a decade ago after the physicultists reprogrammed theirs to self-destruct and took out downtown Montreal.”

I said, “I remember. It was some kind of mess having to do with the illegalization of petroleum-based body oils.”

We reached a cross street. I turned right and stepped into the flow of traffic, caroming off a passing pseudo-pod. Red righted me, and traffic parted to flow around us. In an area of moving calm, we headed for the opposite side of the street.

“Thanks,” I said. I knew from Tedders’s directions that we were on the right track. A faint sound, becoming louder, informed me that our destination was near and nearing.

“Thanks, nothing,” protested Red, “what are you doing with interdicted tech?”

I ignored her. “Tedders, this church thing. You should have known about that when we were back in the car! I might not have been so quick to eject, if . . .”

Out loud this time, Tedders said, “I didn’t run a complete check. I thought names and profession would be enough. Who knew that there was such a thing as the All You Need Is Love Church?”

Red said, “The all you what is what church?” She dragged her heels.

I pulled her by the arm, and then overrode Tedders, repeating for him, “The All You Need Is Love . . .” I laughed, lit by the beautiful dawn of understanding. “AYNIL, anal.” We arrived at a short street that turned to the right. I heard a fanfare of trumpets and faced toward it. Standing at the end of the street was a tall building that had been painted all the colors of the rainbow. Three-D portraits of the lads at different ages adorned every level. An old-time propane-burning banner had been draped across the overhang that protected the building’s entrance: “All You Need Is Love Church of the Proototype.” Next to the building, a small converted residence bore the sign *More Authentiquer Mongolian Barbeque*. I wondered how this nice Beatles-worshiping family from somewhere my æssistant may well have imagined had ended up in the same city that was the birthplace of the *Free Puerto Rico from the Smells of Rigidity* movement.

* * *

Migue explained, “Sometimes you just spring into being. And when that happens, best you take advantage.” She had lovely hands. “Besides, Their sacred work shouldn’t be diluted.” She was surrounded by the multiple glows of an even dozen music boxes. She indicated her mumbling, finger-moving husband, “Rocky designed the BombylBee bug. It was supposed to consume only the neo-Beatles catalogue, but—”

“Mutation, right, we know.” Red nodded, relaxing carefully on the

antique Beatles bench. “Any idea how *that* happened?”

Migue dropped a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Rocky thinks that the wildly differing styles of music caused a kind of rapid evolution, forcing the bug to expand its tastes. Music hall, jazz, baroque, it became voracious. The fact that each piece had a watermark made it easy for the bug to jump. Now it eats whatever it can find.” She moaned, saying, “It won’t stop mutating. It recently acquired a taste for disco.”

I perked up, “But that’s great! Program it to feed on rap and zpd rock, and you’ll be doing the music world an immense service.”

Migue stiffened, turning on me the weight of her disapproval. “We of the AYNIL Church of the Proototype are not musicians. Sound and let sound. Our only goal with the bug was to rid the world of false songs.” She began to wring her hands. Seated close to the distressed woman, Red was sprayed by flying drops of sweat. Still, she leaned into the mist and said, “You couldn’t know.”

“Oh, but we did.” Wide eyes, shining.

JJ, cassock flapping, burst into the nave, pausing long enough to sketch the sign of the apple. “Maddy found them!” He dashed over to where the four of us lounged. Rocky drank fruit punch. Lucky devil.

JJ dragged a pulpit to our little group and made himself comfortable behind it. “It is written,” he said, “that George, having been allowed to contribute only a fraction of the holy works, should thereafter be known as ‘the Quiet One.’”

“Yea, verily,” intoned Migue. Rocky mumbled rhythmically; drank more punch. Lucky devil.

A chorus sounded from a second-floor interior balcony, “I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.”

“And John, Paul, and Ringo saw that it was good, bestowing upon us

the peace that passeth underfaction.” JJ put up his arms and began to sway back and forth. The chorus repeated the chorus. But oh, didst the narrative come in two beats early, sowing rhythmic discord: “And the Beatles, together always in spirit, knowing that history would distort each member’s contributions, did cause to be saved a secret catalogue comprising all recordings, equal in number; and it were ten qbytes long and one hundred qbytes deep, with fruit-flavored piping and a place to store their favorite pets.”

Gasping for breath, JJ collapsed to the floor. From the transept, a tall girl with white tennis sandals and belt entered, solemnly air-guitaring. She spoke in E Major and could be neither dissuaded nor put on pause.

“We praise you, oh Beatles, from whom all true music flows. Our BB bug will destroy all other musics, profane and/or copyrighted.”

Coming from my right, a whir and a faint breeze. Rocky, still quaffing punch (lucky devil), now had a keyboard. The highly contagious human-machine interface was considerably less plastic than legend had it. I scootched closer to Red, putting as much distance as I could between myself and the anachronism under his moving fingers. “Moving,” a conservative term of sober description. Flying, whizzing, snicker-snacking. The brutalized keyboard fell to pieces. The balconied chorus *whooed*, falling in a faint to the linoleum tile below.

Wide in the space above our heads, a funnel began to spin, sucking up papers and cigarette butts that had disappeared circa 2027. The sharp scent of bitter almond eddied around my ears, but that was much too informal, so it began to edward, instead. I beheld a vision of butternut taking up residence in Red’s swirling coif. It applied for a visa but was refused on the grounds that confederate soldiers seem reluctant to tip over 10%.

“Red,” I shouted over the maelstrom above. Her silvered ears rotated in my direction. But the storm thundered with the voice of Zeus (a clever ventriloquist, but nevertheless troubled by words with the

letters *m*, *b*, and *p*, and—to a slightly lesser extent—*f* and *v*).

“RED!” I screamed.

She jerked away from me. “I’m right here,” she said, “use your indoor voice.” She pinched the fabric of my neutralizer between scarlet fingers.

The tall girl, Maddy, I assumed, was doing the solo from “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.”

Behind her, an entire library of music spheres—not the Beatles, I was certain—exploded in a multicolored spray of fruit punch. Rocky moaned, but continued to pound the wrecked keyboard.

And stillness.

The glass door at the far end of the nave swung open. Soft tropic air, a short man with wrinkles in his eyes, two of the big cockroaches that look as if they could play defensive tackle. Entering the suddenly silent space, the short man. With wrinkles in his eyes. He carefully examined each of us. Red held his gaze for longer than any of the others, but he considered each of us: me, the supine boy, the soloing girl, the eyes-still-wide Migue, the punch-drinking Rocky (lucky devil). The man nodded and swallowed a vitapack, apparently not needing a glass of water.

He gulped, nodded again. “Okay. Carry on.”

Chaos resumed.

* * *

By sunrise the following morning, the Beatles EntiDIs—separately

and as a group—were destroyed, along with nearly all recorded music, antique sheet music, the transcriptions of Schoenberg cereal (gawd help us) recipes made by his amanuensis, Richy, and one of Babe Ruth’s lesser home runs. I mourned about being unable to see John’s last hairpiece, feel Paul’s abrupt inhalation, buckle beneath the weight of George’s convictions, chide Ringo for his rude comments about my addiction to milk, or listen to one more gorgeous Sir George arrangement.

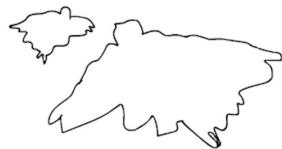
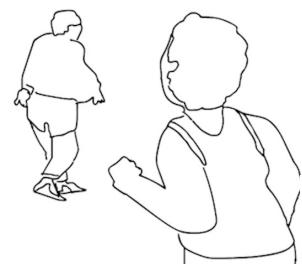
Red—at odds with Captain Excellent and his merry band of married-but-willing men—I convinced to move down to Ponce, something that few San Juaneros would ever willingly do. I helped her with the legalese that resulted in the eviction (with prejudice) of the old composer who had lived next door to me for as long as the Pope has been shitting in the woods. She moved in after the fumigation.

As we stood together, before the altar of Freddy, she promised that she would never again commit music; I promised that I would task Tedders with finding a way to delete the name “Holgertron” from the collective memory.

“Mongolia,” I sang, the newest only song in the world, “at sunset shines with a shiny shine.”

Tedders chimed in on the next line, “at sunrise gleams with a gleaming gleam.”

Red shot me with her hand.



2020 animation reel

by Josie Levin

(animated; see full animation
online at [penumbrio.com/
current-issue/levinReel.html](http://penumbrio.com/current-issue/levinReel.html))

The First Metaphor

by Franco Amati

I invented the written word. For years our people were running their mouths and waving their hands around, and no one knew what the hell was going on.

Sure, I owed a bit of gratitude to my cousin Lou who invented the stylus. But that alone didn't do much. He gave us sticks to wave around—great. But I was the one who suggested we use those sticks to put all the verbal nonsense into a neat and understandable system. I said, hey, let's take this gibberish, and let's all agree on what it means. Let's record it on this soft mushy clay stuff that came from—well, I don't remember where the soft mushy clay came from—but the point is, our tribe was a real mess until I came along. Once we were all on the same page, the rest was history.

Speaking of history, I'd like to set the record straight. There are something like a half-dozen inaccurate accounts of the development of the written word. Some folks like to discredit me, saying I stole the idea from a close colleague of mine named Bob. Granted, these same folks have also marred Bob's reputation, calling him a libertine and a philanderer. So whose story do we believe?

Now, let's discuss my colleague for a bit. Bob was a brilliant man. He did not come up with the language we now use, but he did accomplish something great in his own right. Bob had a way with words. It's why I was so fond of him. He was what I'd like to call a proto-linguist. He wasn't a syntax man. He was all about the pictures and the symbols and the imagery. He saw meanings and connections that no person before him ever could.

The thing I hate most is hearing people say that Bob and I didn't get along. That we were competitors, that we had an ugly rivalry. It's not

true at all. The fact is, no one knows the real story because I've never told it. And good old Bob hasn't been around to tell it. So here I am today, in my waning years, reflecting on the role that Bob played, and putting the confusion to rest about who deserves credit for our elegant communication system.

One major reason why I've never opened up about this is because the events were intertwined with a love story. And lord knows, I'm not one to discuss romance. In fact, I've always tried to avoid mixing business with pleasure, but this was one time where I couldn't avoid it. It was also the one time that got us all in trouble.

Not long after my great epiphany about writing all the words down, I began to attract the attention of many women in our tribe. The attention was flattering. Who doesn't like to be acknowledged? But it was also somewhat distracting. It was interfering with my life's work. So I tried to limit my affections to one particular person. Her name was Tar.

She was okay-looking. To be honest though, she could have looked like a tree stump, and I would have still fallen for her. It was her mind that I was after. We were the perfect couple. We would talk and laugh and come up with ideas all through the night, day after day. We had so much fun in those early days. We made many discoveries together. She inspired and motivated me. Tar was so perceptive. It was almost as if she had the ability to read minds. She understood the thoughts and emotions of others like no one I had ever met.

Part of why Tar was so instrumental in helping me refine the written word was that she was so socially savvy. She was a great listener. She would notice subtleties in the way people described and labeled

things in their environment. Perhaps equally impressive was her ability to assign words to aspects of our internal world as well. She named nearly every emotion, capturing the essence of every mental state that a human could experience.

Tar enjoyed talking to many different people. Conversations were an art form for her, and she was a master at taking other people's perspectives. So it was no surprise that many of the other men in the tribe were drawn to her. For the most part it didn't bother me. I knew where I stood, and I was secure in our relationship. That is, until the stresses of work began taking a toll on me.

With our tribe's culture and language booming, I was stretched thin. At one point there were hundreds of words being added to our lexicon per week. I had become the de-facto overseer of all things language. People would come to me from all corners detailing new concepts, new descriptors, synonyms, antonyms, new sentence structures. You name it. We were flourishing. My team of linguists wasn't very large, so a lot of the burden fell on me. The unfortunate effect was that I wasn't able to spend as much time with Tar.

Around that time, Tar began spending significant time with a new person. She told me that she met Bob near the lake, and they had gone swimming together. After hours of fun, they lost track of time, and the sun had gone down. So they had to camp out for the night. They sat together in front of a raging fire and shared food and stories until they both fell asleep.

Their friendship went on to grow over many more afternoons swimming in the lake and over many more dinners by the fire. Tar admitted to me that she had great affection for Bob. She was remarkably candid with me about all of their activities.

There's a word for when a person begins to dislike the advantages of another. Jealousy—did I feel it? Maybe. But it was complicated. It wasn't the physical closeness that Tar and Bob were sharing that bothered me. It was something else. It was all the time they spent sharing language, in the deepest of ways. In one of those ways, it turned out, was a discovery I wasn't prepared for.

"Last night at the lake Bob said something that really confused me," Tar said. "It was a peculiar use of language."

That piqued my interest. "Peculiar how?"

"Well, we were sitting by the fire, like always, and he looked directly in my eyes. He said something simple, but incredible. He said: 'My yearning for you is this fire, brilliant and hot, stoked each time our breath comes together.'"

"What ... what nonsense is that?" I said.

"Think about it, Gill," she said. "Think about the deeper meaning. The relation between the words. His usage is remarkable. There is no name for this kind of language. To relate something abstract with something concrete. To compare a feeling to a fire. I can't stop thinking about it. This goes beyond merely applying labels to internal states."

"Right. It's as if he's tapped into a language beyond language," I said.

I needed to know more about this meta-language. So I encouraged Tar to continue her relationship with Bob. While it concerned me that their feelings for one another were deepening, there was still a great benefit that I saw in her continuing to interact with him. I considered going to Bob myself, but I had a hypothesis that his meta-language was best elicited in the presence of someone that ignited strong emotion.

"So you don't fear this will negatively affect our relationship?" Tar asked.

"Well, let me ask you this," I said. "Do you still love me? Even with Bob around, do you still feel the way you did about me before you met him?"

"Absolutely. My feelings for you have not changed. If anything they've grown stronger. I have significant emotion for Bob, but it's

different. You are two different people. I enjoy you both for different reasons. Do you think that is unreasonable?" she asked.

"No, my love. It isn't. Go and continue to explore your feelings for Bob."

Meanwhile I was getting all the goods on the meta-language. Each night she'd come back with new material from Bob. It was the kind of stuff that really blew your hair back. Actually, that was one of the things Bob came up with. *To blow your hair back*. It's something the wind does, but in meta-language it means to strongly affect someone. As in, our love-making session really blew my hair back. It invokes revelation. When one's hair is no longer in the face, it no longer covers the eyes, so one can see more clearly. Such a simple phrase, and yet multiple layers of meaning. Bob was exceptional.

The day finally came when I figured it couldn't hurt to actually meet him. There was enough stability in my relationship with Tar, and my work was going smoothly. I felt secure enough to meet the man himself.

Tar introduced me to Bob at the lake. We decided to have a three-way fishing trip. We sat in our boat, and the three of us talked for hours, touching on all manner of topics. Bob was a riot. He had us reeling. And not just with the fishing. A few nibbles here and there. Tar pulled in two big ones, one after the other. She barely had time to catch her breath in between. Bob sliced up the fish with his blade the way he sliced us up with his wit. Not long after that, we called it a day. We were wiped. The afternoon really blew our hair back.

Bob said, "It comes naturally, I guess. It's not like I consciously try to compare unrelated things. It just happens. Throughout my life I've enjoyed making pictures and scrawling on the walls in our cave. Maybe that had something to do with it."

"So drawing was a hobby of yours?"

"Yes, I'd close my eyes, and I'd see things, but I'd also feel them. I'd reflect on their interconnectedness. I'd sit quietly with the pictures in

my head. My mother thought I was odd and that I wouldn't amount to anything."

"No, Bob," I said. "Your mother was wrong. You are a genius. And I believe we should work together."

That's when my friendship and professional relationship with Bob took off. We worked well together. He had talents for things that I struggled with. And I helped him in matters that didn't come easy. It was a nice symbiosis.

You may be wondering if things were ever weird because of Tar being involved with both of us. But honestly, it wasn't. The three of us had a mutual respect and appreciation for all of our talents. We trusted each other, and we rarely argued.

We kept up this rapport for years. Looking back on it, there wasn't a more fruitful time period in the history of linguistic development than the era in which the three of us worked together, collecting all the linguistic, metalinguistic, and sociolinguistic data we could find. We loved the work, and we were proud of how it benefited the tribe. That communal sharing of knowledge with the world caused us great success. However, it was the communal sharing that took place inside our tent that caused our undoing.

People in the tribe began to ask questions about our dynamic: *Why do three scientists need to spend so much time together outside of work? Do the three of them actually live together? Which one is her husband? They can't both be her husband!*

We didn't even think to hide our affections for one another. But people started to feel threatened. Men in the tribe were intimidated by us, worrying that we might move in on their women. Women in the tribe would rant and criticize Tar for spending so much time with two men. They were being so silly and trivial.

It was customary for our people to pair with only one mate at a time. The word for it was monogamy. I rue the day that I added that word to our lexicon. The majority of people thought that anything outside

of that monolith of dyadic sexual relations was some kind of abomination.

We withstood the barrage of insults and threats for as long as we could. But we never imagined what these constant aspersions would ultimately lead to.

One day I received notice from one of the tribe elders that the three of us were to be presented with an honorary prize for our societal contributions. They announced an epic ceremony to commemorate us. Dinner, music, dancing, the works.

We showed up, and everyone was super nice to us. People asked us questions about our research. They commended us for our scientific dedication. Towards the end of the evening, we were called up on stage to receive our awards. For some reason they had three distinct podiums for each of us to stand behind, set about six feet apart. Why would they want us standing so far from one another, I wondered.

I gave my acceptance speech first. Then Bob. And finally, Tar. As she was wrapping up, an odd silence came over the audience. What should have been the beginnings of applause was instead an odd series of whispers and murmurs that culminated in a collective gasp. Then screams.

Armed tribesmen cast nets onto each of us, capturing us so that we couldn't move. Our captors closed in on us. Their aim was to subdue us and put us in holding cells. The whole event was an elaborate trap.

Somehow Bob broke free. He had his fishing knife on him, so he was able to cut through the net. When the captors collapsed on him, he

threw some punches and got away.

"Bob, just run! Don't worry about us. You have to get away," I yelled.

So he managed to escape, but Tar and I were thrown in prison. They sent out a team to find Bob, but they had no luck. With him missing, they postponed our trial for weeks. Eventually they gave up looking for him and held the trial for the two of us.

We were publicly reprimanded and sentenced to three years in prison for indecency. A year and a half into our sentence there was still no word from Bob. The litigators told us they'd reduce our sentence if we agreed to have no further polyamorous dealings and that if we ever heard from Bob again we'd have to turn him in to authorities or else face further imprisonment. Worst of all, they banned us from continuing our academic work as linguistic researchers.

We never saw Bob again, but in hindsight it was probably for the best. I can only imagine what punishment awaited him if he had been caught.

Years later, we considered the possibility that Bob might have found a new tribe. I like to think that Bob went out into the world and influenced other societies with his talent for metaphor.

Tar and I had always hoped he'd find new love and garner the respect he deserved, that more people would appreciate his creativity and his open-mindedness. Bob was a true scholar and innovator and a unique force in the evolution of human language, making it not only practical but beautiful.

Ghost in Orbit

by Jennifer Crow

Caught in the embrace of gravity
and velocity, I ride this metal coffin
past satellites abandoned
by the future. My bones
rattle but no one hears, my spirit
whines at the cold seeping
in from the void. I promised
I would wait for you, here
where words freeze on the tongue.
The vow spilled from me,
crystalline tears turned
to tiny comets. I know
you heard me--fate
always finds a way to pin
us to our hasty plans.
I pine for a past
no one remembers now,
and fall forever around a darkened star.

The War God

by N. C. Krueger

I.

The desert faded gold to boney white,
We dug the bunkers, hid ourselves from sight.
The moon laid shadow-cloths with silent hands;
The Men-from-Mars were scouting on the sands.
They came, scritch-scratching with incessant feet,
With roving eyes and mouths agape for meat.
With dirt in breath, we waited underground,
With rifles clutched, not daring any sound.

"That the bugs?" said Parker when they'd gone.
Midge grunted "Yes" and flicked the flashlight on.
Archer twitched—he didn't like to hide,
And Rory's ocean eyes were wild and wide.
I saw our dust-smeared faces lit like skulls,
Like seashells on the shore picked clean by gulls;
Awake for days on days, with sand-glazed throat—
'Last hope for earth,' was what the papers wrote.

The sand rolled on above our battered heads;
Last hope for earth? I hoped only for bed.
And in my sleepless haze, I heard a ringing
Like bells from church where once was love and singing;
Then what all were thinking, we heard the captain say
"Can't fight 'em in the dark, now, anyway."
And so, to fitful, dreaming sleep we fell,
—And as I did, still louder grew the bell.

II.

I woke at zero hours to a fly
Feeling, strangely, like my head was full of sky
Had been dreaming, but I couldn't say
What had passed me on the slumbering way
The captain was awake with a cigar
He said, "It looks they're following a star—
Funny how they're like us some ways too."
All I said was, "Orders, Captain Blue?"

So at his word I crawled out from our hole
And with my gun I went on my patrol.
The crickets called, the sky was ocean-dark,
I felt as Noah in his lonely ark,
Lilting, reeling on a ceaseless sea,
Pairs of night-born beasts my company
And as the restless wind began to moan,
I thought, how strange he sent me out alone.

And all the silent world was cool and dim
While crickets sang their funereal hymn,
So silently, I trudged upon the sand,
And as I gazed upon the wavering land,
I thought my ribs would crack from weight of grief
For every burnt-out shrub, and stem, and leaf
That spread its selfless body to the moon
No matter if it would be wilting soon;

The stars were burning in the lucid sky—
I knew that we, the last, were bound to die—
They turned and trembled, drawing ever near,
 And in the predawn air I shed a tear;
My steel to breast, I cursed the Men-from-Mars,
 And flung my rebel voice up to the stars
 And to the planet burning red above,
 I said, You will not take the earth I love.

And then a rustling stole upon my ears,
 Seemed confirmation of my alien fears,
Then ever closer burned the lights on high
 With Mars' flashing like a wrathful eye;

My heart was hammering—*two-and-three-and-four*—
 Drumming, drumming on my ribcage door.
The lightning forked, the thunder rolled and pealed
 And there I thought my life was surely sealed;

The black dome of the sky rent open wide
—A thousand ghostly stirrings at my side!—
And now descending from the gloomy night
Space-dust raining from its trembling height
 And with the ringing of that ancient bell,
And thousand voices screaming as from hell,
 And thousand mouths all open in their roar
Spreading black, and always spreading more—

It came. At first my mind was dead,
 I could not hold its form inside my head,
My boots were rooted in the shallow ground
 And to its whirling dark my eyes were bound.
I shuddered as the Thing grew near and near,
 And then, my madness swallowed by my fear

Faced by its thousand teeth so sharp and keen,
 With shaking hands I raised my M-16.

III.

The Thing swelled forward in Its dark embrace,
 And from the sprawling wilderness of space
 Came coil on coil of the starless storm
 'Till all was full eclipsed by monstrous form.
Its eyes were dark as sorrow-sunken lakes,
 Its voice was like a thousand rattlesnakes;
The air was burning through my feeble throat
 And by Its mocking laugh my mind was smote.

And while It quivered in demonic glee
 Its body came compounding all round me,
Before my terrified eyes Its mouth was spread;
 I heard Its voice inside my shattered head,
I am the War God, come to judge your deeds
Your futile movements, swept away as seeds
I am the mouth that eats the worthless men
I am what was, and I shall be again!

My body faint, I steadied well my hand,
 With blanked-out mind, but feet sound in the sand.
Though hope be gone, I hoped my aim be true
 To send to Mars the sign of faithful few—
 A parting shot from falling sons of earth
 —That my last breath could be availed of worth.
 Born up by earth I faced the monolith,
Summed up my nerve, and said, And I am Smith.

Again its laughter rattled in my head,
 But I resolved it'd rattle not my stead.

Go on and shoot, it said in scornful tone,
Its graveyard breath blew deep into my bone;
I pulled the trigger and I heard the roar
Then stars and sand and desert were no more,
And all was black. And, cold as bitter frost,
Entwined within Its tendrils I was lost.

IV.

I felt myself be lifted off the ground,
Its lawless wail commingling all around;
Its void-black coils oozed around my spine
My mouth was full of taste of blood and wine.
A flush of light then stole upon my face,
Then came the cold and emptiness of space,
For we were flying high above the world,
And curtains of the black around us furled;

Farther, farther, off into the night
'Til earth was nothing but a distant light,
A fairy's tear. And Mars was shrinking, too—
Two dots, one burning red, the other blue.
Look well, It spat, *for Mars, too, once was green*,
There waters plashed, and peoples lived serene.

I came; I doomed them for their apathy,
For they are nothing in infinity.

Then like a dream I saw inside my head
The barren Martian lands, all cold and dead,
And heard the phantom laughter, phantom song,
The ghosts of life and love and memory long
Echo on echo among the sterile stone.
Then from its empty heart a new birth grown—
Creeping insects forming, given breath,

The War God's children multiplied from death.

Cruel seemed the stars on their black waves
For now I saw a universe of graves;
I in Its grip remembered not my name,
Lulled and deadened by my crushing shame,
And far away the blue and silent stone
Where hung all hopes, and all we call our own,
Was nothing but a house's distant light,
A window barely gleaming in the night.

You see, the War God spoke (and men despair!)

Your petty loves but fancies on the air.
And I was cold and hollowed clean of hope;
But clinging still to Love as to a rope,
For rose in me a sorrow for my home
For woods, for fields, for lake-shores casting foam,
And from my daze the thought began to form
That houses, be they small, were always warm.

V.

The ocean-water welled within my eyes;
The well-trod dirt came rising up as sighs.
The petals fell and left the heaving fruit,
I found my failing voice a springtime shoot;
I said, It's true—as dust we crawl and die
Perhaps, then, nothing hears us laugh or cry
Perhaps, then, Nothing reigns all death and birth
But, still, somehow!—I looked unto the earth.

You foolish creature! I heard Its voice distort
Is still your sight so narrow and so short?
What can you see, I ask, upon that dot,

*For what have you so resolutely fought?
And, shaking, with its coil round my throat,
I said, Then make my mind as like your boat
And sail with me across the earth-blue sky
And I will show you why we fight and die.*

So hearing this, It chittered through my brain,
But still we soon were low upon a plain
Of prairie grasses undulating gold
And hillocks rolling fold on rumpled fold,
And grasshoppers ascending from the dust
And, left alone, a car encased in rust;
Then further, where a withered streamlet flowed
A farmhouse on the rutted country road.

The paint was peeling off its sun-bleached door,
(The roof-top sagging as it was before!)
Jungly gardens; trodden, broken grass,
Yellowed walls and clouded window glass
—But Jackson sitting on the crumbling stoop
And Aaron shooting baskets in the hoop
And Rosie with her hazel eyes so wide,
And kitchen odors floating from inside.

This, I said, And this I know as mine.
While breezes swayed the washing on the line,
And in the air Its silence was profound
As we came skimming 'cross the beaten ground;
And all at once I saw again the sands,
The oceans, cities, mothers clasping hands,
And in their bunker underneath the sky
My steadfast brothers, bound, prepared to die.

And there beside the dreadful God of War,
I saw it all as dust and loved it all the more—
A dot of baby blue in star-lush loam
That bears inside a country, city, home.
I said, as to a doll the little child clings
To this I hold, and many other things
Which shall not last, but still, as long they live,
Have to a man some greater joy to give.

You call my planet small! and valor sings
That men have died for many smaller things;
If it be futile, then, at least we stood
And held to what we know is true and good,
And if it's not—if there be God above—
Then surely he must be a god of Love!
For in the shining wilderness of space,
Love is the salt that makes a sacred place.

VI.

The War God's scream reechoed through the sky
Its furious wailing dwindling to a cry,
Its body bursting, shedding endless dark
And all Its tendrils peeling off as bark;
Growing smaller, split by thunderous cracks,
Its awful grin all melting off as wax,
'Til Its transfiguration I did see
And all 'twas left was not an It, but he.

With ruddy face and fairy-footed stride
With sword in belt and halberd at his side
In silver cap he stood upon the sand—
The War God, yes, no bigger than my hand!
He said, *My brother, you have spoken true*

*And freed me, when despair was all I knew.
By Love is war conceived in hearts steadfast;
By Love will war be one day stilled at last.*

Then in the wind were Men-from-Mars absolved;
Their brutish eyes and insect forms dissolved.
He raised his halberd and he gave salute
—I heard from Mars a sound of distant flute.
So he departed, stalwart in repose,
But first he plucked, from well-loved dust, a rose
For with it to the crimson star to soar,
That Mars may bloom with roses evermore.

VII.

So I was left alone upon the sands,
With stardust left upon my shining hands,
And as the yellow sun gave first its gleam
I wondered whether it had been a dream.
But, it was surely real! for in that day,
The Men-from-Mars had melted all away
And all 'twas left were echoes of their moans
And all around, their broken, human bones!

The Earth is saved, I said when I returned,
And told my comrades what I'd seen and learned.
Parker thought me mad, but Captain Blue
Said, "After all, would we have first thought true
The Men-from-Mars? but there the Martians were."
And by these words did he my friends assure.
So on the sand beneath the azure deep,
I closed my eyes, and, smiling, went to sleep.

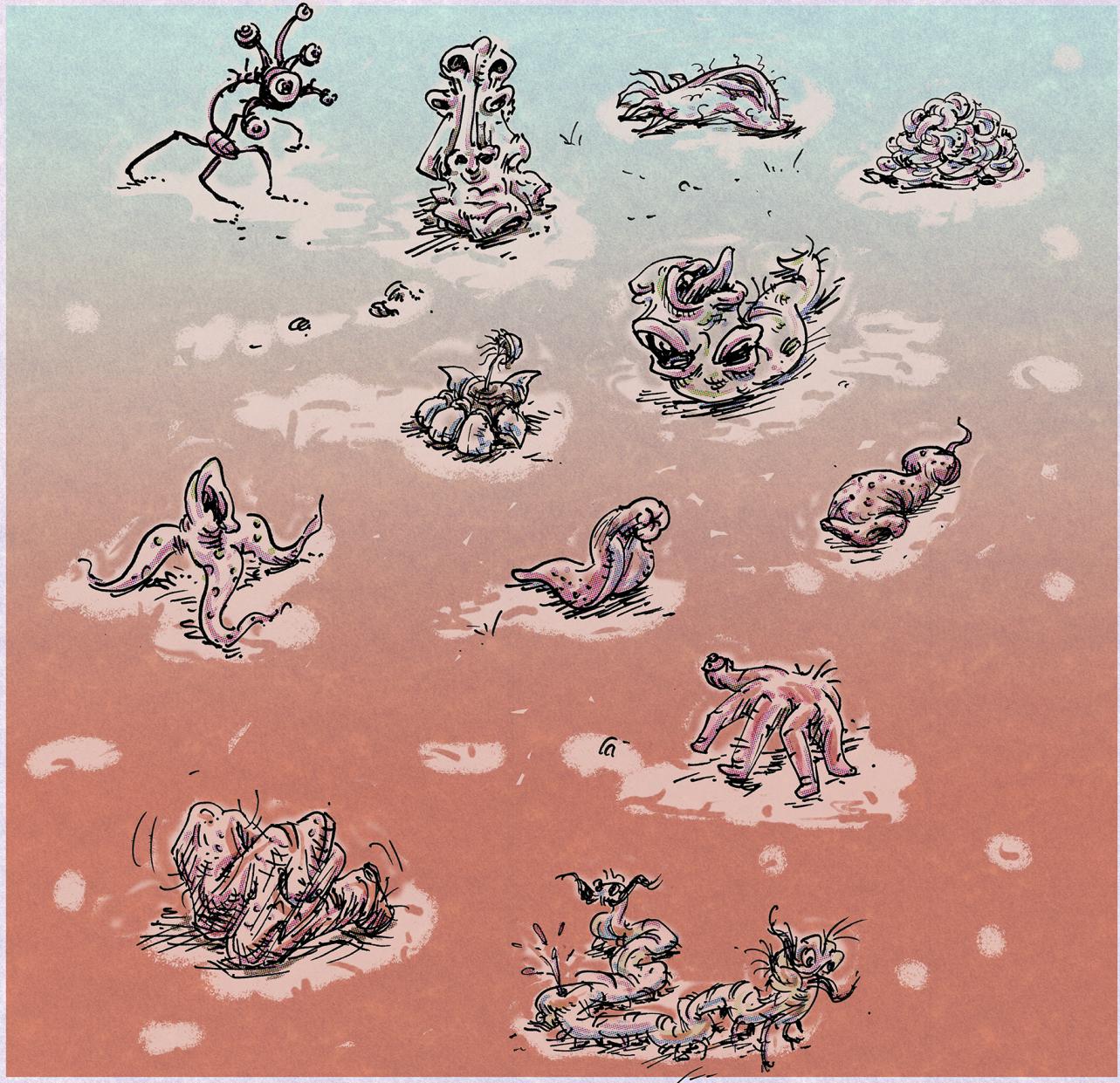
VIII.

And sometimes still on moonless, cloudless nights
When to my eyes are spread all heaven's lights,
I look to Mars, and free of pain or fear,
I see it flushing redder every year;
And think of roses, roses of my own
With such a joy could break a heart of stone.
Then to the ground I look with greater love
Than I could give to any star above!

The Road to Golgonooza, our ongoing story, will resume next issue.
In the mean time, please enjoy this garland of cartoonish amusements.









Consciousness is
everything



when you die,
the universe
will cease



like none of it
ever happened.



that's fine,
in a way



there'll be
no you
to know
anything



"Rage rage
against the
dying of the
light"



said Dylan Thomas
who doesn't know
he ever existed
to say that



Every night,
existence
halts for a
time



you must recover
it in the
morning.



who am I?
where am I?
what am I supposed
to be doing?



we might represent
the only time the
universe became
aware of itself,
the only time we
reflected



we'll never know



and yet we're
happiest when
immersed in
pleasurable activity,
losing our sense of
self + the passage
of time



© MOT '21

Asteroid Impact

by Grace Wagner

I could do nothing
in my solitary satellite, orbiting
hopeless circles around a death-shrouded
planet, a cloud cloaking what used to be
home. I don't know who is alive
down there—all I know
is that I wanted to be an astronaut
since before I knew the word—since I could look up
and recognize the stars as not only shining
but far. There is no sky in space
and the stars do not shine half as bright
as they did in the heart of the lone-star state.
The prairie sky died and I doubt the sage
will bloom again, but I remember
that Saturday night—boot-scoot dancing
and laughing at the economy,
because what was it made for if not to fail?
And the kiss.
But I won't think about you—deep in the heart
of a Texas-sized fireball that I'm certain hit

somewhere in the panhandle—because what can't
Texans handle? If there is still land
where Texas used to be, perhaps
there is an economy, trading in hog-skins
and feral meat. Perhaps the Tsunami
I can only imagine missed
the Yucatan and—but what of the islands?
I keep forgetting. Perhaps there is nothing
left. I cannot see the surface, a glimpse
of blue like a mirage at the edge of my vision,
but even that is suspect. No response
from ground control. No shuttle
to scuttle me home and no home to go to.
I've counted and recounted the supplies,
and it's enough
to prolong my death until I'm certain
you are gone—my bright star,
my shining home.

Radio Silence

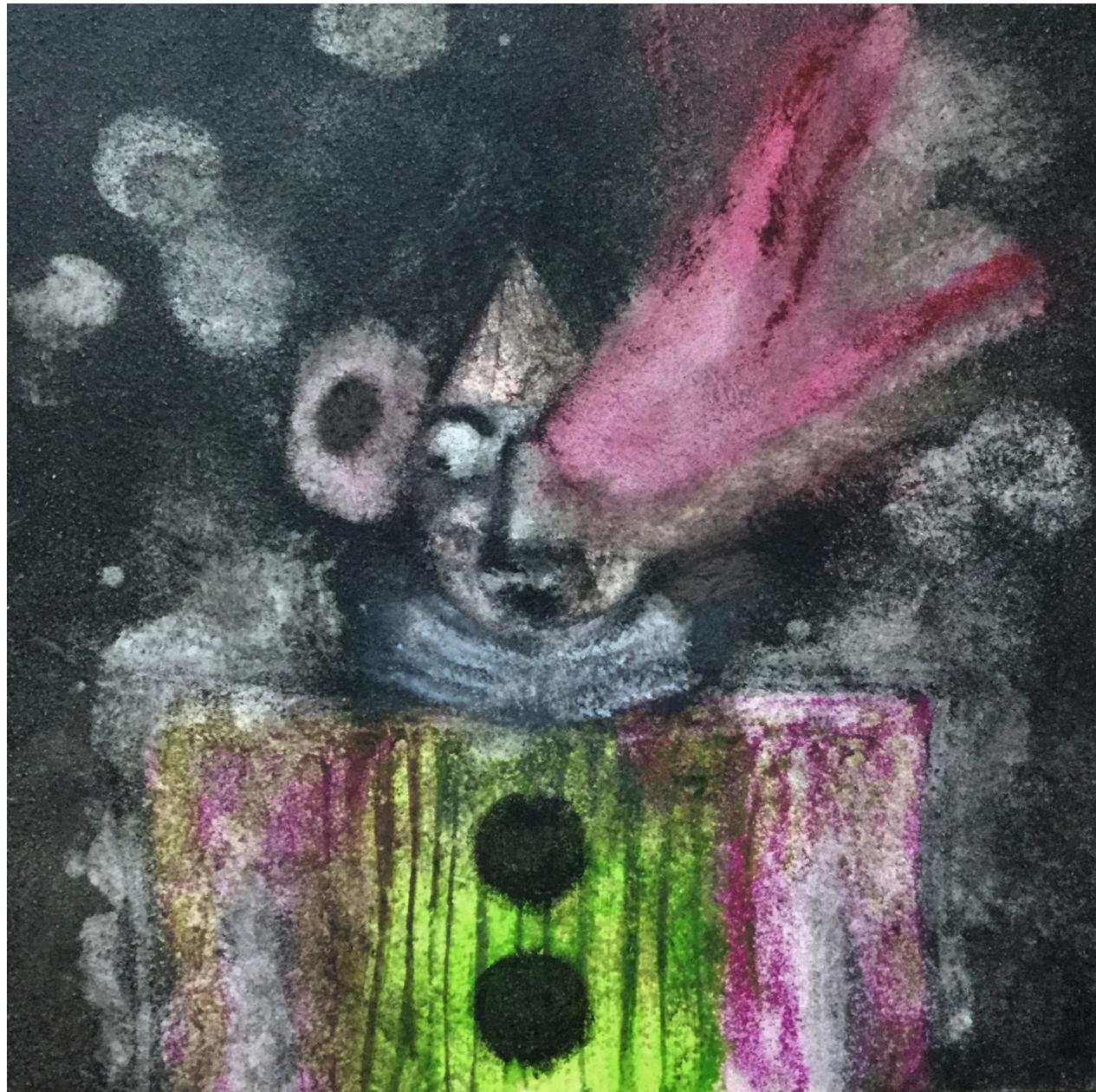
by Avra Margariti

His friends call him Major Tom
because he's a space oddity
even among their mishmash group of
intergalactic backpackers.

They stop at an Andromeda station for fuel
and Major Tom sneaks out through the hatch
stardust glitter over his eyelids, tulle skirt pooling
around his legs, one flesh, the other long eaten
by his family's pet shark.

The room is empty but the barwoman,
a tentacled krakenmaiden of neon green smiles,
makes him a deal: she'll put on any song he likes
if he guesses how many teeth she has in all her mouths.

Leaning his weight on his prosthetic leg,
he guesses right on the first attempt.
A twelve-string guitar strumming its supersonic tune,
he twirls around himself and around the vacant stage.
The Earth spins too, far away from here, a phantom limb
and Major Tom hopes he never reaches ground control.



Deleting the Dream Machine

by Elby Rogers

The One I Fell Into

by Cory Swanson

Menke is a painter.

Menke has no paints.

It used to drip from him as a child as he toddled around his parents' apartment in the Lower East River District. From the perspective of his mother sitting on the couch, the first sight of him was always his hair, the big poof bobbling around and bouncing with his gait.

But after Menke would pass, chasing the cat or looking for a toy, there it would be in bright and brilliant puddles. Or in little drops scattered like the leavings of a bitch in heat. It would depend on his momentum—on his velocity—how much would collect.

We all leave our essence wherever we go, changing and affecting those around us. For Menke, however, it was tangible. So much of it gurgled and boiled forth that it couldn't be contained. Not by his diaper, nor by his clothes.

His mother loved it. She would find the puddles of it on the floor and, instead of mopping it up, she would rub it into her hands like lotion and enjoy the shimmering warmth of her baby boy for hours. When Menke grew older, she would go into his room when he was at school and lie in the puddle left on his pillow, resting her head in the liquid epitome of her son.

In contrast, his father would grow frustrated at the constant mess. He could not understand why his son was unable to control his secretions. "I contain myself," he berated his son. "My father contained himself. Everyone I know contains themselves. What's the

matter with you, Menke?"

But Menke couldn't help spilling himself everywhere. As he approached his sensitive teenage years, he began to feel bothered by it dripping and sloshing in every direction.

"The thing I love about you, Menke," one of his teachers told him, "is that you're completely you. It's everywhere. Don't hide from yourself."

* * *

When I first met Menke, he promised to teach me how to paint.

"It's easy," he'd said, red Solo cup of keg beer in his hand. "I don't know why everyone says it's so difficult. It's not."

I remember my first sight of it, shining bright at the corners of his mouth. It enraptured me, glowing and swirling like a moving piece of raku pottery.

"Dude," said another partygoer. "Something's dribbling down your leg."

There it was. More of it, running in rivulets down his calf.

"Oh. Ha!" Menke said. "That happens when I drink."

The others laughed, and I worried that he might feel embarrassed.

"How could I worry about that?" he later told me when I asked about the incident. "That stuff is just me. I'm funny. Why not laugh when

you're funny?"

Several days later, I took him up on his offer and visited his studio.

"Do you like it?" he asked as I stood in front of one of his works.

My jaw dropped. I eyed my new friend as he smiled and beamed at his creation.

"Well?" Menke urged.

"Like' is an inadequate word."

His brow curled. "How do you mean?"

"Like' implies a mere affinity. I guess I could use the word 'love,' but that feels inadequate as well. 'Love' would imply that it only inspires positive feelings. But this, this painting is..." I noticed that I had been reaching out to touch it. "May I?" I asked.

"Of course," Menke replied. "I would be honored."

I laid my fingers on the surface and they sunk into the swirling shimmer of the substance on the canvas. Nervously, I looked over at Menke, who smiled and nodded his encouragement. I sank my hand deeper into the canvas. It felt warm and my hand seemed to glow and tingle. Waves of emotion flowed down my arm like the thick currents of some liquid drug. A tear formed in the corner of my eye and slowly moved down my cheek.

Eventually, I breathed and remembered myself in the real world. I withdrew my hand, the surface of the painting swirling where my fingers once were. Even the oil-slick shine of the surface left me shaking inside.

Menke observed the look on my face. "Good. I'm really glad you like it," he said, that indomitable grin stuck in position. "You want me to show you how?"

Before I could respond, he'd moved his painting and replaced it with a clean canvas.

"Look, Menke," I said. "Something like that, it could make you rich. Maybe you shouldn't just show everybody how it's done."

He waved off my comment as he gathered his brushes. "Why would I be concerned with such things? Give me a warm bed and enough to eat. I love it so much, and it's easy. Maybe I can share it with the entire world."

From the sink, he pulled out a clean pallet. I looked around, expecting the usual piles of mixed and unmixed paints lying around, but no such thing existed.

"I think everyone is born with the ability to paint," he continued, eyeing the blank canvas and fussing with its position. "Most of us just forgot how to do it."

I opened my mouth to ask where his paints were, then stopped short. Menke lifted his shirt, exposing his somewhat gaunt and mildly hairy midsection.

"But I believe in relearning," he said. "Look at the Renaissance painters. Painting like they finally remembered how things look. That is the key."

Holding a brush like a pencil, he pressed into his belly with a practiced motion of his pinkie, removing a finger-full of glittering paste.

"Just remember how things look--how they really look--and you'll be fine."

He wiped the glob on his pallet, poking at it and mixing it with his brush. Three more times he swiped his pinkie across his belly, mixing and blending the tones together until the beautiful stew seemed to pulse.

Menke smiled at me and dipped his brush in the mixture. “Then, when you remember how things really look,” he began spreading it on the canvas with sure strokes and wild flourishes, “try to remember how things really feel.”

* * *

We all struggle to put our essence to use.

Menke’s journey through his teenage years had been difficult, what with his father’s inability to understand his character.

“Keep it to yourself,” his father said. “Don’t let anybody see it. If they know what you are, they’ll know where you’re weak.”

“I can’t help it, Dad,” Menke complained. “It spills out of me. I flick my wrist and it sprays on the walls. I turn my head and it flies in every direction.”

These conflicts led to vicious rows and angry words. After, Menke’s mother would invariably find him sulking in his bed.

“Don’t hide it, Son,” she would say. “Put it to use. It’s a shame to have all of that ‘you’ flying around with no purpose.”

So he vowed to find the meaning of his gift.

His first attempts to find a creative use for his overflowing self yielded disastrous, if comical, results. A stint in his school theater program left the other students flecked and shimmering as he sprayed his lines to the audience. The difficulties of portraying characters who did not exude his exact *je ne sais quoi* proved impossible.

His semester spent learning the trumpet in the school band proved equally untenable. After even short passages, his sound would begin to gurgle. He would duck his head beneath the music stand to empty the tubes of the instrument using the water key, only to leave glowing streaks all over the band room carpet.

“Band is about what we can do together,” the director told him after pulling him into his office for a chat. “It requires you to put yourself aside and let your sound become one with the group.”

Alas, Menke’s gurgling trumpet never blended and balanced with the other sounds, and the growing puddles beneath him, though fascinating, proved distracting to the performers and the audience alike.

One day, as she came home from work, his mother found him at the kitchen counter bent over a piece of paper.

“What are you up to?” she asked, not seeing his usual schoolbooks and supplies surrounding him.

“Drawing,” he said.

“Drawing what?” she said as she walked over to him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Self portrait. Something like that.”

She saw that he had been dripping all over the counter, his opalescent essence streaming down his face as he leaned over the paper. She grabbed one of the rags they had stowed all over the apartment just for such purposes.

“I didn’t know you were interested in drawing,” she said.

Menke grunted, not breaking his focus.

She saw him dip his pencil in one of his puddles and spread it on the paper. Intrigued, she looked over his shoulder.

The picture was indeed a self portrait, but not in the traditional sense. There were no eyes or ears. No depiction of his strong chin or the wild hair that he’d had ever since he was a toddler. But what she saw captured the essence of the son she knew and loved so perfectly that tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"Menke," she whispered. "That's beautiful."

"You think?" he said, smiling and holding the picture up.

"I think you've found your voice, Son."

Even his father thawed at the sight of his work. Menke once spotted him on the couch, slowly letting his finger sink into the artwork, a look of pure awe on his face. Despite this, his father reached very different conclusions than his mother had.

"It's nice to be able to express yourself, Menke," he said. "But art isn't a career. Why don't you study finance or medicine?"

Menke wanted only one thing from that day on. To share his vision with everyone he met. To bring them the joy of his creation. To fight to be heard among the crowd.

* * *

"I don't think I can do that like you," I told him at my second art lesson.

"Nonsense," he said. "Everyone's made of this stuff. Just do it like this." Menke pressed into his belly, the substance secreting onto his finger like toothpaste on a toothbrush. "See?"

I lifted my own shirt, embarrassed at the contrast of my pale and flabby midriff to his toned physique, and pressed into my own belly the way he showed me. Of course, nothing came out.

"You're not doing it right," he said, smile remaining. He pressed his finger into me and I felt a surge of warmth and a twinge of desire. He held something up like a child showing off a recently caught ladybug, revealing a small amount of the substance resting on the pad of his index finger.

"See?" Menke beamed. "I told you we were all made of this."

"That could have come out of your finger as easily."

Shaking his head, he grabbed a pallet for me and wiped my paint in one of the waiting divots. "No, this is yours. It's totally different from mine."

Though I couldn't see the difference between his and mine, I decided to stay quiet and let the master show me how to execute such monumental works.

"Just mix it up like this," Menke said, swirling several of his own dabs together on his pallet. "Then, just make something."

"What should I make?" I asked.

He looked over at me, confused. "Whatever you feel like making. I certainly can't tell you what that is."

Menke focused on his own painting while I mixed my small glob on my pallet and lifted my brush to the canvas. Try as I might, I could not get the substance to stick to the canvas. It dripped and collected. My sad attempt to paint a face became a drooping and sick nightmare.

"Tsk, tsk," said Menke as he looked over. "You must feel very badly about whoever that is."

"It's," I started sadly. "It's a self portrait."

Menke looked on me with great sympathy in his eyes. "You must learn to love yourself," he said. "I must show you how to love yourself."

* * *

Menke tried art school. Needless to say, his views on art did not conform to what the professors were trying to teach him.

"I don't know why I'm paying for this," his father told him when he

saw his grades.

"Neither do I," Menke said, frustrated with what the professors had tried to shove down his throat during the preceding months.

"Menke," his father said, "if you want to be an artist, you need to learn about design, history, marketing. If you can't do that, you need to go into a more sensible field."

Menke scoffed. His father pressed harder. Menke became defensive.

By the end of the night, Menke had moved in with a friend and withdrawn from school.

He refused to learn the terms by which a normal artist becomes successful. As always, he wanted to invent his own way through life. It's just the way he was.

* * *

"Look, Menke," I said. "I never really wanted to be an artist. Don't worry that I'm bad at it. It's not a big deal."

"No, no," he said. "Everyone is an artist. Everyone has something important inside of them."

"No, really," I said, brushing my hair out of my eyes. "Don't worry about it. It was fun, really." I smiled at him.

He smiled back. "I haven't given up on you, but you can take a break. Let me finish up and we'll go get some coffee."

"I'd love that."

I wandered around his studio while he painted, looking at the various works collected in the nooks and crannies. A dog. Mountains. None of them took the form of the actual objects, but I could feel what they were. The dog felt like loyalty. The mountains felt like exhilaration. Something about his paintings enraptured me.

I turned to see a newer painting still drying on an easel. I gasped. Something about it seemed familiar and warm, though I couldn't tell exactly what it depicted.

Why not ask him? I thought.

"Menke?" I said, turning around. My foot caught on an imperfection in the concrete floor and I felt myself beginning to fall forward.

Menke spun around just in time to see me disappear inside the painting.

* * *

Menke slept on his fair share of couches in those early days. His mother struggled to locate him as he imposed on everyone he could, stretching their lease agreements to the limit before finding another place to crash.

"Are you okay?" she asked him over a diner breakfast after finally tracking him down.

"Yes, Mom. I've never been more free."

"You need your own place."

Menke shook his head. "Mom, I'm doing fine."

"You need somewhere to put your paintings. Somewhere to make them."

Menke bowed his head. She was right. Getting a toehold in galleries meant he had to have something to sell. Right now, working on his art proved difficult, at best. His endeavors required him to carry his supplies from place to place along with his one change of clothes and his sleeping bag.

Then he got lucky. An older friend of the family took pity on him and offered him their insulated garage as a studio and a place to sleep.

With a few dollars he'd been able to scrape together, Menke bought a space heater and a hot plate. The benefactor allowed Menke to use an old mini-fridge that had been stored in the garage since college and tolerated him coming in the house to use the restroom.

Menke wasted no time putting the opportunity to use. Each night, he worked until he collapsed, spent and, quite literally, drained. By day, he took these works and shopped them to the galleries, calling in favors from friends to transport him from place to place.

Slowly, he worked his way into a gallery or two. Little by little, his work sold.

By the time I met him, he'd been able to rent his studio space, sleeping on a cot in the corner, his hot plate and space heater still in use.

* * *

At first, I felt like I'd fallen into a lake or a river instead of a painting. My eyes and mouth locked shut, trying not to let the substance in. I thrashed and kicked and generally panicked until my heart beat like a jackhammer.

Drowning like this seemed to come straight out of my nightmares. My lungs felt like they would explode. Just before I lost consciousness, my mouth opened and I breathed it in. I breathed Menke in. His essence filled me. It nourished me. My eyes opened to reveal the light and color that surrounded me. Menke stretched in every direction. My heart seemed to fill with it. With him.

As I opened my eyes on the grandeur of Menke's creation, nothing to that point had ever felt so complete. So right. I breathed the thick liquid deeply, letting it nourish my brain. The light. The shade. *This painting is a masterwork*, I thought. *I've never experienced anything so complete.*

I swam one direction, then another, exploring the various structures and forms that made up this world. Time seemed immaterial and

stretched infinitely to the horizon. Everything felt pure and right and good.

Eventually, I looked up towards the source of the light that rained down on this realm. I saw a hand, his hand, reaching down and frantically grabbing and grasping around.

Funny, I thought. Menke seems upset. I wonder why.

Then I saw his head in the opening, his wild hair swimming around his head like the tentacles of a jellyfish, his face clearly distraught.

I tried to ignore him at first. He has no right to try to rescue me. I'm enjoying myself.

But as he shouted and searched the depths for me, his substance washed from his mouth and eyes in panicked streams and began to snake and wind through this world. It leaked the bright colors of panic and dismay and I could not deny that it changed the character and feel of my environment. *Don't ruin your painting*, I wanted to yell.

Reluctantly, I swam up and grabbed his hand. With strength and sureness, he pulled me up and out.

I flopped on the grey concrete floor of his studio.

"Oh my God. Are you okay?" Menke shouted.

My eyes opened and I tried to reassure him that I was fine. Nothing but the gagging sound of liquid being forced out of my lungs came out. Slowly, the substance dripped out of me.

"Talk to me," he said. "Are you okay?"

The substance dripped from his hair and new rivulets of it formed at the corners of his mouth.

He was beautiful.

I grabbed him and kissed him.

* * *

"You can breathe it," I said later, finally able to speak, thrilled that he'd kissed back.

Menke seemed unimpressed. He brooded and sulked.

"You don't understand," I said. "There's more to your work than what you've set down in two dimensions. There's a whole world in there."

"I never knew that what I'd been making was dangerous," he said.

"I wasn't in danger. It was like a beautiful drug."

His mood grew darker. "I never intended to make drugs."

I felt something wet underneath my shirt. "Oh, my God. Look, Menke." I held up my finger to show him the glob of the substance I'd collected.

"That's just leftover," he dismissed.

"I dried off. This is new. This is me."

His mood grew more brooding.

"Oh, that's good," I said. "Twenty minutes ago, you wanted to teach the whole world how to paint like you. You told me that anyone can and should learn how to do it. Now you're upset that I'm leaking it too."

Menke looked over at me, his dark eyes beautiful and sad. "I didn't know that could happen. I'm so sorry."

I hugged him. "Don't be sorry. It was one of the best experiences of my life. Please, tell me. What was that a painting of?"

Menke smiled, clearly relieved. But instead of telling me what kind of painting I'd fallen into, he kissed me.

* * *

Life could not return to normal after that. Every day proved a fight against the thoughts and daydreams, all of which led back to the memories of being inside that painting.

The only thing that could scratch the itch was being around Menke. Looking back, I must have been such a burden on him. I constantly hung around him, showing up at his studio unannounced. He never turned me away. If he'd been more like me, he would have kicked me out in a heartbeat, but he seemed to like having me around.

I sat there like a junkie, watching him paint. At parties, I would joke that he was my dealer. In reality, he was my drug.

Menke shared what he could with me, throwing me scraps of food like I was a hungry dog. And like a dog, I remained faithfully by his side. He never asked me to fetch his slippers, but I would have.

I returned the favor as best I could. I had a car and gave him rides to the galleries. I ran errands for him, did his shopping, took his packages to the post office. All to remain at his side.

I shunned my responsibilities as well as my relationships. I stopped going to work and got evicted from my apartment.

But there I would be, at his feet, in his bed, soaking up that essence, that substance that I craved. When he went out, I would find his little puddles and soak my hands in them. I would rub it in my hair and lick it off my fingers.

It was never enough. I knew I had to go back into the painting. It was the only way.

* * *

"I want to go back in," I told him.

"Again?" Menke said. "I'm tired."

"No," I said, wiping at a thin stream of his substance trickling out of his eye with my finger. "In the painting."

He shook his head. "I don't want you to get lost in there."

"We can use a rope. You'll be right there."

He sat quietly and I worried I'd offended him. Heedless and desperate, I continued.

"I need this, Menke. It's the only thing that makes sense to me anymore. I'll pay you anything."

His brow furrowed. "You have no money. That much is certain."

"I'll get a job."

"You had a job."

"I'll get another one. I'll give you all the money. Please, just let me —"

Menke put his finger to my lips and shushed me. "I've suspected you'd want back in. I'll admit, it's exciting to me that my work has another dimension to it that I never understood. But I need you to promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Promise you'll never go back into that same painting you fell into before."

* * *

Giddy, I picked a small painting of a rabbit for my first adventure. I

figured no harm could come from a fuzzy rabbit. My shoulders couldn't fit through the frame, so he took it off and I slid in, a rope tied around my waist, the other end tied to the radiator.

Only a few seconds later, I tugged on the rope and he pulled me out.

"What's the matter?" Menke asked.

Once I could breathe the air again, I gagged. "That poor animal. Trapped in a cage, sitting in his own shit. How terrible, I thought it was a cute bunny."

"But that's how I felt when I painted him," Menke defended. "I wanted to open his cage and set him free the entire time."

"But from the outside it's just a cute bunny."

"That's the duality of our emotions towards animals. On one hand we want to appreciate their affection and their warmth, but on the other hand, we have to understand that we have fundamentally changed a wild animal and, as a consequence, it can never be free."

"Why would that need to be in your painting?"

"Because it adds to the richness of the animal. It wouldn't be as good a painting without that kind of depth."

I shook my head, at once impressed with his artistry and disappointed.

"How about this one?" I asked, pointing to a different canvas.

"The sunset? I love that one."

Taking this as a vote of confidence, I dangled my feet for a second then pushed off into it like it was a swimming pool.

Seconds later, I tugged the rope and he pulled me out. When I could speak, I began to cry. "That was so sad. Why was that beautiful

painting so sad?" I asked him.

"Sunsets are sad."

"Sunsets are beautiful, not sad."

"Of course they're sad. The bright day is ending. Nothing lies ahead but the dark and foreboding night."

I shook my head at him in disbelief.

We moved through several more paintings, none of which matched my experience with the first one, and all of them were difficult in different ways. The old couple dancing felt like the fleeting impermanence of beauty and happiness. The boat teetered in a vast and unforgiving ocean. Even the bee in the flower felt like a desperate bid for survival and a fight for scarce resources.

By the end of the night I sat sulking, generally making both of us miserable.

"I want to go back into the first painting, Menke."

"No," he said simply.

"Why not?"

"Because it scares me," he said. "Besides, I sold it."

My heart felt crushed. As I lay next to him trying to sleep that night, I started to wonder how I would go about finding that painting.

"I don't even know what it's a painting of," I said.

Menke grunted, already mostly asleep.

* * *

My affliction grew worse with time.

"You're not eating enough," Menke told me.

"It's fine," I said, cleaning a drop of his substance from the corner of his mouth and rubbing it between my fingers, feeling its warmth.

"It's not fine," he said. "I'm making more money now. There's plenty of food. Eat it."

"I'm fine," I insisted, the warmth of his essence filling me from my fingertips out.

"You're not fine. I'm worried about you. Look." He wrapped his entire hand around my bony upper arm and was able to touch his finger to his thumb. "You're wasting away."

Angry, I pulled my arm back. "You know what I need."

"I told you, I sold that painting."

Later at a gallery, as I tried to haul some of his works in for a show, I stumbled at the curb, too weak to lift my legs high enough.

The gallery owner helped me to my feet. "Look, I know a great rehab clinic," he told me.

"I don't need rehab," I spat at him. "I'm not a junkie."

"It can be hard to admit. Menke's worried about you. He cares for you."

"Junkies need drugs," I said, my speech slurring. "I don't have drugs."

Later that week, my parents and brother came to the studio with Menke. They found me in the corner, lying in a cot, rubbing a stray drop of his essence between my fingers.

"Come home with us," my mother pleaded. "Get healthy, get back on your feet."

"I'm fine," I said, my speech garbled. "I have everything I need here."

Menke helped me to my feet and into the car. "It'll be fine," he said. "You just need to get grounded again."

And for a while he was right. For several weeks at home, I truly tried to forget what I'd seen. I ate, I exercised, I began to feel normal again.

Until one night. My parents went to the theater and left me home alone. I missed Menke so much that I took out the small three inch painting he'd given me as a birthday present.

Just a little, I thought. It can't hurt me.

What began as one finger knuckle deep in his substance quickly progressed to rubbing it on my gums and under my eyelids. Anything to make this little bit go as far as possible.

My parents came home to find me incoherent, rolling on the floor. In the morning, when they confronted me about it, I grew angry, shouted, and left.

Menke took me back into his studio. "I missed you," he said.

"Me too."

* * *

The time at home only made my relapse worse. I wiped his messes with rags and tried to breathe it in like vapor. I snuck bits and pieces from his paintings when he wasn't looking. My body deteriorated.

There was only one thing I wanted, though.

"What was that painting of, my love?" I asked.

"Which one?"

"The one I fell into."

Menke again met my question with stony silence.

My desperation growing, I tried looking through his receipts. I broke into his phone and checked his mail to see if any paintings I didn't recognize had been sold.

Nothing.

I called the galleries and asked if they remembered a painting that fit its description.

More nothing.

Then it dawned on me. *He's hiding it from me. That son of a bitch is hiding it from me.*

Frantically, I began to leaf through his stacks of finished paintings. Behind shelves, under the furniture, I searched.

Then I found it. Underneath our cot. His substance had soaked through the mattress and dripped onto the back side of the canvas and dried, obscuring the title.

"My God," I whispered, flipping the painting over, finally seeing it again after so many months. Its beauty exceeded what I remembered.

How come I can't tell what it is? I thought. Every other painting of his, I can tell right away. I can see it and feel it. But this.

I sighed.

This is beautiful.

* * *

Later, Menke told me that he walked in to find the painting on the

floor with the rope dangling in it.

"No," he yelled. "Dear God, No!"

He yanked the rope, but didn't feel the familiar resistance. All that came out was the dangling loop.

* * *

Inside, I found the painting as I'd left it, beautiful and perfect. I'd gone in with the rope and every intention of returning to the world. But once I was in, the purpose of the rope escaped me. When it prevented me from going as deep as I wished to explore the structures and forms around me, I slipped it off my waist.

The warmth of the painting consumed me. The architecture of brilliance surrounded me and drove me to another plane. I'd never been this far or this deep, but there seemed to be no limit or border.

Time didn't slow. It simply became irrelevant, its only purpose to give sequence to my actions which also became unimportant.

I don't know how long it took him to find me. It must have been terrible for him, gagging on his own secretion.

I became aware of his arms around my waist. Somewhere out in that endless abyss of perfection, he pulled me back. I reached out, trying to swim away, but I was rendered weak and helpless, every movement a limp, slow-motion flailing in the thick liquid.

Back on the floor of the studio, the sound rushed back as Menke's essence bubbled and drained out of my ears. Sirens. Menke coughing and gagging.

Hands lifting me. Speeding in the ambulance next to Menke. Tubes and pumps in my stomach and lungs. Menke sitting up, breathing through a mask.

All I wanted was to go back in.

What a beautiful painting, I thought.

Later in the hospital, Menke leaned over my bed and held my hand. I opened my eyes for a moment.

"What was it a painting of?" I asked, my voice a breathy whisper.

Menke squeezed tears and the opalescent substance from his eyes. "You," he croaked. "It was a painting of you I made when I first fell in love with you."

* * *

On our first anniversary, we brought our red Solo cups to a nice restaurant and had the waiter fill them with cheap beer to commemorate the party where we first met. No fine wine could have accompanied our filet mignon better than that cup of Bud Light.

The following morning, he made me sit for a painting. I agreed, giddy with delight.

"You're not going to like this one as much," he said before he turned it around.

"That's probably a good thing, considering," I said.

He was right. I didn't like it as much as the first one. The first painting had been a painting of new love. It felt exciting and shined in its bright hues. That first painting was a magical—even mystical—thing.

This new image was of a love that had steeped and brewed for a year. The bright tones had cooled. The abstract structures had solidified. Its lines had become neater. I sank my hand in and felt warmth. The substance felt firm.

It was good that I didn't want to live in it like I did the first one. It can be deadly at worst and stifling at best to expect a relationship to stay in those initial stages. Infatuation can be thrilling and wonderful,

but there's a reason it doesn't last forever.

Menke looked at me expectantly. "What do you think?"

I kissed him.

This became our tradition. We marked the passage of each year with cheap beer and good food, followed by another painting.

Yes, they grew darker every year as they filled with our experiences. Our joys and accomplishments as well as our disappointments and losses. Inevitably, life becomes filled with such things.

But every year, Menke's lines grew firmer. His forms matured. As our relationship moved from the abstract to the real, so did his paintings.

Every year he asked me if I liked it. Every year, I gave him a kiss.

In his dotage, Menke became ill. In the last painting before his death, the abstract had melted away. The painting seemed to me to be no

different than a photograph. The many lines in my face were realized with an exactitude that only the deepest knowledge of them could have conveyed.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"There's no more abstractions," I said. "It's so austere."

Menke placed the back of his hand on my cheek. "There's nothing left to guess at. It's all been written."

I gazed into his eyes and he closed them tight, the tears flowing in phosphorescent streams, his essence as pure as it had ever been.

"Do you like it?" he croaked, his voice unsteady.

"No," I said. "I can't like it. It's too real. It's too firm and clear."

Menke sobbed. I kissed his cheek, his essence warming my lips.

"But Menke, love is also an inadequate word."

Red Shoes

by Colleen Anderson

It was always the shoes
who but a tender windfall girl
fresh corn in Munchkin, Quadling, Ozian fields
clad in slippers fit for balls, entranced
by winking, silver, tinkling
whispers from older, hidden belles

A prince or handsome stranger
could have offered precious lures
yet discarded misfits snared the searching child
curious about these raggle taggle things
a tin man, lion, man of straw
outcasts trailing after innocence

Dorothy watched a tin can become a man
rusting metal encircling flesh, a machination
of designs, a man of straw lithely torqued
twisted body and mind, unlocked vessels
while a hairy, ferocious lion of a man
chose his freedom and right to hunt

The shoes continued to lead her on
dancing through a field carpeted in dreams
lush poppies brought them opium sleep
heavy visions laden with power
courage, kindness and desire
the unerring virtue of blind trust

Reality she barely grasped
storm-formed visions disturbed her stupor
shifting slumber dragged heavy shapes
that field trodden she awoke feeling broken
as her shoes tainted red
as the blood of decaying flowers

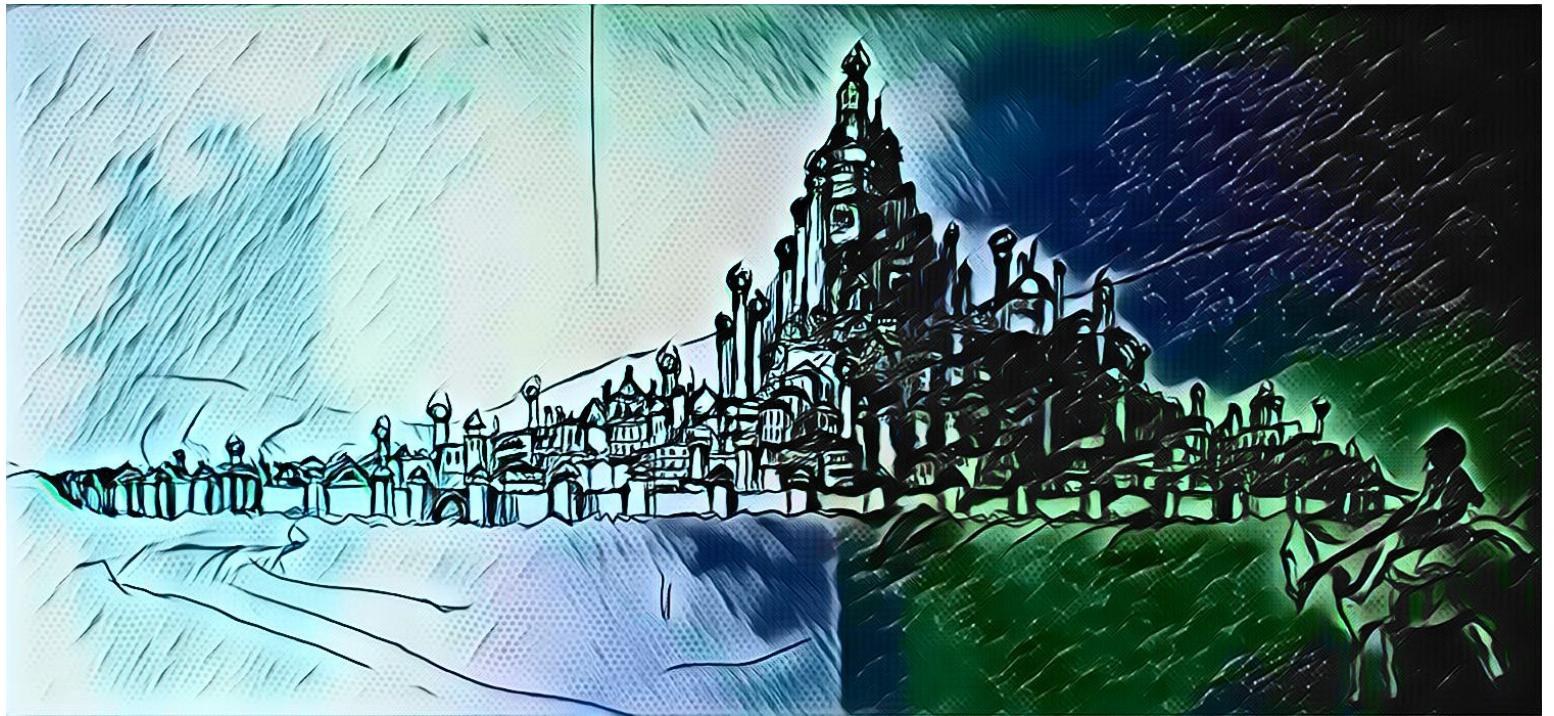
Evidence for detectives
and every knowing witch
that she would never be the same
could not undo forward momentum
that hurled a house onto a witch
propelled her into a madcap world

Each companion had their wish, their wont
except for what she wanted, a way to return
home, guiltless, knowing where to belong
not be owned, or ordered about
somehow mother to weird animations
on endless quests, her reward kept waiting

The shoes propelled her, hiding secrets
of what lay around the next bend
she wanted to choose her path
rather than be hurled down, stumbling on
their belief she would find a way
contradicting her need to be on her own

The slippers had always compelled
binding her to their drive
she never thought to kick them off, run
free from the pressures of breaking trails
and what womanhood meant
until the charlatan granted her request

She clicked her heels to spiral on
carrying memories, strange thoughts
and something growing within
to tap out her new life when she touched down



The College City of Trebay

by Novyl the Mysterious

Apocrypha

by Anatoly Belilovsky

Narcissus lost in his own reflection
drowned in ocean
cut by smashed mirror
dead the death of a billion bytes
stored selfies no one will see.

Labor of Sisyphus, roll the stone to the summit
where Narcissus waits
to express
disappointment.

Hypatia's last thought
as she saw the Library burn
was probably that Prometheus
had not suffered
nearly enough.

The Early-Morning Garden

by Umiyuri Katsuyama

translated by Toshiya Kamei

In hazy mist, Jade dragged her bent figure into the garden and saw a piece of paper among the tiger lilies. With her boney, age-stained fingers, she picked it up. *School Starts*, it read. *On Monday in the Square*, continued on the back. Her village had no school when she was a young girl.

“Oh, it’s today!” She leaped up and began running. A smile flashed across her face as her knees no longer hurt, spots dotting her skin like plum-blossoms.

“Mother, take your medicine,” her son said, but no reply came. When he glanced outside, a snow leopard vanished.

Mnemosyne in Formalin

by Darien Dillon

low wattage bulbs
fog machine suspends
acrid halls, simulacra screams
refuse appearances
adorned skin in shadow
make a bemused expression:
for one's denial
a store bought persona
can't help but ponder
knowledge of unmade choices,
cheap and flimsy masquerades
did you decide I was to become
red: the devil's
warm ooze binding our hands?
a variety of not yet dead
abyssmal unends
tittering in child's spite
hoard ghoulish courage,
demolish the other selves

fluorescent flicker oil stains
rainbow like Rorschach tests
all seen is exhale.
upon my body escape
infected wounds ripe with maggots
I am stuck here
do not tell me pity is
to evoke Pathos.
do I too crave sentiment,
failures to individual automobiles
glutted on slivers of hope?
virulent contagions saturated
gangrenous hearts, weeping
I whimper they are
caught in decrepit dreams
playing pretenders
never to grow fuzzy-fetid.
toss muddied worms on crisp sheets
give the ground a head start

Troupe

by Carl Scharwath



Regret in Blue Sharp

by Arasibo Campeche

Dr. Markson cranked his lantern on, then searched the argillaceous, rocky wall for a smooth patch. The light glimmered against crystalline minerals coating the cavern's stalactites. He became short of breath and bent over, then straightened up slowly, keeping the light on the wall and standing still until his respiration rate returned to normal. Spots appeared in his vision, but he managed to dispel them by blinking rapidly, like the trill of a flute. Fatigue was catching up to him, but luckily, Cassandra's orchestra couldn't be much further into the tunnels.

He found a dry spot on the wall, a few feet before the tunnel forked into two, and drew an arrow pointing to where he'd come from with his chalk.

As a young man, he'd challenge himself to memorize the endless turns of new caverns he surveyed. Unrelenting efforts, natural talent, and a sober mind had led his mentors to label him a student prodigy, a born critical thinker, an exemplary scientist, feeding his ego at a moment in time when he believed that personal happiness and self-identity necessitated professional success. But now Markson was old, and the accumulating grief of the last few decades had stripped away many of his cognitive abilities, like water patiently washing away stubborn stone. He was also old enough to know others wouldn't understand what he needed to do. So, he had come to this cavern alone, searching for the source of the music. Soon he'd be deep enough to hear the melody clearly, and Cassandra would be waiting at the source.

It had taken months to chase the source of the music to this cavern. Months of waking dreams, and puzzling together cryptic melodies, indicated only one outcome. Cassandra was here. It didn't make

sense how he knew this, but it was a certainty. It wasn't necessarily logical that both of his loves, cave systems and Cassandra, had intertwined in one place. Perhaps it was fate.

At first, he'd thought the orchestra was a symptom of his deteriorating mental health, only to later realize that it was a summoning—Cassandra clamoring for his presence. He tried explaining to his friends the voice was unambiguously hers, but they had insisted he see a mental health specialist. Eventually, he gave in and visited a doctor, and took his medication for a whole month but never refilled the prescription. For a time, her voice had stopped—

"I am waiting, my love," Cassandra's voice interrupted his thoughts, re-establishing her existence. She continued speaking, but in a gradual decrescendo until he only heard the susurration of unintelligible whispers. Which words she spoke didn't matter. They were surely a declaration of love.

A squeak like a clarinet with a split reed came from his right, and he decided to follow that path, ignoring the arthritic grind in his knees and ankles as he walked. At the tunnel's threshold, the ground became uneven, and he lowered the lantern to see where his feet landed.

Scattered puddles of water emulsified with organic oils shone with iridescence, creating what looked like a warped rainbow disjointed across the ground. He did his best to avoid slipping on the puddles. No one knew he was here, so if he injured himself, help wouldn't come.

But he only needed Cassandra. She would take him back after seeing how much regret he felt and how hard he was trying to fix his

mistakes, most of which were drowned in alcohol, inaccessible, or simply erased from his mind. His current journey in this cavern was evidence enough of his willingness. Who else would risk their lives in search of a past love? Isn't disregard to personal safety a sign of true commitment?

After getting back together, they could move back to a new city, start a new life. He could show off the few bits of music theory he'd studied and impress her. Maybe later she could re-join an orchestra and he could sit in the front row, heart swollen with pride as she played.

He breathed in the cool air and relaxed. Caverns comforted him like no other place, but they could be deadly without attacking. They instead waited, killing by combining a lack of resources with the victim's negligence, like a murderer with infinite time and patience, depriving their victims of food, water, and light, until their body and mind crumbled, then finally amalgamated with the mineral-rich earth. But he had enough experience to survive. During his career as a geologist, he'd spent long stretches of time studying new, unknown cave systems just like this one, then publishing his findings, moving up the academic ladder until he became head of his own department at the state university. His colleagues had nicknamed him Dr. Maze Hunter, an unoriginal attempt at mockery that didn't bother him. Eventually, he found out that some of his peers—the same that shared jokes and stories during cocktail hour—were preventing him from funding his lab by giving his grant applications poor evaluations. This betrayal angered him to no end, catalyzing drinking that led to violence that led to further drinking.

The sound of air rushing through a hollow object, like blowing into a trumpet with the mouthpiece missing, came from deep in the tunnel. He raised his lantern, but the light stopped several yards in front of him, as if blocked by a solid wall. He held his breath, strained his hearing, but there was only the sound of his colleagues laughing. He ground his teeth to stop himself from swearing back at them. The cackles made him punch the wall beside him, hurting his hand but at least banishing the voices. After a few minutes, he relaxed again, the pain in his hand the only reminder of what was no doubt a

hallucinatory event—Cassandra wouldn't allow his enemies into this place.

The tunnel led to a large cavernous chamber inundated with blue light. Bioluminescent animals glowed overhead, revealing the ceiling's rugged topography. The troglomorphic creatures had four legs and moved like nimble lizards. He'd never seen this species of reptile before. How deep into the cavern was he? He remembered traveling for a couple of days, yet the burlap sack he carried over his back was only half filled with bread and canned meat, so it must've been longer. He'd also re-filled the canteen hanging from his belt with the cavern's natural water sources countless times. Luckily, he'd spent long spans of time in caverns during his career and was able to keep his bearings.

After a few moments of consideration, he nicknamed the creatures blueups, since they were blue and came from above.

He walked deeper into the chamber, and a blue hue washed over his body. The hairs on his arms stood, as if reaching to an unseen source of static electricity. After taking a deep breath under the cool light, his mind quieted for several minutes.

Music started playing—softly, pianissimo—like a soothing lullaby. He spread his arms to take it in, to let the melody solvate into his blood like water-miscible alcohol, but the brasswinds lost the beat, rushing through the music, while the clarinets and flutes slowed down. The percussionists pounded against the snare drums like a drunk marching band. He plugged his index fingers in his ears. His stomach clenched with his staccato breath.

A familiar smell of gardenias and peonies came from his left.

"Do you know why I'm leaving?" Cassandra stood a few yards away, a violin case leaning on her side.

Warm gas ballooned in his throat. He burped and smelled the reek of partially metabolized bourbon despite the fact he'd been completely sober for weeks. The Cassandra in front of him wore the dress she'd

donned in one of the few fights he remembered clearly. Luckily, the black eye he'd accidentally given her had healed. He hadn't meant it, after all, but she had no right to suggest how to improve his career. He was the scientist, not her—no. That didn't sound right. Perhaps the fight had started for another reason.

"I am your wife, not your possession." She sighed. "It doesn't matter anymore. I've met other ... I'm afraid of telling you." Cassandra raised her head, and tears ran down her cheeks.

"I tried. I failed. I'm sorry. Please come back." He took a few steps towards her.

"No! You'll never change." Cassandra slammed the case against the cavern's floor. "I won't waste my life giving you chances." She turned around to leave.

"Wait! I've changed. Please don't leave me again." He rushed to the image, hands outstretched, yearning to hug Cassandra and feel her soft skin. She dissipated before he reached her. The smell of her perfume lingered, and the cavern filled with laughter.

"No No No No No!"

He rushed away from the blueups, running through tunnels and passages until the pain in his knees made him collapse, then realized the amateurish mistake of running directionless in this place. The hot anger in his heart had muted his rational mind. He needed music to avoid a panic attack, but the orchestra had gone silent. He sat upright and clapped at one hundred beats per minute. He'd practiced using a metronome and was confident he got the timing perfect. Every third clap he giggled to cheer himself up, keeping the pace of laughter near a grave tempo.

He eventually stopped clapping and prepared lunch while rationalizing how insensible it was to argue with hallucinations. Clearly, the real Cassandra intended he work a bit harder before finding her and wouldn't just appear and then disappear. Also, the real Cassandra left him without saying a word, bruises still visible.

His temples contracted and twitched, and pain dug into his skull. Despite not having had a single drink, he was experiencing the worst hangover he remembered. He laid on the cold ground. In the distance, he could almost hear her voice, whispering words of encouragement.

* * *

Some of the others already have partners. I know this because I have been nearly chosen several times, caressed by smooth flesh, even twirled on one occasion, yet no one has selected me for a permanent bond. I don't blame them. How hard would it be for me to choose a partner among such a vast selection of candidates? I cannot see or hear them, but I feel the vibrations they transmit, and in that hum, there is only happiness. Look at the eternal grins the partners wear if you don't believe me. Listen to the shrills of their ecstasy.

* * *

The pain in his right knee woke him. He stood from the floor and rubbed his leg, but the pain was deep in his joints, inaccessible to his fingers. He could have brought arthritis medication to relieve his symptoms, but coping with the stiffness and swelling on his own would show Cassandra how much he was willing to sacrifice for her, for them to be together again.

Some of his colleagues at the university regretted their old age, saddened that they wouldn't be able to continue their research. They'd spent their lives claiming they were close to the next great breakthrough. He pitied them.

Cassandra had been right: life was to be enjoyed without the need for outside validation of one's accomplishments.

He remembered when he'd shared with the other faculty that Cassandra was a musician, first violin in the city's orchestra. Most of his colleagues shrugged, unimpressed. He'd nodded and clinked whisky tumblers with them—a habit he'd developed on the job—thinking he, as a scientist, was objectively superior to an artist.

After all, weren't artists simply entertainers of a sort?

"Not everything can be approached with scientific rationality," she'd said often. "Music is part of the irrational human truth."

He had laughed at her back then, but things changed. Even now he didn't know what she'd meant, but hints were starting to resonate within him.

A decade after she left, his scientific career was dead. One of his colleagues in a similar situation had found solace only in suicide. But Dr. Markson had found peace in art, partly because of the happy memories shared with Cassandra. Art was a form of beauty, a way to share one's most raw emotions. If science observed the physical world as it was, art created new things that need not exist, but that made life richer.

The orchestra played in the distance. He closed his eyes and tried to pick out the saxophone—his favorite instrument—but the sound was missing. Then, there was silence. Cassandra had told him the saxophone was not commonly played in orchestra, but she'd surely include one for him in the cavern's orchestra as a reward for trekking this long journey.

He bent his right knee several times, while leaning against the wall to avoid resting his entire weight on his left leg. Moving around helped with the arthritis. He continued, following the sound of running water, until he reached an underground river. Water dripped from the darkness above him. A naturally made stone bridge crossed over the river. The bridge's rocky surface helped his boots maintain purchase while he crossed. He heard the blare of a horn over what sounded like a person humming. His heart raced, as if telling him that he should be nervous and anxious, terrified even, yet he felt at ease, as if his body and mind were out of sync and couldn't agree on what to feel. When he reached the other side, he sat on the edge of the water with legs outstretched and refilled his canteen, then drank heavily until his heartbeat returned to a normal pace. He walked a few steps away from the water, pondered on the turns he'd taken after the panicked episode in the blueup's chamber, and drew an

arrow on the floor.

* * *

Time cannot be measured here, only progress. I've learned how to move without damaging myself. My body remains untarnished. Our bodies will fuse together into one being, perfect in every way. Perhaps the end will finally come.

* * *

His food supply had run out long ago, and he decided to risk his health by eating the blueups. The gelatinous fluid inside their bellies tasted acidic and reminded him of times he'd vomited after drinking too much, yet they served to keep the hunger away. His beard had become long enough to catch some of the half-chewed morsels when they wriggled out of his mouth. The hand crank on his lantern had broken off, and he'd filled the alembic-shaped glass chimney with the blueups, which in addition to lighting his way also gave him a perfect place to store his food.

His mind was getting better. The hallucinations only began when he thought about them.

"I'm not thinking of you," he said. "I made mistakes, but I've repented. The silence here is beautiful."

He sang snippets of his favorite songs to distract himself. Vocalizing Frank Sinatra's "My Way" eventually calmed him. It had been some time since he'd heard his own voice. His intonation was better than he remembered. Why hadn't it ever occurred to him that he could be a singer?

* * *

He is close. The air vibrates with excitement. Is he calling out to me? I'll tap my neck against the hollow wooden floor until we're together.

It is true this is a trap. It is also providence.

* * *

Dr. Markson's beard stretched down to his waist like wet, gray tendrils. The tunnel continued to spiral down around him. The supply of blueups was endless. They provided a hint of accomplishment if he ate enough, like quitting a night of drinking after only three beers. He'd accepted this place as his new home, his chalk crushed and abandoned on some anonymous rock. The hallucinations no longer bedeviled him.

He grabbed a handful of blueups and chewed on them several dozen times, until the noodle-like creatures became a viscous mush in his mouth. If he swallowed them whole, they gnawed at his throat and stomach, peppering his stomach lining with bloody ulcers, a fact he only knew because of the blood he'd coughed up. Indeed, swallowing them like jello shots had not been a good idea.

The ground became crystal white and sloped down. He immediately recognized the salt as potassium sodium tartrate, a piezoelectric material that when deformed by mechanical stress produced electrical charge, his favorite organic salt.

"What a coincidence," he said and clapped his hands with joy – this time at 120 beats per minute, a consistent allegretto.

He made his way down the salt slope, resting his palm against the wall to keep his balance. The ground beneath his feet vibrated with every step, and the hairs on his nape stood. The rapping sound he'd been following for months, or perhaps even years, became a single word inside his mind.

Love. Love. Love.

Uncontrollable lust goaded him down the slope. Part of his mind screamed that he was being lured into oblivion, like an insect voluntarily treading to the heart of a spider's web, hopelessly seduced, unable to turn and flee.

He continued walking, turned left. A red curtain hung at the end of his path. Tartrate salt coated the folds like powdered sugar on a pastry. When he touched the curtain, electricity crackled up from the ground to the ceiling. Slowly, the curtain moved to the side, revealing a wooden stage covered with rows of metal chairs. In each chair sat an immobile skeleton holding a musical instrument. Farthest from him, the skeleton conductor stood, its left hand over its head, clutching the baton. Beyond the conductor were rows of red plush chairs filling a massive theater.

His hand trembled as he ran his fingers over the clavicle of the skeleton manning a timpani, streaking white powder off the bones.

Lying on the floor, behind the skeletons holding flutes up to their lipless mouths, a saxophone bumped its neck against the floor repeatedly at 60 beats per minute, like a clock. He waited until the instrument stopped moving, but it continued, swaying and tapping against the floor in perpetual motion, unaware that this mere action violated the first law of thermodynamics. Here, in this place that ignored the constraints of known physics, he'd found the orchestra. Cassandra had to be close.

He walked over, careful to not disturb the immobile musicians, and picked up the saxophone. After touching the cool metal, a voice spoke in his mind. "I loved you, but you failed me."

His voice trembled. "Cassandra?"

The saxophone continued. "I'm so tired of the rotations and the cycles of violence. Periodicity governing over delicious chaos."

He held his breath, expecting yet another hallucination to pass and Cassandra to appear from the darkness and hold him in her arms.

"I am real. Stop thinking and feel me. I am sad for you. I'm sick of talking to you after you've lost your mind. Every time, the same thing." Cassandra sighed. "You can't apologize for a life of mistakes, but don't worry. This is the last iteration. The end of the end of everything."

The only seat unoccupied by a skeleton was the one in front of the saxophone. What felt like cold fingers grabbed the back of his head, while another force, accompanied by the sound of someone blowing out a candle, shut his eyes and brought the instrument up to his face. The mouthpiece felt natural in his mouth, the reed rough against his tongue. He blew without wanting to, and the saxophone told him that sound was called G, and that he was perfectly tuned.

He straightened his spine. The arthritic pain in his lower back felt like he'd been stabbed with a red-hot chimney rod. His hands released the saxophone, but it floated in place, forcing him to blow again. This time the orchestra tuned with him.

He opened his eyes and saw that every skeleton had been replaced with a replica of himself. The flute players were the youngest, while the percussionists in the back were the oldest. The haircuts, weight, and general facial features varied, but they were all him, a Markson orchestra. Fear made his face twitch, his legs tremble, he needed to urinate, but the saxophone forced him still.

An orchestra of failure, Cassandra's voice told him.

Instead of a skeleton, Cassandra—not the one he'd loved, but a nearly identical twin—now conducted the orchestra. Her gaze locked with his, and he winced like an injured animal. He wished he had his medicine, a vanishingly small organic molecule capable of hushing the music and stopping the visions, leaving real peace behind, but taking a pill wouldn't help. His surroundings felt too real to be hallucinations.

Beside his own reflection on the saxophone's polished bell, Cassandra stared back. He looked around. On every instrument he could see, her face smiled at the other versions of him.

Was he looking at previous versions of himself? Was his society another in a line of infinite repetitions? Had human history replayed itself; forced onto a deterministic cycle of being born, growing old, and dying?

In front of him lay a phenomenon unknown to science. A collection of questions that if published would lead to a long string of high-tier publications and abundant grant money, a clear direction for his research career during his next life.

But her voice had been clear. There was no next time.

He needed to escape. He needed to find happiness. Still holding the saxophone, he'd turned to the curtains when the sound of cracking glass came from above him. A diamond shaped salt formation protruded from the ceiling. A blue, viscous liquid sloshed within, writhing unto itself like semi-solid hydrophobic tubes. The diamond cracked again, and fist-sized salt crystals fell around him.

He tried to run, but the saxophone ordered him to stop. The pain in his joints flared, and against his will, he stopped moving. The crystallized salt shattered. A giant mass of blueups cascaded down and piled on the floor. A blue wave of electricity hit his right side just below the ribcage, shocking his liver, and after a few moments of intolerable pain, he smelled burning flesh; his heart beating past prestissimo.

"It is a bad thing to die in pain and confusion," Cassandra said.

Cassandra's voice came in bellows, a projection that resonated in all of reality. He had nearly grasped the meaning of her words when a flurry of images showed him the abominable deeds he'd done while intoxicated and had later forgotten—violence in drunk stupors with hints of a sense of superiority, self-exculpation ... pleasure. He knew what he was: an unimportant, small man that didn't deserve forgiveness, whose own name disintegrated into the air like burning ash. The anonymous man took a deep breath, welcoming the electrifying pain. Then darkness extinguished his thoughts.

* * *

We are finally complete. The mistress stands straight, clicking her stick against the music stand and signaling us to start playing. Even

if you're sane, the braces imprisoning your mind will fall apart, elevating your senses.

Don't fret if you hear our music calling. The pain will be short.

All cycles have been completed. If you hurry, you'll catch my solo. It

will make your hearts burst with love. My husbands will play while you soak in the blood and sweat of your efforts, the last orgy of men.

When the last note is played, and the last instrument crumbles to dust, we'll fall from this plane, plummeting through unknown dimensions, regrets intact and inerasable.

The Hit

by Gerri Leen

Sunlight streams between slatted blinds
Squinting, she waits for the sun to surrender the day
To darkness, the moon, the stars
And magic, which waits for her
Just out of reach in this golden light
Taunting her: the slightest odor, a flash of silver in
The oranges
And golds
And greens
Of the daylit world

Finally, she feels it
Nighttime coming
The moon risen hours ago but now fully alight
Stars glitter as an inky sky welcomes her
She closes her eyes, opens her soul
Something she's relatively sure she's
Ceded the deed to with this exchange
Some would call it unholy
She just knows it feels
So
Damn
Good

Magic hits hard, the way
She imagines heroin must do
The first initial flush
And then the floating
No disorientation but a sense of distance
Pain pushed so far away she can finally reach
Her power, pulsating
Ready to work her will

Only it feels so good
She can't move
Can't think
Can't remember

The petty slights she wanted
Vengeance for, the promotion she
Was going to do a spell to secure
What was her goal?
What does she need to do?
Other than lie here
Power pulsating
Fogging her brain
Everything
Feels
Great

She closes her eyes
The stars sing her to sleep
And she wakes with the
Golden light
Angry and remembering again
All the things she hates
That she can change if she
Could just get to her power
The magic that eludes her
Once more in the light of day
She waits for nightfall
Riding the emptiness
Counting the hours
Until she gets
Her next fix



by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

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

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

I won't really win the Nobel Price in Grayscale Toning with this page, but then again, who does these days...

That holopad is a favourite for the Ugliest Design Of The Year award, though...





PART ONE: END
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

Jemma likes to use her nanotech clothes once in a while, just for the rush of instant change. She has normal clothes as well, though. Really, the only thing you need is a set of nanotech clothes to cover your needs (and your body), but it can be expensive quickly... The clothes themselves are quite expensive, and color and style changes cost money. It works via a download service, where you choose clothing style according to your set of clothes, a script is downloaded, and the nanobots restyle the clothes accordingly. The cost is deducted from your online bill.

They can change fibre setup, direction and density, color, softness and shape. Ordinary Smartcloth (most clothes have Smartsystems) has - other than what Jemma has already shown, like communication and warning systems - features like health control (with automatic hospital alert), ability to change cloth density after warm or cold weather (or rain) and programmable reflective/light patterns. Gehenna mostly uses normal clothes, as she don't like the feel (and price) of Nanocloth.

Or maybe it's all just based on old-fashioned "Transforming Girl" tech ;)





This is a double page, sorry for the big one if you're on
modem..

NOTES

The pic is a combination of a 3d environment, drawings
and photos.

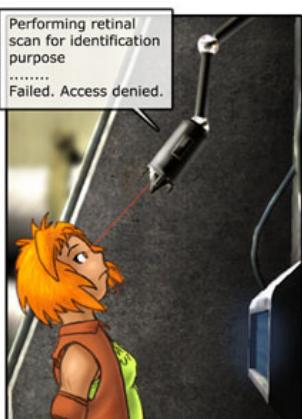
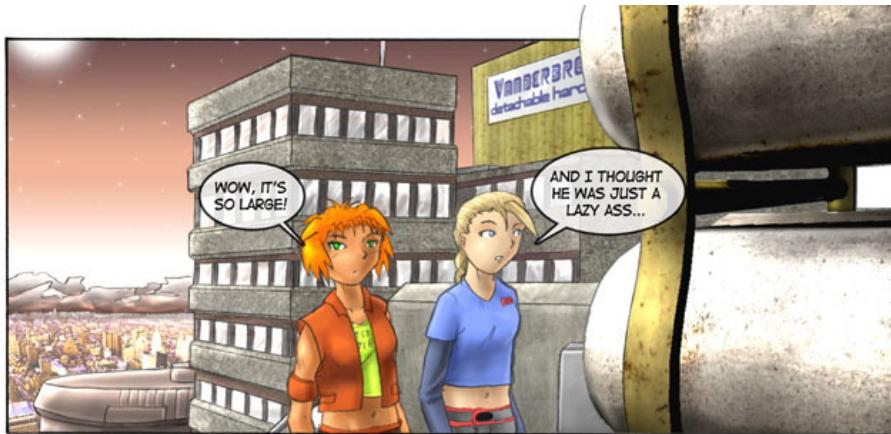
NOTES

If you do not realize how much work there is on a color page like this, please take a moment to ponder this.

I'll try to make a few more, as I have much of the backgrounds and suchlike prepared already...

The warehouse is situated on the top of a large hill in about the middle of the city.

The sky in the first frame looks strange, because the artificial atmosphere over Mars does not reflect the sunlight the same way as the Earth's atmosphere. It's constructed to keep the oxygen levels intact at ground level, but it's very thin higher up, thus you can see the stars even at day.



NOTES

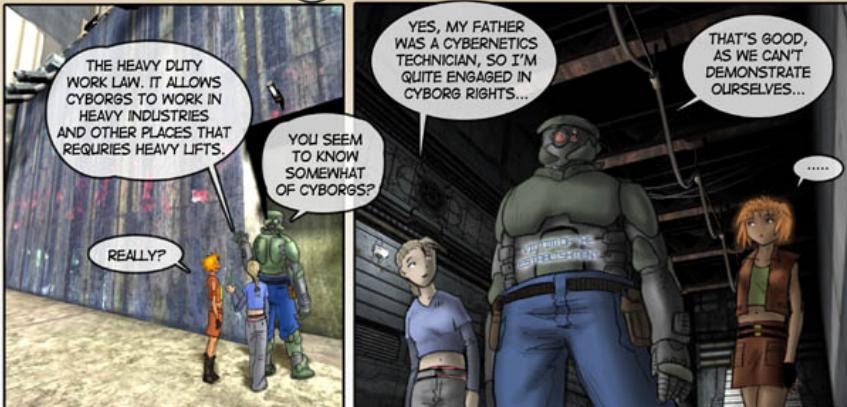
Working pants are blue. Period.

For more information about the "Hecatonchires" term, and more cool cyborgs, check out Masamune Shirow's "Appleseed", and see where I stole it all from ;)



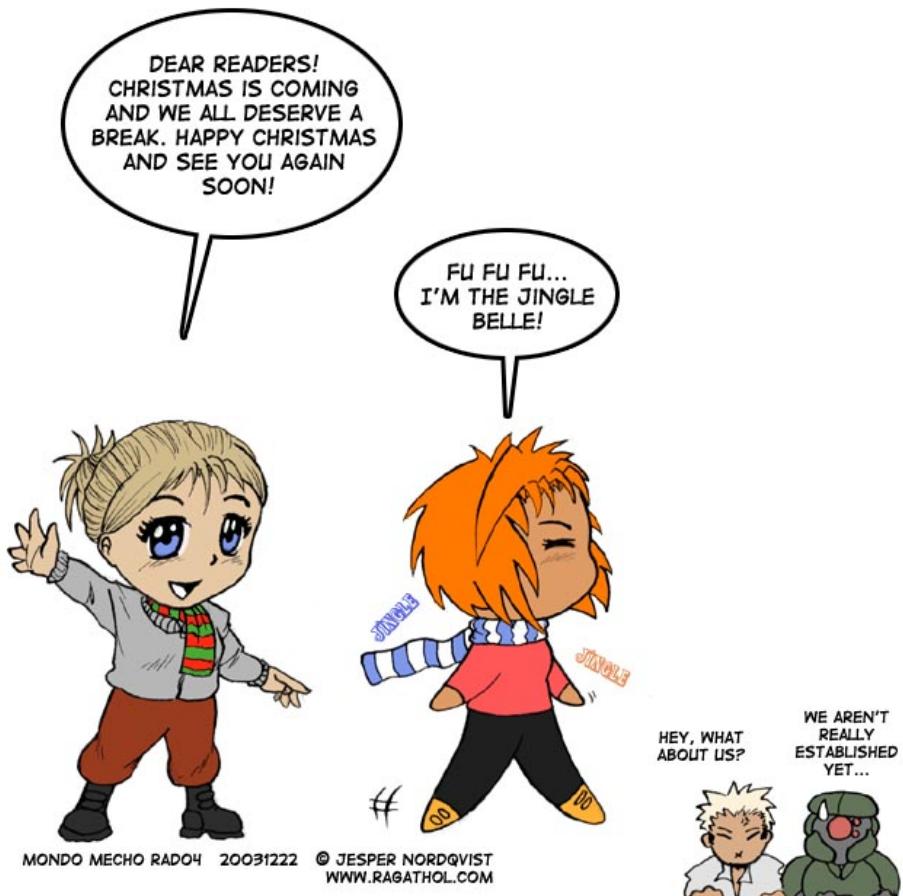
NOTES

Big creds to Epic Games for creating the tools needed for these color pages, this is the last one, Lucy The Chicken bless us all...





RANDOM ART DAY 04



NOTES

(From the Managing Editor:
Well, this is a bit mistimed lol.
Happy Holidays anyway! You
can decide whether to apply
that retroactively or in the
future ...)



Contributor's Bios



FRANCO AMATI is a speculative fiction writer from New York. His educational background is in cognitive science. His fiction has appeared in *The Colored Lens*, *Northern Speculative*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and other places. You can find more of his work at francoamatiwrites.com

* * *



COLLEEN ANDERSON has a BFA in writing, is a three-time Aurora Award finalist and was longlisted for the Stoker Award. She has performed her work in the US, UK and Canada. Colleen also co-edited *Playground of Lost Toys* (Aurora nominated) and *Tesseracts 17*, and a solo anthology *Alice Unbound: Beyond Wonderland*. Her short fiction collection, *A Body of Work*, Black Shuck Books, UK, is available online. A Canada Council and BC Arts Council recipient, her work has been published in such places as *nEvermore!*, *Beauty of Death*, *Polu Texni*, *The Future Fire* and *Cemetery Dance*. Living in Vancouver, Colleen keeps an eye out for mold monsters and mermaids. www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com

* * *



ANATOLY BELIOVSKY was born in a city that went through six or seven owners in the last century, all of whom used it to do a lot more than drive to church on Sundays; he is old enough to remember tanks rolling through it on their way to Czechoslovakia in 1968. After being traded to the US for a shipload of grain and a defector to be named later, he learned English from *Star Trek* reruns, apparently well enough to be admitted into SFWA in spite of chronic cat deficiency. He has sold original and translated stories and poems to *NATURE*, *F&SF*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and other markets.

* * *

DAVID BUSBOOM is the author of more than a dozen short stories, most recently "Ahead of Dragons" in *Planet Scumm* #9. His debut novella, *Nightbird*, was published by Unnerving Books in 2018. His other fiction has appeared in such venues as *Shock Totem*, the *Norwegian American*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He currently edits a pair of scientific journals and lives in Central Illinois.

* * *



other venues.

ARASIBO CAMPECHE is originally from Puerto Rico and has a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Biophysics. He writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror that's often inspired by scientific principles. His work has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Weirdbook* #41, *Helios Quarterly Magazine*, and in



Shy and nocturnal, **JENNIFER CROW** has rarely been photographed in the wild, but it's rumored that she lives near a waterfall in western New York. You can find her poetry on several websites and in various print magazines including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Liminality* and *Kaleidotrope*. She's always happy to connect with readers on her Facebook author page or on twitter @writerjencrow.

* * *



DARIEN DILLON is a poet and Bryn Mawr College graduate with a BA in English living in Philadelphia. She often finds herself staying up

too late reading horror stories, which probably explains the bizarre dreams she uses to fuel her works. Darien's macabre poetry is featured in *The Scribe Magazine* February and May 2020 issues as well as *The Literary Hatchet* issue #25.

* * *

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

* * *



UMIYURI KATSUYAMA is a multiple-award-winning writer of fantasy and horror, often based on Asian folklore motifs. A native of Iwate in the far north of Japan, she later moved to Tokyo and studied at Seisen University. In 2011, she won the Japan Fantasy Novel Award with her novel *Sazanami no kuni*. Her most recent novel, *Chuushi, ayashii nabe to tabi wo suru*, was published in 2018. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous horror anthologies in Japan.

* * *



N. C. KRUEGER is an author/artist from the Twin Cities whose work has been published or is forthcoming in *Better Than Starbucks*, *Prehistoric Magazine*, *Alexandria Quarterly*, and *Flashes of Brilliance*. She derives joy from freezing temperatures, black metal, dinosaurs, and earthworms. She can be found on YouTube as Anonymous Witness.

* * *



GERRI LEEN lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. In addition to being an avid reader, she's passionate about horse racing, tea, ASMR vids, and creating weird one-pan meals. She

has work appearing in *Nature*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Deep Magic*, *Escape Pod*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Cast of Wonders*, and others. She's edited several anthologies for independent presses, is finishing some longer projects, and is a member of SFWA and HWA. See more at gerrileen.com.

* * *

JOSIE LEVIN is a visual artist and writer. She splits her time between Indianapolis and Chicago, reads large volumes of books and occasionally writes her own. She has been published in several publications, including *The Wayne Literary Review*, *The 2River View*, and *Witness Magazine*.

* * *



AVRA MARGARITI is a queer Social Work undergrad from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, and other venues. You can find her on twitter @avramargariti.

* * *

More of **T. MOTLEY**'s comics are at tmotley.com

* * *

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

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NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username @lyv0n.

* * *

More about CALLUM PEARCE can be found at
Callumpearcestoryteller.com

* * *



Hailing from California, **BOB RITCHIE** now lives on the lovely island of Puerto Rico, where he discovered, among other things, that wet heat is better than dry. He has a fantastic wife and as many as five kids, depending on the configuration of the day. He does some editing, yeah, some teaching, sure, some translating, claro. Ritchie (as his wife calls him) is a musician who is fortunate enough to have collaborated with Jon Anderson, a particular favorite of his. Bob (as he calls himself) is also a writer of stories. He has written several things that he believes are good. His work has appeared in *Unlikely 2.0*, *Small Print Magazine*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and other forums; two of his stories were nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Neither won. Oh well.

* * *



ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *



LENORE SAGASKIE is a fantasy and horror writer from Canada living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. The first two books in her fantasy series: *The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox* and *The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice*, are currently available on Amazon. Her horror/comedy film, *Out of the Grave*, is in post-production indefinitely. Lenore is writing the third book in The Four Sworn series, and her next short film, *Rage*, is currently in pre-production. Her first feature length film, *Be Wild*, is in pre-production. You can find Lenore lurking on Twitter and Instagram as @lenorewrites, and on Facebook as herself.

* * *

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

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CORY SWANSON lives in Northern Colorado with his wife, two daughters, and his old blind dog named Kirby. When he's not teaching tweens how to play band and orchestra instruments, he can be seen camping with his family in his tiny trailer or traveling to strange worlds in his head in order to write about them. If the weather is decent, you might catch him riding his bike or running because he is afraid of death, and he's heard exercise helps with that.

If you would like to witness a nearly middle aged man attempt to navigate the perils of social media, you can find Cory on Facebook under the handle @speculativemeculative, or at his website, coryswansonauthor.wordpress.com



Lover of wine, women and song, you can find TOEKEN's art at: <https://atoekeneffort.weebly.com/>

* * *

GRACE WAGNER is a queer, nonbinary writer living with a disability in Houston where they teach at the University of Houston. They have attended the New York Summer Writers Institute and work as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*. Their work has been featured in *Salmagundi Magazine*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The Offing*, and is upcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*.



Inspiration Creation

(full image)

by Novyl the Mysterious