

LEGION

speculative fiction mag



All Prose and Art Issue!

## Of Medicine and Mer

Several tales of perfectly  
normal goings-on in  
hospital and ocean

featuring

- Avra Margariti • Gordon Sun •
- A.P. Sessler • Dean Schreck •
- Joshua Orr • Desmond Rhae •
- Chrissie Rohrman • Jay Caselberg •
- Nicola Brayan • John C. Mannone •
- Glenn Dungan • R. Mac Jones •
- Jennifer Crow • Claire McNerney •
- Shikhar Dixit • JD Hurley •
- Maureen O'Leary • Denny E.
- Marshall • Sonny Zae • Sara Backer
- Marc Phillips • Carl Scharwath •
- Alicia Hilton • Christina Sng

*Penumbria* is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2023 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

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

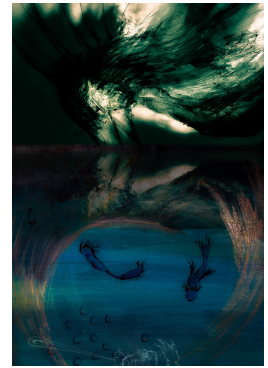


# Table of contents

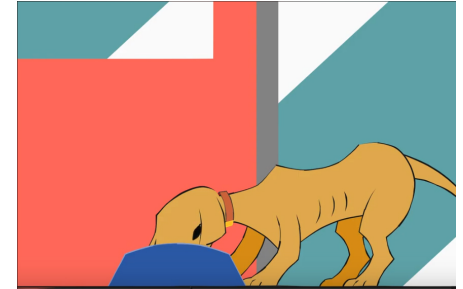
from the editor

## fiction & poetry

- by Joshua Orr  
by Chrissie Rohrman  
by Gordon Sun  
by Dean Schreck  
by Jay Caselberg  
by Jennifer Crow  
by Glenn Dungan  
by John C. Mannone  
by Sara Backer  
by Claire McNerney  
by JD Hurley  
by Marc Phillips  
by Maureen O'Leary  
by Sonny Zae  
by Alicia Hilton  
by Avra Margariti
- Flight of the Birdmen  
Someone to Sing To  
Three Months  
The Portrait  
Radio Sounds  
Trickster Juice  
Pickled Lotus  
The Mirror  
Potential  
ferried away  
Small Claims  
Do Not Flee  
Always a Fire Somewhere  
The Ultimate Dying Machine  
Devoured  
Neither Touch Nor Tarnish



*Dive Little Creatures*



*A Full Bowl*

## art & g. narrative

- by Shikhar Dixit  
by Carl Scharwath  
by R. Mac Jones  
by Nicola Brayan  
by Denny E. Marshall  
by A.P. Sessler  
by Desmond Rhae  
by Christina Sng
- Boardwalk Haunting  
Cosmic Energy  
Dive Little Creatures  
Raindrops  
SteamPunk Robot  
A Full Bowl (*animated*)  
Radioaspiration  
Moments in Space

contributor's

bios

cover: The Treatment  
by Tabitha Marsh





# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

This issue opens with me explaining both to myself and others why we're doing two all prose and art issues in a row. It's supposed to be a once-a-year thing, yet here we are—no interview, no article.

One reason for this, albeit the lesser one, is that we've had many good submissions—I mean, really good—that I've gone a bit off my head and accepted so many I'm in danger of going over the one and a half year maximum between acceptance and publication (honestly I'd prefer we were closer to a max one year, but I'm definitely not going over that one and a half years), so being able to publish a few extra pieces in an issue helps. (Don't even ask why this is the maximum number of pieces per issue ... there are in fact reasons, kind of having to do with time and space but not in any esoteric way, just having to do with the total total number of constraints.)

The larger reason has been a host of ... difficulties ... that have ramped up even as the pandemic has become more ... er ... manageable (from an anxiety perspective ... from an actual "it's still there" perspective, well, it's still there), or at least we're managing to deal with society's expectations of us a bit better. I realize saying "difficulties" or "other issues" sounds vague and ominous, but I don't want to go into details on these other issues (some are family/other people related, and privacy is important). Suffice to say, each has become its own anxiety and time sink, and what with everything I've been unable to find the energy to do interviews or write/research articles. I think there must be an equation somewhere for this ... work done equals time x energy, or equals time<sup>energy</sup>, or some such. Plus there has also been actual paid work that had to be done. Regardless, things are looking/feeling more manageable now (not that I want to tempt fate by saying that), and you can expect a return to my self-created "normal" with the April issue.

Well, that meandered ...

In this issue we seem to have a dual theme—one of hospitals and one of water, of medicine and la mer. I won't try to tie these together, except in many cases there is blood regardless. And of course there are some works that don't fit readily into either theme—they just all seem to fit together nicely in the issue.

Finally, I'd like to congratulate a couple of award nominee's/winners from the pages of *Penumbria*. Jamal Hodge, who we interviewed in our December 2k21 issue and whose amazing work has been published in many issues in the past, won second place in the 2022 Dwarf Stars awards for his poem "Colony" (from that same Dec 2k21 issue). And Douglas Gwilym's "Poppy's Poppy," published in the April 2k22 *Penumbria*, is on the preliminary ballot for the Bram Stoker Award in short fiction. So cool!

By the way, please do let me know of any awards y'all might have been winning, whether or not it's for work in *Penumbria*. I am always happy to help promote the authors and artists we've published. Whatever I can do to help ...

Have a lovely winter into spring, and I'll see you in April!

Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbria*





# Flight of the Birdmen

by Joshua Orr

When she was young she asked her mom why bad things happen to people.

“Sometimes it’s because they did something wrong,” her mom had replied, “And sometimes it’s to make way for better things.” It was one of those defining moments people occasionally experience, something that imprinted itself on Corey’s mind so that now, after the accident and the surgeries and the days of drug-induced slumber, waking bleary-eyed and supine in a hospital bed, she recalled her mother’s words and wondered what wrong she’d committed to forever lose the use of her legs, for surely no good could ever eclipse this horror.

She was a pretty girl, though she did not think herself beautiful, with green eyes, a pale complexion, and dirty blond hair typically tied back in a ponytail. She preferred sports to fashion, and while boys hadn’t exactly escaped her eye, she’d had no boyfriends yet. She *had* been asked to the fall dance, but of course she’d missed that.

In the long, lonesome hours in the recovery ward she felt trapped and useless. It was difficult to straighten the covers over her motionless legs, painful to adjust her position, too much effort to reach the light. If the television remote fell out of reach, she couldn’t retrieve it. For the rest of her life she would associate infomercials with helplessness.

She was on the cusp of sleep when she heard her door open. Eyes closed, she listened as someone was wheeled in and moved to the neighboring bed. Corey likely would have drifted off entirely if something strange hadn’t happened. Almost like the heat of a lamp she felt the other patient’s gaze on her and, though her eyes were firmly closed, an image of her companion materialized in her mind: a boy, black, approximately her age—maybe as old as fifteen—with

short hair and a good-humored smirk. And from the looks of it, he had no use of his limbs below the neck.

When she opened her eyes she let out a startled breath because the vision had been so accurate. Somehow she’d seen him with her mind instead of her eyes. She considered whether she should ask the nurse to adjust her medication.

“They’ll just think you’re crazy,” the boy said slyly.

A shiver ran down Corey’s spine that stalled out at her waist. The boy closed his eyes and fell instantly asleep. She watched him for a long time, trying to understand what exactly had just happened.

*Thomas. His name is Thomas.*

He was gone the next morning, as if he’d never been there.

\* \* \*

On day one of physical therapy she told anyone and everyone that of course she would walk again. By day three, her spirit had broken. It was on a particularly miserable day that she saw Thomas again. As before, she was nodding off to sleep when she heard her door bump open. She barely took notice at first, but when she heard the wheelchair she opened her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her tone less polite than it could have been.

“I was bored. No one comes to see me.”

“*Too many* people come to see me,” Corey responded, secretly wishing that were still true.

“I can leave if you want.”

“No, don’t!”

He grinned and she realized he’d called her bluff.

“So you get a lot of visitors?” he prodded.

“Well, not so much anymore.” She rolled clumsily onto her side and propped her head in her hand. “My parents were here all the time at first, but they had to go back to work. They still come to see me for a couple hours every day.”

“They sound nice.”

Her mouth twisted. “I think mom’s more concerned about having to move the furniture around for my wheelchair.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe not.”

Her parents definitely loved her, but they were fussy about change and Corey felt like an annoyance to them.

“Honestly, all I can think about is that I can’t play basketball anymore.”

She immediately realized how shallow she must seem, but Thomas just laughed.

“I never did get the hang of basketball. I had an accident when I was six, haven’t been able to move since.”

“I’m sorry,” she responded quietly. She felt like the universe had

plopped this kid before her as if to say: *See? Be thankful. It could have been a lot worse.*

“Everyone’s got their problems. You know what I would do if I could?”

She shook her head.

“There are these guys who jump into canyons and out of planes and stuff. They don’t use parachutes or anything, just these wingsuits that make them look kind of like flying squirrels. They call themselves birdmen.” As he talked he seemed to draw nearer. Indeed, Corey was certain the nurse had left his wheelchair against the wall.

“Birdmen,” she repeated, coming out of her thoughts.

“Yep. That’s what I would do. Can you imagine what it would feel like to fly above everything?”

“It sounds wonderful.”

\* \* \*

The next time she saw Thomas he looked ill. His skin had lost its luster and his eyes were yellowed and weary.

“Are you okay?” she asked, wishing she could go to him.

His response was trance-like. “You want to see something special?”

She nodded, desperate to see his crooked, roguish smile.

“Later,” he mumbled and his eyes fell closed.

“Thomas?” she asked sharply. She reached for him but he was too far away. “Thomas?”

Still no response.



“I’m calling a nurse.” She fumbled for the call button and then felt his gaze on her, hot and forceful. He treated her to the smile she liked.

“Corey,” he admonished. “They don’t even know I’m here.”

Then he fell asleep right in his chair, leaving Corey to wonder about his statement until eventually she, too, fell deeply asleep. She dreamed of spring, of track, of running sprints so hard her shins hurt, the loud clap of shoes on pavement, the burn of her lungs as she cleared endless hurdles.

She awoke to the gentle clatter of a woman setting down a dinner tray. Thomas was still sleeping in the corner, though he was now cloaked in evening shadow, nearly invisible. The worker seemed to wholly ignore him.

*They don't even know I'm here ...*

Corey had a little plastic basketball her dad had given her. It went to a hoop hung on the back of her door. She didn’t shoot it much because she had no way to retrieve it when she was alone. Remembering Thomas’s words, Corey dropped the basketball so it made a light thwap on the ground and rolled under his wheelchair. The worker, who was almost out the door, glanced back, saw what had happened, and with a sympathetic smile went to retrieve the lost ball. Corey watched as she stooped and fished it out from beneath the wheelchair. It was all very shocking, for there was some hint in her mannerism, some clue in the way she carelessly used the wheelchair for support, that indicated she was entirely indifferent to Thomas’s presence. She treated him like a piece of furniture that was in her way, as if she truly couldn’t see him.

*It's my imagination, Corey thought. Of course she sees him. He's not invisible.*

The woman handed Corey the ball. “You should put a string on this,” she suggested with a smile, then left.

Corey gripped the ball and stared at Thomas. In the shadows as he was, she couldn’t really make out details. If not for the metal rims of his wheels catching the light she might have been able to convince herself there was no one there at all.

“Told ya,” he groaned suddenly, and she felt a chill.

Now she could see the whites of his eyes, visible through narrow slits.

“I don’t want to scare you,” he said, his voice cracked and forced. The gleam on his wheels intensified as they rotated and the chair edged closer to Corey’s bed. Corey withdrew and the wheels stopped.

“It’s just me,” he assured her. “Do you still want to see something special?”

She couldn’t speak or move. After a moment he closed his eyes. Nothing happened.

“Thomas?”

Suddenly Thomas’s head jerked upright. Corey squealed. His thin chest snapped forward. His shoulders followed. Then his hips rose from the chair and, in one motion, he was standing. But something was horribly wrong. His legs—emaciated things that they were—were bowed at funny angles, his feet seeming to dangle on the floor, ankles turned inward. His arms hung limply at his sides. He looked like a scarecrow propped up with an invisible pole. Then with a great shudder his shoulders rolled back like a soldier coming to attention. His fingers flexed spasmodically and his whole body lifted once, twice, and on the third try he landed with his feet flat on the ground.

“Ta-daa,” he whispered weakly.

Corey let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Thomas was *standing*. When he walked to her, his gait was exaggerated like that of a marionette.

“It’s not perfect,” he admitted, reaching out a hand. She took it, found it was stiff. He squeezed and the act was as unnatural as if she’d been grasped by a mannequin. She was impressed all the same.

“How are you doing this?”

“You can do it, too,” Thomas whispered. “I could sense you when you first came in. Most people have a spark inside them. But you ....” He extended a finger and touched her forehead, right between her eyes. “You have a bolt of lightning.” And then he was in her mind, and it was the sensation of hair raising on the back of her neck. Her heart beat so hard her shirt fluttered. She felt an incredible release as he tinkered with her mind, removed invisible barriers. All at once, the two of them were alone in infinite space. In this place she felt saturated with unknown power and potential. And in this place she knew she would heal.

\* \* \*

Corey had always been a fast learner. When Coach had lined them up to practice layups, she was the first to master the 1-2 step. She could out-dribble anyone on the court, and her free-throws weren’t half bad either. This was really no different. With Thomas as her coach, her own natural talent drove her to success. On her first night of training, she was able to make her basketball float from the floor to her hand.

Like sports, this was mostly mental. Thomas started her out with meditation and deep breathing exercises. With his help, she could see the world behind the world, a universe of lines and waves of interconnected energy. She had only to trace a path from her mind to the basketball to make it rise with a thought. It was much the same way her brain fired commands to different parts of her body. The way she figured, if she could just reconnect the path to her legs, everything would be fine.

She spent her days in physical therapy and her nights with Thomas. She grew closer to him than to any other person in the world. He’d

been in her *mind*. He had seen her through the worst days of her life and was now ushering in the best. One night she asked him if he would like to meet her parents. His expression was uncharacteristically disturbed.

“Nevermind. I’m sorry I asked.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He frowned and stared off into space. Finally he said, “Because I’m not supposed to be here.”

He didn’t show up the next night. Or the night after that.

\* \* \*

Without Thomas, it was all too easy to believe everything had been a dream. She didn’t want to return to the real world where she’d have to face all the changes: a new life full of grab bars and ramps and wheelchair-accessible toilets. He didn’t turn up again until the third night, when her mom was going home after a visit. She kissed Corey goodbye and left the room, pulling the door shut behind her. All at once Thomas was there, in the shadows, looking haggard and pale.

Corey gasped, then said crossly, “Where have you been?”

“Let’s get to work,” he said.

“Thomas, you’ve been gone for two days.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

That was all he was going to say on the matter. She didn’t like the direction things were going; she missed their long discussions, the laughter and angst unique to the teenage experience. All he wanted to talk about these days was her progress. He could be so infuriating.

“I want to stand tonight,” she said insolently.

Thomas closed his eyes and granted her a thin smile.

“I don't think you're ready for that.”

She felt herself flush angrily, felt his gaze. Heard him sigh.

“You're too focused on doing things the way you used to,” he began, drawing nearer. “Don't try to move your legs—they don't work anymore.” She felt his voice slide into her mind and she closed her eyes to better concentrate, to follow his guidance. He helped her see the web of energy that permeated the world, that surrounded and penetrated her body. Turning her gaze inward, she tried to follow the path from brain to legs, but it was, of course, broken. Instead, she tried to imagine manipulating her body from the outside, tugging on the strings of the web that would pull her to her feet like a puppet.

She felt herself begin to rise.

“That's it,” Thomas encouraged.

Sweat broke out on her forehead and chest. She felt winded. But she maintained her focus and when she opened her eyes she was vertical.

“Congratulations,” Thomas said.

Corey didn't know what to think. On the one hand, she was certainly not lying down anymore; but on the other, she wasn't really standing so much as balancing. Her legs weren't doing anything at all. She felt underwhelmed. Instinctively she tried to take a step.

“Not like that!” Thomas cried, and it was strange to see such an animated expression on a head that didn't flinch. Then she was falling, her legs crumpling beneath her. Just before she hit the floor, she felt a force grip her, slow her fall, then raise her up again. She realized that force had been present the entire time; Thomas, helping her along, the psychokinetic equivalent of training wheels.

“I told you your legs don't work anymore,” he said with a weary smile.

He started to lower her gently to her bed, but it was too soon so she resisted, her own mind butting up against his and her body was like a rag doll between them. Then, boldly, while still focusing on steadying herself, she reached out with another part of her mind and nudged Thomas from behind. He was visibly surprised.

She waited impatiently as he drew himself up. They were the same height. Thomas swallowed hard as she reached out and took his hands. She felt unbelievably close to him. Closer than bodies touching.

“You're getting good at this fast.”

“I had a good teacher.”

He took shaky, deliberate steps as she coaxed him to her. Their roles were reversed and she liked it.

“You're better at this stuff than I am,” Thomas admitted.

“What stuff?”

“The physical stuff. Walking, moving things. It took you a tenth as long as it took me.”

“But you helped me cheat,” she whispered. “You had to find all the answers yourself.”

“I don't have all the answers.”

She shushed him and put her head on his shoulder. Together they swayed lightly, as though moved by an unfelt breeze.

The door flew open and someone entered with a dinner tray. Corey stiffened in surprise, but Thomas gripped her more tightly. The



worker maneuvered around them, positioned the tray by the bed, and walked over to the window. She peeked outside and made a face; it was sleeting out. She returned to the bed and began straightening the covers. Corey giggled.

“Are you making us invisible?”

“Not exactly,” Thomas explained. “It’s just easy to trick people into not questioning things. I’ll teach you.”

“Let’s just master walking right now, okay?”

He responded by putting his mouth on hers. It was her first kiss.

The worker felt an urgent desire to make herself scarce. The kiss lasted a long time, and when it broke Corey asked, her head on his shoulder, “What are we going to do when I go home?”

\* \* \*

On the eve of her check-out, her parents stayed late playing board games. Corey was agitated the whole time, wanting them to leave so she could see Thomas. She tried to tell herself nothing had to change. They could see one another as often as they liked. But somehow she knew that tonight would be the last time she’d ever see him.

The TV remote was out of reach, but with a casual flick of her wrist it hopped into her hand. She switched off the television and closed her eyes. She drifted for a while and once again had the dream of running, only this time she didn’t jump over hurdles, she floated over them. And this time she wasn’t running for the joy of it—she ran because she was being chased.

She awoke with a start and sat up. Her heart was racing. Her skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. The room was dark and shadowy tendrils of her dream were still clutching at her. It had been a long time since she’d been afraid of the dark, but now she wanted light

more than anything. With forced calm, she concentrated and the drapes flew open so the room was awash with the light of the moon. She gasped; Thomas was there, sitting in the corner, staring at her.

He didn’t move, didn’t even blink. She wasn’t entirely sure he was breathing.

“Thomas?”

She flung the covers off herself. Her legs were awkward and twisted. She willed them to flop over the side of the bed and she eased herself to the floor, summoned the strength to crawl to him.

She reached out to touch him and his hand snatched her wrist. She shrieked. Bony fingers dug painfully into her flesh.

“Thomas, what are you doing?”

He stared at her emptily for a moment, then his eyes appeared to register her presence and he released her. He gazed around as if he didn’t recognize his surroundings. Then his expression sank and he slumped back into himself. He blinked a few times and stated thickly, “You leave tomorrow.”

She dismissed his statement with a quick nod, still wondering if he was okay.

“I’m sorry I frightened you.”

She was still lying on the floor, so she pulled herself up by the bedpost.

“You should use your mind, not your arms.”

She paused, thinking him irritated with her, then completed the action that left her propped against her bed. She sat like that for a long time, wanting to adjust her legs, which were tangled in curious ways, but

petulantly not wanting to use her power to do it.

Thomas looked depressed. “I watched an old man die today. His kids and grandkids were in the other room. And his wife wanted to be alone with him. They’d been married for over seventy years. Can you imagine? You know what they talked about?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing at all. They just had a chat. It was amazing. They must’ve had five thousand conversations over the years and now they just wanted to have one more before it was too late. What could she possibly have told him that would matter? He can’t take her words with him.”

“You don’t know that.”

She saw his fingers groping mechanically for her. “Want to see something special?”

She nodded, blinking away tears, and when she took his hand it felt like completing a circuit. He flashed his sly smile and the room began to dim. Or maybe it was just that their bodies were beginning to glow. Her pores were leaking light, white light too bright to look at, but when she closed her eyes she could still see it. And then for a stretch of time she couldn’t breathe and there was the terrifying sensation of falling a long distance and just when she wanted to scream she came to a halt as abrupt as the end of a roller coaster ride. The dizziness cleared, the light faded, and she could breathe again.

She found herself floating alongside Thomas.

“Thomas! Oh my God, Thomas, I don’t like this!”

He pulled her close and shushed her. Could he do that without arms? Without features? What exactly was she seeing? For they had transcended physical form, leaving their bodies behind, slumped and lifeless. Thomas, without flesh, blood, or bone, still looked like himself—

the same dark skin, the same crooked grin—but he also looked entirely different. He looked more complete.

She asked, “Are we ghosts?”

“I don’t know what we are. Come on!”

He pulled her, over her protests, across the room and through the wall and into the hallway. Then he was tugging her up through ceiling and floor and ceiling again and eventually through roof and finally up into open sky.

“I’ve never been up this high before,” he exclaimed.

“Come on,” she said, exhilaration beating away fear. “Let’s fly.”

They flew, racing across the sky, through wind and rain. They soared through towering thunderheads and saw lightning bolts blast from cloud to cloud. They made their way to distant cities and buzzed the streets through pedestrians. They saw Niagara Falls, Times Square, the Eiffel Tower, the Grand Canyon; they stood at the summit of Everest, felt the dry burn of the Sahara, witnessed icebergs collapsing in the Antarctic. It was happening so fast, almost simultaneously. Through it all was the sensation of flying, always flying above everything and everyone, higher and faster than airplanes or hang gliders or birdmen could hope to reach. And then when they’d seen enough, they came to a gentle halt, hovering above a mountainous evergreen forest, lost in some secluded place in the world, the moon ever-bright and reflecting endlessly into a great lake below, time and space folding together.

“I’ve never done this before,” Thomas said. “I mean, I leave my body all the time, but this ...” he gestured, “I was always too afraid. I never could have done any of this if I hadn’t found you.”

“Then I’m glad you found me.”

He smiled, but there was sadness there. She could tell he wanted to

say something, but the words weren't coming.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"You're the most beautiful person I've ever met, Corey. Outside and in."

"If I had skin right now, I'd blush."

But he didn't laugh. "Stay with me," he said. "Here."

She was confused and she sank to the forest floor. "What do you mean? We can't stay here."

"Why not? We can do anything!" He drew her closer, so close they might have been one. "Do you really want to go back there? Do you really want to stumble around like you're walking on stilts for the rest of your life?"

"Thomas ..." She tried to pull away, but he held her tighter.

"How can you go back when you've experienced this? This is what it was all about, Corey. Getting you here, to this point. Where we can be free. Everything else is just parlour tricks."

She looked at him sadly. "Thomas, what about my life?"

"This could be your life."

"This isn't a life. This is an experience. An amazing one, but ..."

"You really don't want to stay here?"

"I want to stay with *you*," she said.

"But not here."

Her initial fear at leaving her body returned. "We can still go back,

can't we?"

He hesitated.

"Thomas," she said hoarsely. "Take me back now, please."

"Just one more minute," he begged.

She separated from him, concentrated, peered through the world and saw the webs of energy, the ebb and flow, the pulsing. But in the distance she sensed a gathering darkness. Empty spots. Malignancies in spacetime. She remembered her dream of being chased.

"Thomas."

"Just one more minute!"

"Why are you pushing so hard?" she asked angrily.

"Because I'm afraid," he shouted. "You want to know how I learned all this? I've been immobile since I was six. I've had a lot of damn practice. And I don't have family that cares about me, not once they realized what a burden I was. After the money ran out ... I had to make everyone forget about me. I was alone for years, learning, practicing my gift, lurking in the hospital, tricking them into keeping me alive. Then I met you. And I knew you were just like me. That all you needed was a push. So I came to you. I thought maybe if I could show you this place, you'd come with me and I wouldn't have to go it alone. I'm so tired of being alone." He took her hand, held it between his like he was praying. "You must have guessed my body is dying. I'm not gonna make it another day. I might not make it another hour. Stay here with me. Please just stay."

She was crushed, but of course she'd known he was terminal, had known from the first time they met, just like she'd known what he looked like before she'd ever seen him. She took him in her arms, felt the electric tingle of his aura brushing against her own.

She murmured, "What happens if you're out here and your body



dies?”

“Stay with me and find out.”

Now she couldn't help but cry.

“I love you,” she said and she knew it was true. “But you know I can't stay.”

They held one another in silence for a very long time. Then Thomas drew away and she saw his smile and somehow it was worse.

“You're right,” he said wistfully, touching her cheek. “It's too much to ask. I've already made you risk too much.”

“Thomas,” she started, but suddenly the world was swirling with dark, formless shadows that blotted out the ethereal glow of the world like the darkest of sunspots. She shrank away as they drew closer and closer, whirling and rippling, a blackness laden with the weight of infinity. Thomas gazed upon the encroaching void and his expression was solemn.

“Thomas!”

Then she felt a tug on her midsection, a sinking feeling like she'd stretched a bungee cord to its max, and she was rocketing back across the world, through trees, over snow-covered mountains, between buildings and over cars. Then free-falling through the hospital, gliding smoothly over waxed linoleum floors, and she saw her own face fly at her and then she saw stars, as though she'd stood up too fast, but she wasn't standing: she was a tangled pile of limbs on the floor. Her lungs took air and it felt strange and clumsy, like trying to walk after wearing rollerblades for a long time. She felt ensnared by her rigid body. She was dizzy and trying to clear the spots when she heard words ripple across her mind, slide over and through it as though trying to catch up to her and then scrambling for purchase before skidding off. The words were Thomas's. He'd called after her, “I love you, too.”

“Thomas,” she gasped, and looked up. His body was in the corner, and to the unobservant eye he looked the same as always; small, crooked, his head leaning against its headrest. But his eyes were closed, his skin ashen. She reached for his body, and when her palm touched his delicate chest she felt no heartbeat, no warmth.

Fighting back tears, she tried to draw the nurse's call button to her hand, but her mind was racing and she couldn't focus. She had no choice but to drag herself back to her bed, to the button, a journey that took eons. When the nurse came at last she found Corey on the ground sobbing softly to herself. The nurse checked Thomas's pulse, then called a doctor, but Corey knew it was far too late.

“Who is he?” someone asked.

“His name was Thomas,” Corey said. “He was my friend.”

\* \* \*

Without Thomas's guidance her powers fell away almost to nothing. The two of them had formed a unit that improved both of their abilities. It was weeks before she could move objects with her mind again and months before she could bring herself to a crude imitation of standing, though it was a trick she preferred to keep private. Over the years her powers branched out and grew and eventually she could do more than see the hidden world around her: she could *feel* it. The glass on the counter, the static on the television. She could sense the presence of others, taste what they ate, feel what they touched. And while she never truly walked again, she felt the trade-off of her legs for her gift was a fair one.

But she could never figure out how to leave her body again. That gift had been Thomas's alone. Sometimes she wondered if he was still out there, playfully outwitting death. She remembered the dark spots that swarmed around them that night, the terrifying emptiness, and she wondered if someday the world would go dark for him, if it goes dark for everyone. And whenever she found Thomas was on her mind, she longed for just one more conversation.



# Boardwalk Haunting

by Shikhar Dixit

# Someone to Sing To

by Chrissie Rohrman

*Some nights, I am quiet and still, reveling in the solitude of a dark, idle night, the gentle swishing of the ocean waves against the shore.*

*But on this night, feeling lonely and peckish, I draw in a lungful of crisp, salty sea air and let loose a song. A breeze that smells of ocean spray carries my voice toward town, a soft whisper over the wildflower fields, a quiet whistle through the leafy forest canopy. My song finally reaches the uneven cobblestone streets of the village, where a young man is stumbling out of the tavern after one too many pints.*

*“Get on with ya!” shouts the barkeep as he closes the door with a pointed slam.*

*The young man scrubs a clumsy hand through his hair and, as my melody first teases his ears, misses the last step down to the street. “Is someone ...” Bloodshot eyes screwed up in confusion, he turns toward the beach. Toward me. After a brief hesitation, he takes a step in that direction.*

*A smile pulls at my lips as the song takes hold. On a night like this, it’s almost too easy.*

*He appears, dazed, at the edge of the field where the tall grass gives way to a wide stretch of sand. I beckon him closer. He’s just a boy, really, caught in a trance, longing for more.*

*I long for more, too. For the life force within him, the spirit that will give me strength when I take it as my own.*

*With one hand outstretched, I step backwards toward the waterline.*

*He follows on unsteady legs, until the water swallows him.*

*Unfortunately, this is also the night the townspeople have had enough of me stealing away their sons in the dark of night. They come for me as dawn breaks, a warm honeyed glow kissing the horizon. I am lounging on the beach, sated and drowsy, when the first boot sinks into the sand.*

*I turn toward them, pressing my lips together in a gentle hum. The tune has no effect; they push forward undeterred. I stand, and as they draw nearer, I see the menfolk have wax crammed into their ears.*

*Smart.*

*Fear flutters in my chest like a trapped bird. I back away towards the safety of the sea but, unaffected by my song, they too easily surround me. I have recently fed, and the first dagger skips harmlessly off my chest. The second strikes true, only to snap in half.*

*I stand tall, smirking, but they do not seem dejected.*

*“Sister Amala!” one of them calls, voice too loud as he compensates for his muffled hearing.*

*The crowd parts, allowing an old woman to step forward, leaning on a cane. I recognize her face; or, at least, the look of it. Weathered and knowing, as I am, but without the benefit of all those ingested souls.*

*A witch.*

*She’s whispering, a constant low tone that stings my ears.*



*“Be gone from our sons,” she mutters. “Be gone from our homes. Be gone from this land.”*

*I raise my hands to cover my ears but cannot block her out. Her voice, her spell, echoes through my mind.*

*The witch holds out a gnarled hand, where a seashell is settled atop her palm. Her soft words pull at me, drawing me to step closer.*

*“Be gone from our sons. Be gone from our homes. Be gone from this land.”*

*“No,” I protest as my foot drags along the sand. It is the first true word I’ve spoken in a century, and it’s to no avail. I walk towards the witch, caught in her spell the same way men have been caught in the thrall of my song.*

*A glow is building within the hollow of the shell, increasing in intensity until I must look away.*

*After that, all I know is darkness.*

\* \* \*

Brianne had heard the stories, same as everyone who grew up in the sleepy seaside village of Freybury.

“That beach was once home to a vicious sea witch,” some said, “who slithered through the sand like a snake to snatch slumbering children from their beds.”

Others would wave a dismissive hand and weave a different tale. “It was a kraken ’at dwelled within the waters. Having emptied the sea of fish, the beast developed a taste for human flesh.”

“You’ve all got it wrong,” still another would argue. “’Twas an eerie songstress in the sea, whose tunes wormed into the minds of unsuspecting men and dropped them into a trance. She lured them to walk

straight into the surf, until the water closed over their heads and swallowed them whole.”

The tales had been twisted and stretched with time, until no one could agree what evil once lived there. The only thing everyone did agree on was that the evil was gone, one way or another, and they should be thankful for it. Should not flirt with allowing such malice back into their lives and homes. The beach had been abandoned for decades.

Brianne had grown bored of the life Freybury had to offer when she was still young. While other girls were playing with dolls or weaving wreaths from wildflowers, she daydreamed of adventure on long walks through the forest and fields, venturing a bit farther from the village each time. Eventually, she came upon the famed beach and stood in awe of the beauty of the sea, feeling neither fear nor trepidation, only stillness. Peace.

Every morning since, she wandered along the overgrown path to the beach, paying no heed to the stories, the thriving fear of her neighbors, or the wooden fence and sign posted at the edge of the sand that declared the area dangerous and off-limits. Whatever monster may have once called this beach home, she reasoned, it was gone long before she was even born.

Despite the eerie, low-hanging fog of early morning and the coarse pebbled sand that stuck to the bottoms of her feet, Brianne found herself missing the beach whenever she was back in town. It was calm here, away from the anxious bustle of Freybury, and quiet, but for the crashing waves, the whisper of the surf climbing the sand as the tide rolled in. She loved to sit in the sand for hours and stare into the waves, concocting fantastical stories of far-off lands.

One morning, as she left her shoes at the sign like always, she saw the tide was lower than ever, revealing a new, unexplored stretch of dark, damp sand littered with half-buried shells and stones. Brianne lifted the hem of her skirt and hurried to explore. Each shell she came upon was more beautiful than the last, glistening under the light of the rising sun. Her gaze fell on a large, cream-colored seashell with

hints of turquoise and purple along its swirling ridges, glimmering gracefully in the sunlight. When Brianne stepped closer, she noticed that one edge of the shell was cracked, a single sign of imperfection. She dropped her skirt and crouched in the damp sand, carefully working the shell free. The pad of her thumb brushed over the crack, and a piece of the seashell fell away.

Brianne winced and returned the shell to its spot on the beach, regretful she had disturbed it. She shook the sand from her skirt and continued her walk, leaving the treasure behind, allowing nature to take its course.

\* \* \*

*I've grown weak within the confines of my dark prison, scratching at an unseen barrier with strengthless fingers, aching for the smell of the sea.*

*A shear of light splits the darkness, the first I've seen since that morning with the witch. I am falling, then come to a sudden stop against soft, sinking ground.*

*The light lingers, blinding. I blink, fingers scrabbling as I struggle to push myself up. I feel coarse sand and smooth stones, inhale the welcome sting of salty air. I look up, and through watery eyes, I see the sun rising over my head.*

*My lips twist in a weak grin.*

*I'm out.*

*I'm free.*

\* \* \*

Brianne made her way towards the beach under a matte gray sky, with the rest of Freybury still slumbering behind her. It had stormed the night before, and that usually meant a late morning start for most

of the townspeople. Melle wouldn't be expecting her at the bakery for hours.

Bracing a hand on the signpost, Brianne stepped out of her shoes. When she raised her gaze to the sea, she startled. For the first time, she was not alone on the beach. A woman stood in the water, ankle-deep, staring out at the sea. She looked more like a spirit than a person, the lightweight material of her long, simple gray-blue dress shifting with the breeze blowing off the sea, as well as her curtain of white-blond hair.

It was immediately obvious that the woman wasn't from town; no one in Freybury looked like her. Brianne remembered the ferocity of the night's storm and squinted out at the lazily rolling water, looking for any sign of wreckage, for the shapes of bodies or cargo bobbing in the waves, anything to serve as evidence of how she came to be here. But Freybury had no port, and she could not remember the last time anyone had visited their small village.

"Hello?" she called. "Do you need help?"

The woman didn't react to the sound of her voice. She stood motionless, the frothy sea lapping around her ankles.

Brianne shivered just watching her; this early in the day, and on the heels of such a storm, the water had to be freezing. "You probably shouldn't be out here," she said. "They say the beach is dangerous."

The woman said nothing, only inclined her head in Brianne's direction as she stepped closer.

Brianne stopped a short distance away and ducked her chin, squinting. "Do you talk?"

The stranger turned to face her fully, and Brianne sucked in a breath. The woman was beautiful, in an odd, ethereal sort of way. Her eyes, the color of the ocean swell, narrowed as she stared quizzically at Brianne.

\* \* \*

*I can hardly believe my good fortune, that this delicate, vulnerable creature has wandered onto my beach at a most opportune time.*

*I open my mouth ... and nothing comes out. The young woman cocks her head, her brown eyes clouding with concern. "Are you injured?" she asks.*

*Anger swells fast and warm in my icy chest. No one has ever looked at me in such a way. They wouldn't dare. I am something to be feared, not ... pitied.*

*I raise a hand to my throat, cursing the tremble in my fingers. That damned witch; her seashell trap may have fallen to pieces, but too much of my strength has been taken. I don't have enough for a song.*

*It will take some time to recover what I've lost, to become what I was once. I turn away from the girl, looking back to the sea. I do not want her pity.*

*After another long moment of stillness, I hear her soft steps in the sand as she walks away.*

\* \* \*

The strange woman was there again the next morning, standing in the same spot as Brianne had left her the day before. Arms hanging at her sides as she stared out at the rolling sea.

"Hello there," Brianne greeted, though she did not expect a reply.

She didn't get one; the woman lifted her chin but did not even look her way.

Brianne shrugged and started to walk away, but something stopped her. She turned back and studied the woman. She looked so ... lost.

And that was a feeling Brianne could empathize with. She had never quite felt like she fit in with the others in Freybury, but without anywhere else to go, she had just sort of ... drifted along through the days, taking the apprenticeship at the bakery when she was old enough to seek out work. She had never paid much mind to those who spoke of fate but couldn't help feeling like there was a reason she was here on this beach, now.

She hefted her skirt and settled onto the sand. "I think I'm going to sit here awhile," she said, "and watch the waves. You're welcome to sit with me." Brianne draped her arms loosely over her tented knees and waited.

With a resigned sigh, the woman turned away from the sea and stalked to where Brianne sat, leaving a trail of wet footprints in the sand. She flopped down and looked at her expectantly.

"I'm Brianne," she said. "What's your name?" The stranger rolled her eyes and gestured to her throat, and Brianne winced. "Right. Sorry."

The woman's gaze dropped to the sand, and she picked up a stick that had washed ashore. She turned the stick in her hand and dug one end into the sand. With long, smooth strokes, she etched a single word.

"Eliria," Brianne read. "That's your name?" At the woman's reluctant nod, she said, "I like it. It's very pretty."

The woman's posture relaxed, and they sat for a long time in not entirely uncomfortable silence, watching the waves as the sun warmed the sand beneath them. Every few moments, Eliria would glance at her with a strange, appraising look.

Finally, Brianne squinted up at the sun; it was later in the morning than she had intended, and Melle would for sure have something to say about her tardiness. She stood, brushing sand from her skirt. "I suppose I'll see you tomorrow, Eliria. If you're still here, that is."

Eliria just stared as she walked away.



\* \* \*

*This Brianne is an odd creature. But strangely, I find myself looking forward to tomorrow morning, knowing I will see her again. There is a warmth in my chest, an odd tingling in my limbs I've not felt before.*

*There is more than pity in her eyes, and more than curiosity. It is a familiar longing that I see in those brown depths, and I find myself drawn to her.*

\* \* \*

Every morning after that, Brianne ventured down to the beach with a newfound skip in her step. As the days went by, her curiosity at seeing Eliria on the beach had turned to anticipation, which was quickly becoming excitement. Even though the other woman didn't speak, there was a different kind of connection growing between them.

"Do you want to come into town with me?" she braved one morning. "It isn't much, but you can get a decent pastry at the bakery."

Eliria opened her mouth as though she was finally going to speak, but she quickly snapped it closed and averted her gaze.

Their hands were splaying in the warm sand, fingers nearly touching. Brianne reached out, covering the other woman's cool hand with her own.

A dark look came over Eliria's face. She tore her hand away and stood abruptly, turning away from Brianne. Without looking back, she walked purposefully toward the water.

"Eliria!" Brianne jumped to her feet, stumbling in the sand. "I'm sorry! I-I didn't mean .... Come back!" Her voice pitched higher as Eliria stepped into the sea. "What are you doing?"

As she watched, the woman kept walking, until the water closed over her head.

Brianne stood at the shore, her face ashen, and waited for Eliria to resurface.

She never did.

\* \* \*

*I have never been the one to run away. Of course, I have never felt fear like this. Even when that witch was weaving her spell to trap me, I did not feel like ... this. I know that I cannot tell Brianne what I truly am. Not only because she would never want to come near me again, but because to hear my voice would be to succumb to my thrall.*

*With time, my strength has returned; not all, but enough for a song. I crave the power that came with being what I once was, but I do not want to sacrifice Brianne. My song may mean strength and power for me, but it serves only as a harbinger of death for those who hear it.*

*There has only ever been one way for this to end.*

\* \* \*

Brianne lay awake all night, thinking of Eliria, trying to make sense of the woman's sudden appearance and disappearance, the oddness that had lingered in the space they spent between.

As the first hints of sunlight crept across the night's sky, an unwelcome sense of certainty came over her, settling in her stomach like a rock.

\* \* \*

*I wait by the water as dawn breaks. I know Brianne will be back.*

*They've never been able to resist me.*

*She walks right up to me, stands at my side and looks out at the water. When she finally turns to face me, there are tears glistening in her eyes. "You're the thing they tell stories about, aren't you?"*

*I drop my gaze. I don't want to hurt Brianne. I want to take her as my own, but not as a trophy. I want her as a companion. A partner. But it's not possible.*

*I press my lips together and nod.*

*"I started coming here when I was a little girl," she says.*

*I remember. She's told me everything about her. Her dreams, her wishes. The fantasies she's conjured as she sat here on my beach. And I have offered her nothing but silence. And still she returned, day after day.*

*"Did you ...?" Brianne takes a breath, tries again. "Did you lure me here? From the sea?"*

*A long, still moment passes between us, broken only by the far-off crash of waves. "I don't know," I say quietly, carefully. Truthfully. I very well may have. It is the only thing I have ever done. "I must have." It takes effort to speak without singing. I gave up on the use of it, eons ago.*

*"I'm not so sure," Brianne says, stronger now. "Eliria ... sing for me."*

*I gape. "N-no."*

*She reaches out and takes my hand, smiles. "Trust me. You won't hurt me."*

*I turn away, shoulders tensing, but I do not possess the self-control to keep from humming. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Brianne lean in closer, and I stutter to a stop.*

*"No," she says quickly, squeezing my fingers. "I'm just ... listening."*

*In a soft whisper, I offer my first song since that night with the witch. I watch Brianne as I sing. Her eyes remain pinned on mine, but they do not glaze over. She is enthralled by my song, but not because of any magical power I possess.*

\* \* \*

Some mornings, we are quiet and still, reveling in the solitude of a dim, idle morning, the gentle swishing of the ocean waves against the shore.

But on this day, feeling content and whole, I draw in a lungful of crisp, salty sea air and let loose a song that is just for Brianne.

# Three Months

by Gordon Sun

*Monday, February 3*

Hello, this message is for Marcia Rodriguez. This is Denise Moss, the social worker for Leticia Rodriguez at Regency Lake Medical Center.

Thanks for coming by today to visit Leticia. As you've gathered, your mom had a rough time after her car accident, having had major skull and chest surgery while also recovering from a lung infection. I know it seems overwhelming. Please rest assured that our doctors and staff are very experienced in handling patients with complicated medical needs.

The good news is that your mom's making great progress and is expected to leave the ICU soon. The next step is to continue her recovery, get her rehabilitated, and eventually prepare her to go home and back to her daily routine.

Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help. You can reach me at this number any time anytime during business hours. For emergencies, please call the cell number I gave you earlier today. Alternatively, you can contact her case manager, Rhonda, who you also met today.

And remember that you're welcome to visit as much as you can. I know Leticia loves having visitors.

Again, this is Denise Moss from Regency Lake Medical Center, the social worker for Leticia Rodriguez, leaving a message for Marcia Rodriguez. Thank you and have a great day!

*Friday, February 7*

Hi, this message is for Marcia Rodriguez. This is Denise Moss, the social worker for Leticia--your mom at Regency Lake. Hope you're having a nice week. I wanted to let you know that unfortunately, your mom didn't improve as much as we were hoping over the weekend, so she stayed in the ICU. I wanted to prepare you just in case you were planning to visit today.

Rhonda is available to speak with you if you have any questions, and I can be reached any time anytime at my office or cell phone as well. Let me know if you're planning to visit your mom today or over the weekend. Thanks so much.

*Monday, February 10*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise Moss from Regency Lake. I'm glad we were able to meet with you this morning about your mom's condition. The ICU doctor is not confident that she will wake up right away, which is why he talked about the stomach feeding tube, the G-tube, today. I know you were also hoping her tracheostomy tube was going to be removed, but in a way we're fortunate she still had it since it was easier for the doctors to get her back onto the ventilator.

You may have been following the news about something that's, ah, been going around. Just so you know, we're temporarily reducing visitors to one a day. But remember, you don't have to come in to give your consent for the G-tube. As long as you're reachable at this number, our ICU doctor can call you to discuss the procedure in detail.

Thank you and talk to you soon.

*Thursday, February 13*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise Moss the social worker. I know you were upset about not being able to visit earlier. The policy the hospital put into place to restrict all visitors is for everyone's protection, including yours and your mother's. I hope that within the next couple of weeks we'll fully reopen, but it's hard to predict.

Anyway, as I'm sure you've heard from the ICU doctor, there's good news: the stomach tube surgery went very well. Fingers crossed that she'll keep getting better.

Just a gentle reminder that you can feel free to call me at my office or cell any time anytime if you'd like to chat. Also, let me or Rhonda know when you'll be around next time, so we can try to coordinate a meeting. Thanks again and talk soon.

*Wednesday, February 19*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise the social worker. Good news: your mother's been transferred out of the ICU! She's now in a regular hospital bed under the care of Dr. Warner. However, the doctor thinks her recovery will be slow. She's unable to feed herself and still needs the ventilator.

I know you've been looking to get your mom into a nursing home. However, in light of that 'thing,' that's going to be a challenge. A few of our valued partners have been hit hard by, ah, by this thing and they're a little nervous about taking on more patients. We should prepare for the possibility that if it's difficult to get a nursing home to admit your mom, we'll need to train you on how to care her for her tracheostomy and G-tube in the event of an emergency.

Since the hospital is still restricting visitors, please call me back and

we can set up a time to meet and talk about it with the whole team. We're trying to do video calls when they're feasible, so if you'd prefer that option let me know and I can help you download the right app onto your phone. Thanks again.

*Thursday, February 27*

Hi Marcia, it's Denise, your mom's social worker. We've called every eligible nursing home and rehab facility in the area, but they're either all full or have been affected by--well, affected. It just wouldn't be safe to send your mom.

Unfortunately, there's also been a small medical setback. One of the nurses found a small pressure sore on your mom's lower back. We're taking care of it the best we can.

Finally, if you could please call Rhonda back at your earliest convenience, that would be great. It sounds like you two have been playing phone tag, but we need to get the breathing and stomach tube feeding training set up. I know it's tough with all the travel restrictions popping up, but it's important for Leticia.

If you're able to do a video call, we might be able to do a lot of the training without needing you to physically come to the hospital. Thank you.

*Thursday, March 5*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise the social worker. The pressure injury is stable for now. Unfortunately, placement for your mom remains a challenge. Why don't we try to do a video call and get some face time together? I know the visitor policy makes it hard to have you come here to Regency Lake, but we think it's important to have a discussion about where we go from here.

Thank you and stay safe.

*Tuesday, March 10*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise from the hospital. I got your voice mail yesterday, and you sounded unlike your usual cheerful self. I hope you're staying as stress-free as possible despite the circumstances. The more rested you are, the more prepared you'll be to help your mom.

I'm calling because we're unable to find a nursing home for your mom. My experience is that in the past, a few facilities would have been willing to give her a second look if you, ah, paid out of pocket. But with everything that's happening, even that isn't an option anymore.

I know you've been leery about home health, but Dr. Warner believes that's honestly the safest option now. We can help you apply to the state for some funding and part-time help at home, and of course we can get you supplies and equipment.

Please call me back at your earliest convenience. Thanks and be safe.

*Friday, March 13*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise from Regency Lake. Dr. Warner and the team are again recommending moving forward with home care. However, we need your help with this. We need to do a home safety assessment, fill out some paperwork, that sort of thing.

Could we could have a brief video chat as soon as possible? Please reach out to me or Rhonda any timeanytime and let's set something up. Talk to you soon.

*Thursday, March 19*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise, your mom's social worker. We haven't heard from you in a bit, so we can only imagine how totally upside-down now life must be now for you. We're here for you if you need

anything.

There's There've been some important developments. First, Leticia's developed a second pressure sore that has gotten infected. Second, Dr. Warner says your mom's starting to show some, ah, concerning signs. Unfortunately, these new signs seem to be adversely affecting her mental state. Sometimes she calls for you in her sleep. Other times she gets confused and thinks she's you.

Since you're her surrogate decision-maker, you would be best suited to help guide our team in the direction you think your mom would want to go. Please call me back as soon as you receive this message. Thank you and stay safe.

*Wednesday, March 25*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise, your mom's social worker at Regency Lake. Rhonda and I have left several voice mails for you over the past couple weeks. It's really important that we connect. Your mom's condition needs to be discussed as soon as possible. Her pressure sores are worsening and she's now on a ventilator full-time, so she was moved back into the ICU. Dr. Warner is very concerned that the changes--I mean, the signs she's showing may well become permanent. They're doing the best they can, but as you maybe have heard from the news there's still so little we understand about the condition. Sorry to be the bearer of such news.

We need to speak with you as soon as possible to talk about her situation and how best to care for her needs. Please let us know the best way to reach you and we'll work around your schedule, as hectic and unpredictable as I'm sure it is with everything that's going on. Thank you for your understanding and support.

*Monday, March 30*

Hi Marcia, this is Denise the social worker. I know these are tough

times for you, on top of everything else going on. I hope you're finding safe ways to handle the stress.

Look, I completely get your situation. I'd be struggling if I were in your shoes, too. I--just know that I'm here for you, okay?

Now, on to the matter at hand. If you must delegate decision-making to someone else because you're just overwhelmed, I'm sure we can work something out. Our team finally managed to get the rest of Leticia's medical records from the other hospital where she was initially admitted after the accident. We found a single reference to a son who lives out of town--we assume he's your brother? It looks like his name is Juan, but we have little else to go on. To be honest, his name's never even come up in any of our conversations with you.

Please call us back as soon as you can. Thank you.

*Wednesday, April 8*

Hi, Marcia. This is Denise, the social worker at Regency Lake Medical Center, calling about you--your mother. We haven't, ah, haven't heard from you in weeks. I wanted to confirm if this is still the best phone number to reach you.

More importantly, are you staying safe? Are you doing alright? Can you please call us back as soon as possible? We're worried--about you and your mom. Thank you.

*Thursday, April 16*

Hello, this message is for Juan Rodriguez. This is Denise Moss, the social worker for your mother, Leticia Rodriguez, at Regency Lake Medical Center. I'm not sure if you're aware that your mother has been in our hospital for the last few months. She's had a rough road, and the, ah, the thing that's everywhere now hasn't helped either.

We obtained your contact information from Marcia Rodriguez--or more specifically, her phone. She was your mother's surrogate decision-maker, but unfortunately, we were unable to reach Marcia during the last month or so. We called again yesterday, but to our surprise a nurse picked up--one of our nurses. We found out that Marcia has been a patient here for a few days now, with the same symptoms as your mother. To our chagrin, we realized that we've been treating them as one.

We acknowledge our regrets about the confusion. However, at the same time we also know that due to having the same condition--that thing that's been going around--they're different now, yet also one and the same.

If you wish to help us with their care, please call us back and we can discuss how best to proceed.

Thank you and be well.



# The Portrait

by Dean Schreck

Walls absorb The Life,  
the fog forbids escape  
from an oil painting  
hung above the desk.  
A forgotten gypsy  
sings in a box  
under the stairs.  
He goes through the motions  
of a visit well-rehearsed ...  
it follows him through  
the rooms of the house,  
asking questions  
none dare answer.  
Consumed by the eyes  
of a tattered canvas mirror,  
he goes through the motions  
of a visit well-rehearsed:

Melting candles no one sees,  
watching as they dwindle ...  
walking up and down the stairs.  
Remembering what he has  
forgotten—  
while still, the portrait follows  
asking questions  
          none dare answer,  
drawing colors from him—  
taking what none can give.  
He pauses to touch  
the forgotten gypsy  
singing in a box  
under the stairs:  
He goes through the motions  
of a visit well-rehearsed.

# Cosmic Energy

by Carl Scharwath



# Radio Sounds

by Jay Caselberg

He comes upon me by the riverbank, the man with the face like Jack Palance. He stands over me as I lie there and I look up, squinting against the sun glowing around him. His eclipse light makes it hard to see. And he has no business being here, I think.

My squinted impressions come vaguely, but I see that his dark suit is covered in dust. At least I think it's dust. A gold chain swings across his vest, from one side to the other, looped. The crumpled undertaker's hat atop his head sports a single feather. I tilt my face and the feather changes from silhouetted dark to deepest red. He shifts his gaze, looking down at me, and my heart becomes a drum.

I know without knowing that this man has come for us. I lean on my elbows in that chill moment and my thoughts scurry, scared, seeking out my brother. He sits small with his play rabbit, toys scattered around on the wooden floor of our house. The glass doors face the river. He is there for all to see, an offering. This man with the face like Jack Palance has come for all of us. I know he's after John and even after the toy. And I know he's after me.

Behind me lies the house, stilt-walking down the slope with its veranda stretched out toward the river. Beyond runs the rail line and beyond that lies the road. The train track circles the house, sweeping around. The house is wide and white. It stares out over the muddy river, its metal legs braced against the incline. The broad glass doors look out onto the encircling veranda. At times, we have sat there on summer evenings listening to the wind in the trees and the river sliding past.

My thoughts turn to black and white then colour. First comes Rod Steiger, then the two Roberts—first Mitchum, then de Niro.

But this one is Jack Palance—grinning.

He leans forward and, hands on his knees, peers at me. My drum beats louder and the wind stirs, rushing in the trees. My only knowledge is that there is no one to help us; we are alone now. Suddenly, as he peers at me side to side, decked in his undertaker's garb, he reminds me of a crow. I have no time. I have to get my brother away, away from this thing. I scramble backward up the slope. His laughter echoes after me, harsh, like the call of a blackbird, and I hear his footsteps behind me.

I race up the hill. I stagger onto the porch, fling wide the door, and charge inside. My brother looks up at me, not knowing. His face is open and smiling. I'm panting in the middle of the room, watching him there. Then I remember. I bolt the door. I lean backward, breathing deeply, my back pressed against solid wood, not knowing if it's enough. Looking round, I see a rope on a peg by the door, and there, in the small room to the side, the cans of petrol. There lies my answer.

John thinks it's a game. He takes his fluffy rabbit, stained grey from constant use, one ear hanging loose, and clutches it to his chest as I loop the rope around him. He smiles. I lower him over the veranda and down to the river where he can escape. Just in time, because I can hear the blackbird at the door.

Jack Palance's shadow draws together in the frosted glass. He's standing there, beyond the door, still. Perhaps he's listening. On tiptoe, I fetch the cans. I draw up the trailing rope and loop it through the handles. Gently, I lower them over the edge, one by one. Then I too climb down. Lifting the cans, I clamber up the slope and away from the house, away from John, away from the toy rabbit. The man is still there searching. I call out loudly to draw him to me.

I heft the gas can and I pour, splashing it this way and that. Leaves, green trees, and a wall of flame to protect the house so he can't get past. I toss the can to one side, empty.

At first, I see him sniffing, then I scramble away, ducking behind trees. He's scenting me now, but the smell of burning confuses his senses and keeps him away. I spot a hiding place and creep toward it. Lowering myself through the grass, I lie, looking up. Blades cover my eyes, and I'm peering through them. My breath is rushing noisily in my ears.

He walks above the hummock where I lie. I see him looking down, tall in his black clothes and flat-topped hat. He's looking down, sniffing the fire and fuel. He looms, then sniffs and looks away, not ten feet between us. I know then that it's ash upon his clothes, not dust.

His shadow stretches from above and the flames shoot into the air. I try to be still, to calm the pounding in my chest. I stay silent, waiting—waiting for him to pass, waiting for him to leave again. The fire sound rushes in my ears. The smell of fuel and smoke fills me. Then I see him. Somehow, he has moved beyond the flames and heat. He is facing away. He is swinging his head from side to side, questing like a hunting beast.

I rush down the slope to where the river narrows. I splash through the water, pushing past the current, then through the reeds that tangle against my legs. There's a lip there, a hollow in the bank, and I duck beneath. I sink down into the water and press myself back under the overhanging bank. Trailing roots, feathered and clumped with earth, form tangled crosses before my eyes. The thick smell of mud is all around me.

I can see him over there, crouched down on the roof of the house, and I wonder how he got up there. He's splayed there, waiting, resting on the slates—hunting like a spider. By now, John and the rabbit must be safe. My nostrils barely crest the water surface. The brush-stroke carmine at the side of his hat beckons across the space between us. His hands are pressed flat on the roof and his legs are spread wide. He's staring, staring down and I feel any moment he will notice me.

Another noise breaks through the quiet sounds. I hear the train coming toward us and he hears it too, because I see him tense. Just before the

thunder breaks, he vanishes.

My heart is making radio sounds, beating the silt into little eddies, causing ripples that catch the light and shatter it. I feel as if the liquid sparkles call to him across the space between us. I cannot see him, but I can feel him, as I can always feel him.

I wait and dare to hope he has passed me by, that the train has taken him beyond us and away.

Crouched in the water, nostrils barely peeking above it and looking out, I squat there in the river damp, barely daring to move while the sky grows dark and light again. Then I drag myself out.

When I cross the water and wander up the slope, the house is empty.

I follow the path down through the waving grass. Stains of black criss-cross the slope where the fire has splashed. The river swirls past, torpid in the morning light. I look first downriver, then up. I see the sand spit stretching out, and there, one, two, three, four clear footsteps incised sharply in the sand. His footsteps—or are they his footsteps?—leading out from the bank. Then nothing. For a moment, but just a moment, I think the footsteps may be mine. There is nothing there in the river, merely the swirls of muddy water flowing past.

Behind me, farther up the slope, lies a small, huddled form, curled in on itself and blackened, but I refuse to look. Almost without thinking, my fingers flex, feeling the strength and pressure there. I know the power of those hands.

I cannot think about what I may have done.

I can never think about what I may have done.

Across the river, near the bank, a small, grey-furred shape bobs lazily in the water. A twig floats past me. Then a feather.

Though it's wet, I can see it's red.

# Trickster Juice

by Jennifer Crow

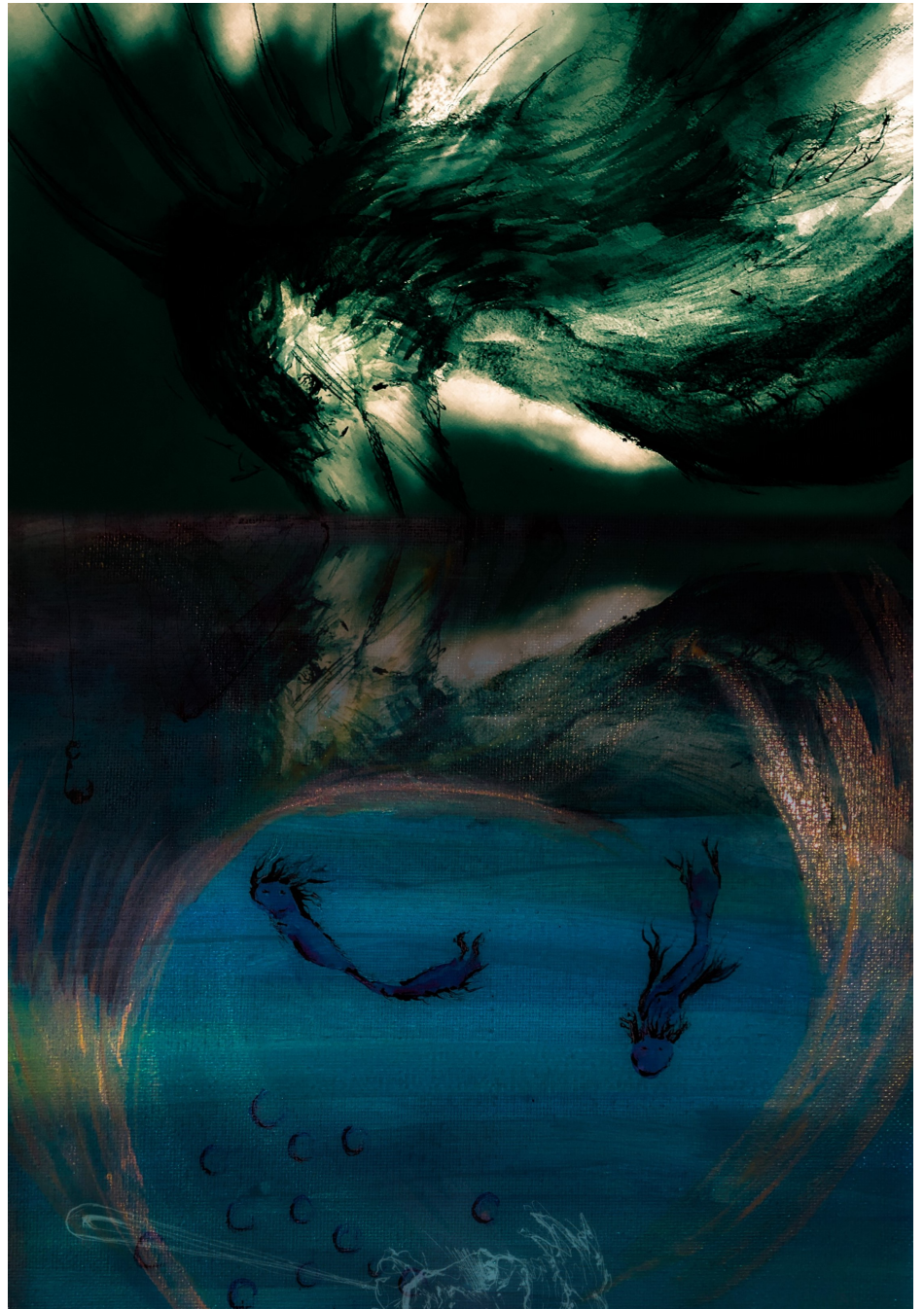
Raven and Coyote meet in a culvert on a wind-blown night and whisper secrets about enemies and allies, about genre and gender, about the way love cracks open geodes and reveals sparkling crystals within the mind. Coyote and Raven have spun out stories for generations, reuniting at the crux of war and invention as tricksters do, their pockets full of counterfeit dollars and trickster juice in green glass bottles stoppered with wax. Raven always marks the melted wax with a careful claw, and Coyote whistles through long teeth as he trots to his city, containers clanking in his satchel—yes, Coyote has a satchel, a god-purse stuffed full of odd ends—snuff boxes and lost keys, broken charms tangled with bits of dried herbs that carry the scent of spells

for romance and for rejection. Raven carries two bottles only, one clutched in each foot, and shares sparingly. Unlike Coyote, Raven knows the fragility of plans, the way life slips out of true faster than even a god can manage, so he only takes as much trickster juice as he can use before the next meeting, when they will huddle under an overpass among the lost, the discarded, and brew up another cauldron full of magic. Maybe both of them hope in different ways, one sure of disaster and ready to cope, one forever winking at the horizon where some new dream awaits his arrival. Raven sees far from his wing-spread vantage spiraling on an updraft, but Coyote sees farther, always sure the best future lies just beyond sight.



# Dive Little Creatures

by R. Mac Jones



# Pickled Lotus

by Glenn Dungan

The main distinction between animals and humans, for Richter, at least, is the uncanny psychic ability to embrace death. This is not to say a dying dog knows it is dying and that its crawling under the porch is a random event, but humans know about death. In a perfect world, for a perfect life, they know their slow engagement with the reaper and welcome it. It is this distinction the hulking ship the S.S. *Lotus* brings to Richter's mind as they approach what once could have been a green and purple hull but has since been eradicated with time and the heat sink of the radiation lurking within. From an outside perspective, the ship is on its last leg, has been for many years, but still it floated, right off the Atlantic Sea, anchored via far-reaching harpoons by the many nations not wanting to take responsibility for it, chaining it to a coral reef in a nautical no-man's land, a non-place. It is not unlike the S.S. *Orchid* six months ago, or the S.S. *Whicker* last year off the Baltic Sea. These husks bob aimlessly, pointlessly, feebly on the ocean, not yet ready to die because they do not know that is an option.

The motorboat skids across the water, wings of bubble and froth skating behind them. Richter looks around him, sees the group that he has been with for the last couple of years. Leon and Jane are reliable, and Richter tolerates their company, which probably borders on friendship. It is more than he could ask for. Sometimes he wonders if they would ever be friends outside of this line of work. They have all come into this contract in financial dire straits for some reason or another, enough to warrant leveraging their lives. This is also a dangerous job, both psychologically and physically. It takes about six months to locate one of these husks and another three months of planning. Only then can they strip the derelict ships with enough confidence and competence to do it right, serving as a reminder all the while how cruel people can be to one another. Yes, Richter thinks,

perhaps it's good to have friends.

The actors do not matter, but during World War II one country developed a deadly strain and infected a large group of sailors (some willing, others not) on a vessel that masqueraded as a merchant ship. Once docked, they would hug, shake, mate, and infect the population within the forty-eight hours they had until their heart literally exploded and erupted fiery blood from their gullet like a burst pipe. It was a virological Trojan Horse. Toss aside the more direct atomic bombs, inflict a pandemic on your enemies. And it worked. And then other countries started doing it. Before long no one was accepting any unsolicited trade coming from international waters. All those Trojan (sea)horses had to turn back or be hit with napalm on the spot. Thus the husks, now aimlessly ricocheting along the aquatic perimeters of a country, knocking about like a drooling child. At first it was the NGOs that paid to get them removed from the ocean, then it became merchant unions who held the purse, and now, as Richter, Leon, and Jane approach the underside of the *Lotus*, it is a mix of war profiteers who want the dormant and dead radioactive plants back and pharmaceutical companies that want to manufacture the cure for any dormant strains still scratching on the human genome like pesky branches against a bedroom window. Richter gave up on morals when they started to name their price.

The *Lotus* is a metal behemoth, barnacled with rust and ill intent. Richter scales the starboard hull with a levy and then helps Leon and Jane onto the dock. Jane carries the glass container meant to hold the dried, brittle petals of these cancerous plants. Long dormant and no longer infectious to humans, certain invested parties have developed technology to revive their stymies. It is all science hokum that Richter does not know and cares not to learn. They walk along the empty



shell of the starboard side. Like all the other ships, it is not built to be empty. The unnatural loftiness of the balconies, the main deck, the interweaving hallways distort space/time. Something is not right about the *Lotus*, but something never is with these ships.

These Trojan Horses always keep their plants in a special vault with expensive lamps to emulate sunlight. It is as secured as a bank vault, but with steady hands and the aided passage of time to accumulate rust, these vaults only required patience, which Jane has in droves. The ships are all built differently, but these vaults are always in the center, acting as the heart that infected the air of every sailor who charted a map, smoked a cigarette, or ate in the mess hall. Richter stopped wondering what it would be like to envision their days, so benign with endless sea, their bodies disintegrating from the inside out. For those who went willingly, did they consider themselves martyrs?

Leon marks the wall with luminescent blue chalk within the bowels of the *Lotus*. Every ten minutes he lights a flare that illuminates the dark caverns of the ship with a ruby glaze. The ship rocks on the water. Up ... down ... up ... down. Industrial flashlights illuminate only a cone in front of them, but they are of good quality and do the job. A thin layer of sea water nips at the heels of their boots.

“Here,” Jane says, stopping them, “it’s here.”

She goes to work wordlessly, bringing out her tools to identify weak points in the vault. She scrapes off a cluster of oysters like shingles, pounds away at the barnacles that fuse together the cinch and axis of the vault. Her hammering sends sharp metallic arrows through the halls, like a penny being dropped down a mineshaft. Within minutes the door creaks open, falling at first into its hinges and the salty film of water at their feet, and then propped against the wall with the combined strength of Richter and Leon. Like clockwork.

Jane sets her industrial flashlight into the corner and rummages into her bag for a vial and a pair of tweezers. Her hands are surgeon hands, and at one point she was a doctor at a respected hospital before saving

the life of a drug lord, and then ended up being a personal retainer. Such was her trajectory before finding her way here, sloshing through stale water and over barnacles, navigating through ghost ships. It is a simple task: pluck the dried stems of the virulent flower, put them in a container, and deliver it via a series of anonymous exchanges.

The *Lotus* rocks along the water. A wave pushes against her rusted hull, sending a metallic groan through the darkness.

“It’s not here,” Jane said, unemotive.

“Come again?” Leon says. He flashes his industrial light on the pedestal, cruising a circle of yellow along the remains of the vault as he does so. “It’s not like it could have gone anywhere.”

Richter hears sloshing at the far end of the hall, the sound of what seems like feet going in and out of water. Another metallic thump. He ignores this. It is always unpleasant being in these husks of ships. Thoughts of his part of the fee are the only motivator for stewing in this briny environ, smelling decaying fish and the earthy, slimy smell of long rotted and bloated bodies. Now that Richter thinks of it, they usually saw bodies floating in the hallways in these ships, bloated and red, sometimes half-eaten by crabs. Sometimes, when the ships are positioned at an angle, the bodies float on top of one another in a cluster of mangled limbs like discarded planks, loose skin still clinging on them like algae. This is probably the case, he thinks, hearing the water slosh outside the vault again.

“Look harder,” Leon says.

“If it’s not here, it’s not here,” Jane argues. Then she turns to them both, a sign that she is done trying to investigate the absence of the virulent flower. “Let’s turn back.”

Richter shakes his head, “If we turn back, not only will we not be paid, but our reputation will be at stake. We need to look harder.”

“Perhaps it floated away,” Leon says, “no other explanation.”

Another metallic clang. The crunch of trash knocking into the water. Leon is about to say something else, but Richter holds up a hand, listening not just for the illusion of feet trotting in the water like their own, but for the pattern to prove it. It is there, slowly, as if the noise materializes and knows it is being listened to. Richter can make out a pattern, but this is broken by a series of loud clangs and, to his shock, a grunt. He looks to the others to confirm that they hear the sound, but their faces already tell him that he is not going crazy.

“Maybe it was taken already,” Richter says.

“I didn’t see any boats on the radar when we approached,” Leon says.

“Maybe they aren’t on radar,” Jane adds, securing the empty airtight vile in her backpack.

Richter draws his pistol and the others follow suit. They step out of the vault and move in tandem with one another. Ghastly smells of rotted fish and crabs permeate the cavernous hallways. Richter figures this is what it is like being in a can of tuna fish. They came across a fork, and when they flash a light on both paths there is no difference; only the rhythm of the water at their ankles, a line of crabs scuttering in both direction on the wall, paint marks of algae growing over the unblinking and dead stares of fish. To their left they hear another grunt amidst a scutter of sloshy steps, and the three of them engage in pursuit down the hall, which leads into darker depths into the undercarriage of the *Lotus*. They have never needed to go into the lower decks of these ships before. It is of no interest to the three of them, and any more minutes spent in this aquatic mausoleum are better spent literally elsewhere. Yet they went in in pursuit of their bounty, taking precarious steps down slippery, barnacle crusted stairs as if their life depends on it. It does.

Another sound to their right and Richter aims his flashlight down the hall. There, in a kaleidoscope frame of orange rust, silver fish scales, and black oyster shells, a figure stands, pale and nonplussed by the sudden light. It is a male, his skin so taugth it looks like it clings to just his bones and nothing more. He wears a suit and button-up shirt

that are heavily disheveled and splotched, brown and green like makeshift camo. Water brushes against bare ankles with skin swollen and cracked, weeping blood over the salt-irritated open wounds like lines of cartography. He has a crab in his hand, its shell punctured with the white meat throbbing both in its exposed body and the man’s fingertips. Clumps of it dribble from his lips.

“Listen,” Richter begins, “we don’t care who you are or who your buyer is. Hand it over.”

“You’ve got got,” Leon says.

The man looks at the three of them, tilts a bald head with strands of silver sprouting like a weed. His eyes are blank, like those of a fish. Slowly, absently, he takes some meat from the feebly snapping crab and shoves it into his mouth, where he proceeds to chew not with his teeth but with his lips.

“Bring us the flower,” Richter says.

“Flower,” the man says, his voice sounding as though dragged through gravel. With gnarled and dry fingers dotted with crab coagulate, he points down the hall, deeper into the threshes. He repeats, “Flower.”

And then he is off down the hall, frantically splashing in the ankle-deep water, necrotic toes dipping into sewage and bacterial orgies. Richter rushes after him, his breathing suddenly labored by the enclosed space. Leon and Jane follow suit, lighting the way with their heavy-duty flashlights, rocking the circles up and down like an erratic buoy. The skeletal man discards the half-eaten crab over a shoulder and Richter smacks it away with the butt of his pistol. He chases the man two lefts, then a right, calling occasionally to the others so they can all help navigate their pursuit.

He turns a corner and stops short. The man is in front of a locked door, the remaining wisps of hair looking like antennas. He looks over his shoulder, sniffs at an oyster that has clung to his suit, and

knocks on the door.

“Flower,” he says again, his shaking eyes focusing on the sudden light of Leon and Jane’s more powerful bulbs. The corneas are hazy, and his nostrils flare like a curious beast above a mouth of broken glass.

With Leon and Jane at his side, Richter admits to himself that he feels a little better. He keeps his pistol aimed at the man, who waits in front of the door. The iron turnstile in front of the door opens with a powerful start and settles into a creaking rhythm. The door pushes inward and in the shadow another man appears, holding one hand over his eyes and squinting. He too is wearing a suit, but his clothes are less destroyed than the wraith’s. His skin, too, is the color of an elephant’s tusk.

He says, half-whistling, “Oh, Mr. Jiminy, what have you brought us?”

Richter says, “We’ve come for the flower.”

“Flower,” Mr. Jiminy says. He starts to giggle.

The man lowers his hand, blinks several more times to adjust to the light, and says, “Come in, come in. You’re letting in the stink.”

“You come out,” Leon says.

He appears more cognizant than Mr. Jiminy, acknowledging the three pirates with their lights and weapons. Trash and fish skeletons push up against the raised lip of the door.

The man speaks as if they knocked on his front door. “Now is not the time for that. You’ve come for the flower, yes?”

“We have guns,” Richter says, “we aren’t afraid to shoot.”

The man opens the door wider, revealing a maw of eternal black. He stands in front of it, framed by the oval perimeter of the threshold,

like a man at the edge of the shore. Mr. Jiminy stares dumbly at them, splashing in the water.

He says, “If you are here for the virulent strain, like I think you are, you know that shooting me will release the virus. You’d die before you made it back to wherever you’ve come from. But let me introduce myself. My name is Helmut Werzig, apprentice cartographer for the S.S. *Lotus*.”

“Apprentice cartographer?” Jane says.

Werzig grimaces, “Well, only cartographer. I try to be respectful. Come inside. It’s dry. We’ll give you the flower.”

Richter looks to Leon and Jane. He nods; they nod back. He says, “We’re keeping our guns.”

“I would hope so,” Werzig said, “it’s the only logical way. But we intend to be your friend.”

“We?” Jane says.

“We,” Werzig echoes.

Slowly, gingerly, Richter leads the way through the drowned hall. The ship rocks sheepishly, swishing the discarded wrappers and eyeballs from right to left and back again. The motion is more subtle here, being so deep into the ocean. Richter keeps his attention on Werzig, even as he approaches the clattering and giggling Mr. Jiminy, who stinks worse than he looks. Mr. Jiminy, Richter realizes, is simply a frantic but docile creature. It feels like he is passing the gaze of a child.

When the three of them step through the threshold, Werzig situates himself in the gap. “Not you,” he says to Mr. Jiminy.

Werzig shuts the door behind them, fastening it shut with laborious grunts before setting into an even speed. Their circles of illumination

only show parts of the room, fragments of a greater picture. In their three cycloptic visages they see tables, used sets of cards, cups.

Werzig warns, “I’m turning on the lights now.”

The room blossoms into illumination with a sharp *click*. They are in a breakroom or a lounge area. Iron tables bolt to the floor along with metal chairs that resist the sway of a boat. Old electronics and amenities like a microwave and refrigerator take up space in the corner kitchenette, emitting an aura of neglect. The sink is bone dry. To the right are magazines and a lounge area. The magazines are crinkly from water bloat and the colors of the covers are faded with the briny water. Outside the steel door, Richter hears Mr. Jiminy padding away into parts unknown, no longer interested, nor seemingly offended, by his exclusion.

A phonograph is playing old-time jazz amidst the undercurrent of creaking metal. The place smells of heavily applied disinfectant, but this only serves to mask the stale, acrid smell of what only reminds Richter of a hospice care. Werzig waits for them to repackage their flashlights, unperturbed that their pistols are kept out, before gesturing for them to follow.

Werzig begins, “Half of us believed in our country, the other half were cattle. Only those who went onto the Lotus willingly understood the virulent strain that turned the ship, and by extension their bodies, into a plague-bringing trojan horse. Oh, what pandemonium our sister ships brought to governments, what chaos they brought to the kings who choked on our blood.”

“There are no kings anymore,” Leon says, “not even during your time, either.”

Werzig stops, looks at his hands. “There will always be kings, sir. The world just calls them something different.”

“How are you all still alive? We hadn’t expected anyone to be in this ship,” Jane says.

“You expected to see a drowned prison full of bloated bodies, no?” Werzig says, “I cannot answer why some of us survived. Our medic had befallen an accident in the beginning. Consumed by those whose minds shattered in the first wave. They say all problems in a ship start with the kitchen.”

The three of them exchange glances. Already Richter is losing patience. He pictures Mr. Jiminy hunched over a cluster of crabs and barnacles, his feet entangled in briny seaweed, stupidly staring at the flashing colors with his milky eyes.

Werzig shepherds them through the cabin, which is an interconnected and seemingly preserved series of rooms. Some of the rooms remain as they are: bunks, latrines, rec rooms. The mess hall is a modest room meant to accommodate shifts of sailors, and it is small but contains an array of crabs, oysters, and flayed fish. They are all dead and simply organized, a display of higher cognitive function which gives Richter comfort.

Werzig continues, “Oh, it’s been hard for the past couple of decades. But the strain has done right by us, as we have done right by it. It has kept us young and spritely.”

He rounds a corner into another hallway. Now it is hard to triangulate exactly where they are in the ship, this once-thought-to-be-abandoned colossus. Werzig brings them to the heart of the domicile cabin, which is proceeded by the sudden introduction of light laughter and soft chatting, the clicking of lighters and following inhales, exhales. Richter exchanges glances with Jane and Leon. Have they really been surviving all along in this nautical mausoleum?

They pass open doors and in them Richter feels himself being watched, even though none of the survivors of this strain seem to pay the three of them any mind. They all wear suits and dresses, much like Werzig, and have similar lacerations on the hems and shoulders, perpetual scabs of brine on the threads. Evidence of open sores on their pallid hands. In some rooms they dance and sway to the jazz music, couples embracing and pulling back as their hips swing. It is

like a soiree, all contained in a seven-by-seven-foot space. A thin layer of water occupies some of the rooms, most likely from a leak between the walls with the rancid water outside. This seems to bother no one. In another room there sits a couple of people, faces unshaven but eyes focused, flipping through magazines and smoking long cigarettes. Barnacles creep up both the legs of the chair and their own legs, as if crystallizing both, a fusion of biomaterial.

Werzig brings them to a back room, which is the only locked space in this area. “You desire the flower, yes?”

“Yes,” Richter says.

He starts to open the door. It looks laborious, but the three of them make no effort to help.

“The flower is dead,” Werzig says, “but we are not.”

He opens the door into a small room. The lights are dimmer here, a marigold yellow. A cluster of people, about seven or eight, stand like totems on the floor. This too is waterlogged, although the murky water is void of any other living creatures or trash. They sway with the rhythm of the *Lotus*. Smears of green and red coagulate on the wall like a cluster of apostrophes and question marks. They stare aimlessly at their feet, shifting occasionally to the walls, twitching and scratching at themselves. Their attire is asynchronous with the likes of Mr. Werzig and the other survivors. Some wear flotation vests and windbreakers. When some of them turn, the light catches the carabiners still attached to their hips.

“What are we looking at?” Leon says.

Werzig answers, “The flower talks to us. It knows that it no longer lives in its base form. You will not be able to retrieve the flower because there is none. Instead, it lives with us, as vessels. For those who have become infected, the flower recognizes our drive to topple these kingdoms in the name of a bigger idea, bigger than ourselves. The flower understands this. The flower understands the need for propa-

gation. In this sense, we are linked, each one of us here.”

“What about Mr. Jiminy?” Richter asks, “Are you linked with him and his madness, too?”

“No,” Werzig says, offended, “his kind were slaves and prisoners, rapists and pedophiles. The kind we kept locked up. For us the flower was a gift, for them, these monsters in the old world, it was a penance. The flower rejected them. The virus ate away their minds like maggots, a psychic lobotomy. There is a point when we stopped needing traditional food, but they didn’t. They became ravenous, mindless creatures. Soon, they invaded our dreams, encroaching on the psychic unity the flower had given us. They are a virus within the virus. Hence the closed doors. Steel seems to help sever the connection to Mr. Jiminy and the others.”

“The others? There are more out there?” Leon says.

“It is a big ship, my pirate guests. Although I’m sure you already figured that out.”

“I don’t understand,” Jane says, addressing the swaying figures standing ankle-deep in the runoff, “these people ... you keep them in the dark? Locked away? Are they like Mr. Jiminy, crazed, chaotic?”

Werzig shakes his head, “They were the crew that got here first.”

The totems idle stupidly, blank and absent. Their backs are cragged with split wounds. Saltwater drips the curves of their backs. A tangle of seaweed crawls up their arms and legs.

Werzig continues, “The flower wants us to propagate. Its strands have dried up and died because the hosts could not live. But we are stronger. We’ve embraced the flower and in turn it has given us life. Now, it is time for the flower to leave this ship, just as intended.”

“What did you do to them?” Jane asks.

“We’re seeing if they turn into us, or *them*.”

Richter starts to back up. Briny water sloshes at his ankles. He raises a pistol to Werzig, alternating between his calm interior and the wraiths standing in the corners of the room. What has befallen their psyches to make them this way? They do not seem psychologically obliterated like the crab-eating wraiths lurking in the halls. They make noises that seem rudimentary, but with acknowledgment. This thought unnerves Richter, who does a quick cost/benefit calculation. He needs the money, as do Jane and Leon, but this ... Richter feels as if he’s walked into a spider’s nest.

One of the wraiths turn, a tendril of drool trailing down its chin. Its eyes are milky, and it is bald. Richter cannot tell much of the human that it once was. It looks almost batlike. He wants none of this. To exist in this drowned limbo is a fate worse than death. A barnacle pulses from its clavicle like an open sore. Richter looks onward, seeing now as his eyes adjust to the darkness that some of them are missing limbs, exposed spikes where the bone snapped and never healed over, patchworked by skin grafts of seaweed and fish scales. Mutants, they have all become mutants.

“We’re done here,” Richter says. He steps out of the room, feels the density of the thick water at his feet fall and then hit solid steel. Jane and Leon follow, each with damp pants legs and layers of sweat. The smell of rotting fish permeates throughout.

“Take us with you,” Werzig says, “let us propagate your world. You’d get our DNA. Make that cure you and the last group and the group before them have been trying so hard to find.”

“No,” Richter raises his pistol, “I said we’re done here.”

Werzig furrows his brows. The hallway amplifies his voice, which has taken on a grating tone. The jazz music reduces to a whisper. Around the corner Richter hears movement in the water, the sloshing of soiree-adorned feet wading through fish guts and smashed oyster shells. The ship rocks as if trying to sooth a baby.

“Do you want to be like the last group? We don’t want to keep populating with whatever scraps of biomass we can get. We are a civilized culture, full of rational people. Don’t you understand what you are denying us?”

“I don’t like this,” Jane says.

Werzig steps out of the dark room and closes the heavy door behind him. The others start to appear in the doorways, standing idle, watching. Some have cigarettes balanced in their fingers, emitting sour odors of burnt seaweed. The group of dancers still hold onto each other, but now they stand like sentinels, ramrod straight, inactive department store mannequins.

Werzig roars, “We are existing on *scraps!*”

A hand stretches out, bony and pale. Her hand unrolls like spider legs, her wrist moving in short, skeletally stiff bursts as her bracelet rattles like Christmas tinsel.

“Take me,” she says, “I want to see the world again. Please.”

“No, you bitch,” another one says, throwing an old magazine into the water where it bloats and then disintegrates. The man has small razor cuts on his cheeks and chin, hiding underneath an attempt at a kept beard. His teeth have yellowed. “It’s Karl. Karl will survive in the new world longer and you will live through Karl.”

“We are one,” the dancers say in unison, turning their heads in Richter’s direction and then into the room across the hall with frantic, sudden movements; a moth suddenly taking off. Their voices are discordant, a mix of soft tenures of pleasure and groans of pain, “if one of us goes, we all go, and we will leave these old, bloated husks of flesh. We are one. We are one. We are one.”

Werzig says, “No. I found them. I deserve to go.”

“We are one,” the dancers chant.



The woman continues, “We propagate via fluids. Let me go. I am the sanest of us, and the most beautiful. This body still has more use.”

The man smoking the cigarette flicks the cylinder in the water, ignored the feeble sizzle of smoke. “It has been of much use to us, Hilde, for we do not care about the open sores underneath that dress of yours, the seaweed coming in and out of your holes.”

The woman’s lower lip trembles, a flash of clarity. “Leave me alone, Gunther. I’m only human.” She directs her attention to Richter and the others. “Please. I’m only human. This flower is a rapist. Our bodies are prisons.”

“No, I found them,” Werzig says, stepping forward, “I am the most democratic, the cleverest. Hilde, you’d die in a gutter, naked and alone. Gunther, you’d get yourself killed in a pub brawl. And Karl, you will die because you will be outsmarted by the nearest con-man. No, you fools, no. Me, Helmut Werzig. I will propagate our virus. I am the most hospitable, most amicable. I will eat with the politicians, rub shoulders with the union men and dock workers.”

“You are arrogant is what you are,” Hilde says.

Werzig says, “That’s the human in you talking about the human in me. We are more than that.”

“We are one!” the dancers yell again.

Hilde advances her jangled hand. She brushes a gnarled talon over Leon’s shoulder. “Please. I’m tired of living. This virus needs a new host, a better host. Let it find someone healthier. Please.” Then she blinks again, loses that trembling part of herself. She arches her back, bites her lower lip. “We can go somewhere dark. I know of a comfy place. Come into union with my body. That will solve everything for everybody.”

“We are one!” The dancer’s discordant voices start to break into laughter. They intertwine once more, flitting in the slogged room.

Richter looks down at his feet as they pedal back out of the hallway and the blank stares of Werzig and his companions. He hears Jane’s steady breathing behind him, the scratching of her backpack swaying like a pendulum. There is an absence of space behind the two of them and Richter looks back to find Leon still in the hallway, this drowned mausoleum, being grabbed by the gnarled fingers of the women and now by the starchy sleeves of Gunther and his nicotine-stained teeth. His body is pushed in several directions, like a doll desired by multiple children. The dancers prance in the adjacent room, kicking up pebbles of salt water from their feet. Someone turns up the jazz music on the phonogram across the hall.

“Help!” Leon screams, “Richter, Jane!”

He falls backward and Werzig’s companions pounce on him as a trumpet solo reaches a crescendo. They drag him along the rusted hallway and Werzig stares above the tumble at Richter and Jane, his eyes unwavering and voracious. He maintains the eye contact as he reopens the door to the mutates so the others can throw Leon in, his screams drowned by smooth jazz. He twists, writhes as fingers dig into his cheeks, reach under his ribs. He fires his pistol into the crowd. The aggressors stop, and Karl looks down at his stomach, examines the bullet hole.

“Now Karl is leaking,” he says, nonplussed by the wound. No blood escapes his body. This realization causes Leon to squirm and begin weeping; his once hardened exterior reduces to madness, the aggressive encroach of the abyss. Karl picks Leon up by his neck, “If your mind doesn’t shatter, then the flower will take you, and Karl will be freed.”

“You popped him,” Gunter says, “now you’ve damned yourself.”

“No, no!” Leon shouts.

He fires again at Karl, who is only pushed back by the force of the blast, like hitting a sack of wheat. Karl grits his teeth and throws Leon into the vault. The half-consumed and stupid sentinels, their

dolphin-like skin full of open wounds and seaweed, turn to glance at Leon, half aware of Leon's intrusion into their cellar.

"Leon," Jane shouts, "we have to save him!"

"No," Richter says, "he's already dead. Werzig said that shooting them will infect ourselves. I'm taking him up on that threat."

"We can't leave him, Richter."

"We can't save him either."

Werzig closes the door. The others brush themselves off, scraping off dried seaweed and clinging clams. Hilde's jewelry rattles on a listless wrist. They straighten themselves and Werzig points with a gnarled finger.

"If they will not take us, we shall take them," he says.

The others run after the pair, a flurry of dress shirts and bow ties, hems of glittering skirts. Richter and Jane retreat, moving past the cafeteria, bloated feet snapping at their heels. Richter sprints to the entrance and begins to turn the stiff, heavy wheel. His hands struggle to find purchase on the rusted spokes and latches.

"Open it, Richter! They are coming around the hall!"

"It feels so heavy."

Richter grunts, feels fire ignite in his muscles. How had Werzig been able to open the door with such little effort? Richter is twice his size and more fit.

Jane rushes to him and holds a spoke. Spots of blood dot their hands as the rust cuts into their palms. They pull at the spokes together, heaving in unison. Richter puts his legs against the jamb and uses the leverage to pull his full body weight. In the corner of their eyes, Werzig and the others appear. Richter swears and with a final grunt

falls onto his back, the wheel loosening. Jane opens the door, revealing the dark void of the hallway outside like a black hole. A hot, salty gust of dead fish, exposed crabs, and rotted seaweed sweeps into the lounge.

Werzig and the others cross the room. Flecks of Leon's blood coat Hilde and Karl's fingertips. Jane cocks her pistol and puts it to her head. Her eyes are red with tears.

"Any step forward and I'll blow my brains out."

This stops the pursuers. Werzig steps in front of them. "You wouldn't."

"I would," Jane says, nestling the pistol into her temple, "those flowers can't invade my mind if my brains are on the floor, and I'd rather be dead than live in that cavern like some *cattle*."

Werzig frowns, "Or you could just take us with you to the mainland. Simple as that."

Jane does not respond to him. She tells Richter to get up and he does. He watches Gunter and Hilde begin to twitch and tap their feet. Their nostrils start to flare. Hilde puts jangled wrists to her head and begins massaging her scalp.

She says, "Close the door, please. I can feel them outside, taste what they taste. Please. Cut off the link."

Richter looks to the void. He remembers Werzig suggesting that the likes of Mr. Jiminy and the other people whose minds became shattered would begin to infect them, too. The gaping maw of salt and floating eyeballs is a noxious aura of protection. Slowly, cautiously, Richter and Jane step backwards into the dark hall, back into the bowels of the S.S. *Lotus*. Werzig appears at the threshold, lips trembling and eyes bulging. He descends into madness before their eyes. Wordlessly, Werzig shuts the door behind them, complaining about scraps, and leaves them in darkness. Once the door is fastened, a dis-

cordant series of shrieks and wails erupt; sounds of anger and sadness, of hunger. It is monstrous, beastly, full of gargling and nails against chalkboard. It makes Richter's hair stand on end.

"Leon ..." Jane says, fishing out her flashlight.

"He's gone, Jane. Either he's going to be one of them, or ..." he brings out his own flashlight, scans into the empty hallway with its ankle-deep water, crust of barnacles, "or one of *them*. He was gone the second they grabbed him."

They navigate through the darkness, their paths carved by the circular scope of the flashlights, side by side. Their ankles brush against strands of seaweed and half-eaten crabs dissected by withered, scabby hands. Pink coagulates of shredded fish bob along masts of barnacles. Each turn brings them to another corner, each a similar sight. The S.S. *Lotus* is a dreadnought, but no larger than a typical supply ship. These virulent trojan horses were built to mimic supply ships for this reason. Yet somehow, it seems labyrinthine on the inside, a complex network of twists and turns existing beyond all logic of dimension. Occasionally the ship will bob from a passing wave or snap with the random pinging of metal against metal.

"Here," Richter says, "I think it's here."

Jane nods and they make the turn, swinging their cones of light with them like a lame limb. There, in the scope, stands Mr. Jiminy. A shattered mind, now holding a flailing fish in both hands and biting down on its shimmering scales, flakes and white guts popping from the sides of his mouth. His milky eyes stare at them but remain as absent as before, a tongue lopping out from his lower lip.

"Flower," he says.

White figures, all willowy and in torn cocktail suits, appear in the cones of light behind Mr. Jiminy. They tilt their bald skeletal heads and drop whatever they are trying to eat. Blocks of barnacles, oyster shells, and twitching crabs fall at their ankles. They stand frozen in

the light, blinking stupidly, tendrils of drool lazily dropping from their chins.

"Oh no," Jane says.

At once Mr. Jiminy and the others start after them with long, stilted legs. The sound of breaking water trails in front of them. Richter and Jane break into a run, turning randomly, each trying to keep the light in front of them and stay with one another. Gargled voices echo metallicly in the distance, piercing through the dark. Occasional laughter and giggles sound like broken keys on a piano. They continue to run, splashing through the ichor, crushing whatever runoff settled underneath the ankle-deep water. Wraiths appear in their cones of light, sometimes running at them in a white, stinking flash, sometimes in pursuit down another hall. It appears that their shattered minds cannot comprehend directions, having wandered so aimlessly around these subterranean catacombs for many years. It is illumination which attracts them. Richter tells Jane to shut off her flashlight.

Now they wade through the darkness, gingerly turning corners once giggles and laughter subside down the hall. One of them occupies the same hall as Richter and Jane. The stink of rotting fish, while unpleasant, is a good indicator of their coming, and one of the wraiths comes so close that the shoulder of his bloated jacket grazes upon Jane's nose. Richter puts a calloused hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming. Once the wraith passes, they continue their escape, eventually making their way to the familiar corner leading to the stairs. The blue-white glow of Leon's markings looks like the golden rays of Heaven.

"Go," Richter whispers.

They reach the foot of the stairs. The door to the middle level of the hip is ajar, having been thrown open in haste after they discovered the vault being empty. Richter follows up the rear, watching Jane ascend the steps two at a time. Once he makes sure that Jane is well up the steps, he lifts his legs from the water and feels rubbery hands wrap around his neck.

“Flower.” A voice whispers into his ear. It is gargled, hardly language.

Richter feels like one of the fishes or crabs in Mr. Jiminy’s grasp. With arms much stronger than the branch-like limbs he possesses, Mr. Jiminy slams Richter into the adjacent walls. Rushes of blood fall from his brow, and saltwater stings the open wound. He feels his throat closing, and Richter fires the gun at Mr. Jiminy, who only stumbles from the impact, unaware of the pistol. His gnarled hands are cragged, rubbery, and smell like dead fish. He giggles like a child amused by toy blocks. Jane calls after him.

“No!” Richter says, trying to pry Mr. Jiminy’s hands from his throat and face. “Get out of here!”

Jane stands on the stairs for a second. She locks eyes with Richter and understands. She watches Richter claw at the bottom of the stairs for a second longer, watches his face slam into the metal steps, his open mouth gulping the stale, necrotic salt water, and ascends the rest of the way. Richter fights for purchase, his body scraping against

smashed oyster shells and barnacles. He aims his gun, fires two more times into Mr. Jiminy’s torso. Mr. Jiminy recoils, paws at Richter’s throat, and tears out a part of his carotid artery, tossing it aside like a slug. Richter gasps in a final pulse of energy and aims the pistol at Mr. Jiminy’s temple, firing. A flash of light, the smell gunsmoke dominates the salty, rancid air. Mr. Jiminy falls to his side. Richter leans on the steps, a gorge of blood rising into his throat, the sticky warmth of it trailing down his chest. With one hand on the bottom step and another resting on Mr. Jiminy’s dead body, he leans his head on a concave of barnacles crusted upon the wall.

He pictures himself looking at the ship from above in X-Ray vision. Deep within the bowels of the S.S. *Lotus* Leon lay trapped like cattle, a food source for the strange commune of Helmut Werzig and his associates, or whatever they have turned into. Richter sits now at the bottom of the stairs, drowning not in these damned waterlogged hallways but on his own blood, never to see shore again. And Jane, by the grace of whatever god may or may not exist, frantically unties their boat and starts the engine with bloodied, shaking fingers, the madness of the S.S. *Lotus* falling away in her wake.

# The Mirror

by John C. Mannone

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*

—Plato

Some people are afraid of crowds, others have a crippling fear of spiders.

However, I cannot—will not—look in the mirror. It speaks dirty things to me. Its pale, shriveled eyes are sunk deep into calcified sockets; skin, a gangrene yellow. A carmine tongue darts between the calculus of its tubular teeth. I can smell its breath even after I shut my eyes. I cannot do what it says.

I won't. I will not kill my mother.

I bash the mirror against the tile floor into a hundred pieces—each shard a dagger. Voices scream in my head. They won't shut up. A hundred eyes are upon me.

“Mother! Mother, I need you!”

“Coming dear ... Oh my ... you are broken.”

“Mother! What is that?”

“Don't worry, Son, there's an art to dying. I have a new mirror for you.”

# Potential

by Sara Backer

Wicked faeries gather at the racetrack  
drinking champagne in a luxury box  
while little mortals roast in the sun  
on metal fold-up seats.

The faeries plan the next christening.  
Malevola favors classic curses: ugliness,  
thwarted love, long lasting comas.  
Venala seeks a crueler gift.

*Look, she says, how the mechanical rabbit  
torments greyhounds who run in circles  
for greedy gamblers—faster, faster,  
until their dogged hearts explode.*

*Let us give this child the cruelty of the parent,  
teacher, critic, boss, and gambler: a lifetime  
of potential. A game she can never win.  
A game that will make her sycophant and slave.*

*If we make her believe in perfection,  
she will shackle her wagon to others' approval.  
Make her think she can win an impossible prize—  
and tease her with honorable mentions.*

The faeries watch the dogs run, sweating,  
gasping as the metal hare smoothly glides ahead.  
*No one ever says you have now fulfilled  
your potential because it can't be done.* Glasses clink!

The waitress keeps her wings inside her uniform.  
This is her second job, for goodness doesn't pay.  
She urges her students to let the wagon careen in space  
and let the dogs run wild in a foggy field.



# Raindrops

by Nicola Brayán



# ferried away

by Claire McNerney

the summer after the market crashed  
we went to a party in the lake  
(in, not at)  
sneaking past the fireflies  
and the fairies dressed just so,  
bioluminescence speckling their dresses  
with unnatural starlight.

the lakehouse was a retreat,  
the lake, gentler than any city pool  
we donned last summer's dresses  
in lieu of swimwear, pink for me  
and champagne for you,  
always your favorite,  
the capelet billowing in the water  
as you led me under the dock,  
hand in hand,  
to another world.

here, the lily pads were dance floors,  
air and water equally fluid,  
and we breathed between them,  
we silly humans, giggly off  
the joy of rebellion,  
of knowing we shouldn't be here,  
and dancing anyways.  
you kissed me with joy  
and you went to find a drink.

the others swirled in green and gold,  
aglow from the inside,  
sharp teeth and ears and eyes with pupils  
like the diamonds they wore  
they were all diamond, through and through,  
and when you stopped to ask directions  
from one with hair as painfully shiny as the sun,  
I knew we were through, too.

he kissed your hand and your spine jolted,  
straight as a metal rod, foreignly solid  
in this liquid world  
he kissed your wrist and you followed him  
I screamed your name  
you didn't look back,  
your arm moved mechanically, to his,  
and even though you never waltzed  
you did for him.

charmed,  
I'm sure, by his diamond eyes,  
his diamond lips, his diamond voice,  
sharp enough to shape you into  
anything he wanted.

water stained my dress,  
the night air too warm, too humid,  
we had come here hand in hand,  
but now I am alone.

# Small Claims

by JD Hurley

You won't like it." Booker's frontal tattoos shimmered iridescently, a body chuckle peculiar to Synners. "Another 'she said/she said.'"

Opal Mars sighed, as did Grace, her snoozing symbiotic canine. The whitehaired pair—the judge pro tem and the violet-eyed dog—shared an immune system, a nervous system, a residence, and who could say how much else.

"Put it on the Jot Grid. I'm too antsy for a mind meld. A quick look, then the park." Hearing "park," Grace's left eye flicked open and her right triangular ear twitched.

"It's about time," Grace snorted. Opal/Grace laughed.

"Hey. This is about justice," Booker chided, adjusting his tattoos and swiftly damping signals from their laughter. Life was painful for synesthiacs—Synners in slang. Lacking sensory filtering—proper processing—Synners felt each input as painful, potentially lethal cacophony. A whiff of scent, breeze on skin, water in the throat, a loved one whispering their name—all torture for a pure Synner.

Partial synesthesia had become common in the decades following genetically modified neural tuning. Those who smelled colors, say, or saw taste were by no means as rare as they'd once been. No single causation theory gained general acceptance. A popular yet unfounded theory made the culprit contaminated food, viciously maligning Planthead fungus modifications. The attempt to grow prejudice backfired. Thanks to one marketing genius, partial Synner mods—prosthetic sensory processors—had become a fashion statement. Like eyeglasses with plain glass, dummy Synner mods were accessories.

But while partial Synners could pass with panache, pure, one hundred percent Synners remained rare and shockingly shunned, as those suspected of being vampires or werewolves were long ago. Synesthiacs, everybody knew, went stark raving mad, their brain tissue turned to mush by the bombardment of indecipherable input. Isolation had been the only treatment and the prognosis of the affected was poor.

Booker had been conceived at the right time. Diagnosed in utero as one hundred percent Synner, Booker had been hooked up to a sensory input filter unit (SIFU). At the age of consent, Booker made two choices: one mundane and one life-shaping. First, the mundane: as every sentient did at the age of consent, Booker picked identifiers. In homage to a grandparent, Booker selected "it."

"It" was good enough for the old Grand, so "it" is good enough for me."

The other choice colored every life facet. Instead of relying on SIFU tech, Booker had elected transmutation—a procedure to decouple sensory input with a bypass sending unprocessed signals to cutaneous layer impregnated with chromophores and microfilaments. All feelings went to its skin. The tattoos covering its body were ninety percent Synner reprocessing function and ten percent (mainly in the face and hands) reconfigurable cosmetic hacks.

Donning day garb, Booker could pass for a non-Synner and be easy on the eyes at that, not merely on account of the facial hacks, but crediting in equal measure good taste and good bones. Still, Opal's house was one of the few places Booker could relax and let the tattoos function, without covering up. More than once it'd caused a call to the authorities when its tattoos fired up in a public venue.

“Justice. Yes,” Opal said as Grace closed her eyes and dozed. “Not everyone can afford law courts, not with justice algorithms costing what they do. Even access to courts with provably inferior algorithms costs an arm and a leg. Small claims court is the only no-fee court. In small claims you get a human judge—no algorithm. Because volunteers serve as judges, it keeps costs down. It’s just a quirk of budgeting that there’s no AI. If we had to pay the royalties on any proprietary justice algorithms, it’d be too pricey for most civilians. I consider serving as a pro tem judge a civic duty.”

“Yes, and your civic duty always volunteers me.”

“You’ve no obligation.” True enough. Booker was cocreator of the leading independent tech report with Opal and Grace and could easily have qualified to serve as a judge, if not for the little matter of—well, never mind.

“Sure. But if I don’t push you and Grace along—” Booker turned palms upward and winked mischievously at Grace, who’d opened her eyes a crack at her name.

“Time would be squandered, so you often say. What’s the case?”

“Like I said. It’s a ‘she said/she said.’”

“A bit more specific, please.”

“Something you’d only see in small claims court. A dopple wants a divorce.”

A dopple was a proxy for hire. In exchange for money or other legal tender, a dopple put on a customizable exo-suit. The exo-suit took on the form selected by the buyer. The exo-suit connected the dopple with the buyer via a quantum entangler link: This way, the buyer could be in two places at once and live two lives simultaneously. A wealthy artist could remain a quirky recluse, yet, by means of a dopple, ceaselessly gambol in public, entertain the fans, and promote, promote, promote.

Celebrities, when exo-suits were first introduced, had fueled dopple demand. Some say it started when politicians paid homeless people to wait in line for them. Rubbish, said others, proxies have always been used. But dopples were out of fashion. Anyone with money—or morals—used a Mekk instead.

Mekks (mechanicals) were non-sentient co-robotic devices. The Mekk Manufacturers Union (MMU) lobbied year after year for outlawing doppling.

Dopples were dirt cheap. Poor humans abounded, but only the poorest resorted to doppling. Some sold their entire lives, assigning contract payments to their heirs and assigns. “Skint as a dead dopple” was a scornful vulgarity.

“Proceed,” Opal said. Grace, sprawled on the cool blue floor, dozed.

“In regards to the contract of DoppleJaneDoe (DJ) versus Buyer Author B #787942, (Buyr). These facts are stipulated. Nearly twenty years ago, a young author using the pseudonym Sparticle propagated a piece entitled *Solitary*, which became an overnight phenom.”

The Jot Grid showed a flurry of lede lines. A triumph! Spectacular! There was a blurry rush of publicity touting the genius of *Solitary*.

“Overwhelmed by pernicious media attention, author-Buyr was canceling appearances and hiding. The publisher was horrified at this squandering of good PR. Internal marketing gurus had tagged Buyr as talented but lacking.

“Here—an excerpt from internal coverage memo: ‘[Author] is solitary, poor, hungry, mousy, and short. To make a blockbuster from her we need a BRAND. Commence operation doppelganger.’”

“The publisher sent out reps, found Buyr, commiserated with the artist’s desire for time to actually write, clucked with concern over her fatigue at serving at the beck and call of consumers, and declared a sincere desire to be of assistance.

“Let us help,” the publisher importuned. “We’ll advance you funds—you can get an exosuit. We’ll help find you someone to wear the suit to be Sparticle in public, and all the time you can stay safe at home.”

“Buyr liked this idea. The publisher loved the idea. With an exo-suit, they could craft the crowd-pleasing figure they’d brand ‘Sparticle.’ Not mousy, like Buyr, but a real blockbuster character better than Buyr. The publisher advertised for a dopple with the usual terms: complete renunciation of identity for the contract duration and total availability for promo activities, including archival holo-body storage for posterity, and memory ablation at contract termination. When it was all over, the dopple would get a brain wipe and would remember nothing of working in the suit, nothing of the job. After the brain wipe, the dopple was paid a lump sum for the service during the contract—the only money they would ever see. The dopple was free to move on to another job.

“Within days, DJ signed the contract and was fitted into the suit, and the external features of Sparticle were designed. That’s how Dopplesparticle was created, Dopplesparticle played by DJ and Buyr joined through the exo-suit interface.”

“Clever,” Opal interrupted without opening her eyes. “That language sets up the premise nicely. If DJ wrote this, she’s as intelligent as she’s impecunious.”

The Jot Grid voice continued.

“For the past nineteen plus cycles, Dopplesparticle has appeared to promote the works of Buyr, DJ in exo-suit model number LMNO2200.”

At the suit model number, Grace flicked an ear. Though her eyes were shut, Opal nodded.

“At two o’clock on the afternoon of the tenth day of the ninth month, DJ entered the small claim court mobile kiosk in the city of Ochre and filed for divorce.

“Here’s the twist,” Booker said, reading ahead and talking faster than the Jot Grid. “DJ argues being a dopple makes her—to use the archaic term for a personal services contract—married to Buyr. She has a right to memories created during the marriage.”

“Sounds crazy. Using the outmoded marriage theory to avoid a brain scrape.”

“There’s more. She argues the dopple contract is unconscionable, should be voided and reformed as a marriage contract under the laws of this jurisdiction, and then she wants a divorce!”

“An interesting point of law.”

“Isn’t it a dramatic ploy? The ‘marriage’ and ‘divorce’ lingo.” Booker yawned, his tattoos turning a downy dove grey.

“I meant the plea of unconscionable contract,” Opal said. “A contract invalid if one party has insufficient bargaining power.”

“Right.” Booker ploughed on, “Why get so worked up about a routine memory ablation? Medicos have been using it since forever to erase pain. Erasing job recall uses the same principle. Why does she want to remember job stuff anyway?” Booker rummaged in the case file.

“Here. This looks interesting.” Booker’s voice took on the orange tones of a Tuscan sunrise, plucking a pink strand and flicking it onto the Jot Grid projector core. A scene grew around the trio like a phalanx of trees surrounds campers huddled by a warm fire.

*A single shimmering spotlight pierces the inky black stage. Dopplesparticle strides to the bright oval. She sees an abyss. Squinting squeezes out an escarpment of faces smooshed together like noisy birds on a cliff. Beak and squawk and flap and stench. Soul guano. But...ah. Yes. There is One. The One smile reaching across eons, the eyes and the smile cut a tether, make a gust, a gale, a doldrum-conquering ripple that persists, and persisting rises above the highest*



*sun on the horizon.*

The Jot Grid projection fades.

“That’s it?” Booker was incredulous, tattoos micro-pulsing cerise.  
“Seriously?”

Grace got up and silently padded to a window. Sun shone on her white fur and through her erect ear, showing pink as it passed through. Her violet eyes glowed like Zimbabwe sapphires.

Opal and Grace exchanged a look.

“You don’t understand,” Opal said gently. “No way you could.”

“You’re a transmuter,” Grace said.

“Don’t say it like it’s dirty.” Booker’s tattoos clouded like a gathering storm. “And so what?”

“Side effects of transmuting,” Opal said, “are numb patches here and there. Unavoidable.”

“You can’t know how it feels,” Grace added, her tone gentle. Neither wanted Booker to get more defensive. Nobody spoke for a breath or three.

“The dopple felt seen. She doesn’t want to forget that,” Opal said.

Booker struggled, tattoos roiling, but spoke in groomed tones like sepia copperplate on parchment.

“The dopple was imprisoned deep inside an exo-suit. Who could see her?”

“A mystery, but it happens.” Opal sighed. Booker shook its head to clear the wafting curvy and cherubic scent.

Opal Mars fiddled absently with the judge pro tem insignia. She’d sent her preliminary ruling. The parties could decide how they wanted to proceed. Grace was still, her fluffiness pure as the first snowfall.

“Isn’t there a way to parse the memories?” Booker asked, sincere as a green kelp forest, as if contributing a solution diluted the sting of not comprehending.

“What are you getting at?”

“Use a Point of View splicer. Recast the memories. Edit out stuff coming from Buyr. That way, the dopple retains only her own memories.”

“That’s an interesting approach.” Grace spoke in a conciliatory tone directly to Booker’s mind without moving her lips.

“There’s a drawback.” Opal shook her head. “Memories created via the exo-suit link are like conjoined twins that cannot be divided and both live. Cleverness and skill could, perhaps, effect a splice. But what the dopple would have wouldn’t really be a memory that could be experienced as a memory. It’d be hazy, like a dream that has slipped away.”

“More painful than no memory at all,” Grace added.

“Back to the brain wipe.” Booker slumped. “Mekks are so much simpler. A Mekk’s memory is the owner’s property. A machine from start to finish.”

“But dopples are human, even if they’ve sold their time, their bodies, every bit of their life. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Grace opened both violet eyes, shining in the afternoon sun filtering past the shade. From one angle it appeared she had a green streak in her left eye, but it was a trick of the light. To Booker, her eyes



sounded like oboes, with a touch of cardamom.

“They have time to review my preliminary ruling.” Opal rose from her seat. “The dopple’s contract is not up for renewal for another month—the twentieth anniversary. A media blitz with Dopplesparticle is just wrapping up. Calendar this for fourteen days.” The calendar marked itself.

Off they went to the park.

\* \* \*

Seven days later, the updated judicial dispatch showed the Sparticle case had been struck from the roster. Why? Had DJ agreed to a brain scrape? Or had Buyr agreed to “divorce”?

Booker stuck its head into the holHelm interface, letting the dark web swirl through the transducer.

“Plug me in. I’ve found it. Let’s watch on the Jot.”

Opal obliged and fired it up. The scene was a huge coliseum, a promo for what audiences worldwide hungered for: Sparticle’s latest output. The reclusive author Buyr, safe and sound far away, linked with the doppleJane via the suit model LMNO2200. Sparticle was on the stage, a halo of light in a sea of black.

The dopple scanned the blur of faces and settled on a pair of eyes in the third-row center. As if time were moving like honey in November, the gaze held, and then the uplink in the exosuit sparked a suspicious green, followed by an explosive pop at Buyr’s haven a continent away. When the smoke cleared, Buyr was a charred heap. In the coliseum, the audience cheered, unaware and unconcerned. The dopple finished the job. Sparticle took an encore.

“Freak exo-suit overload. Buyr drowned in an inferno of sensory input,” said Booker.

“But how did DJ avoid injury?” asked Opal.

“Dunno. Weird malfunction. It never should’ve been a bidirectional link.”

“It says here the publisher will use archival material to generate Sparticle. With a dead artist, they can squeeze out profits by reworking what’s in storage,” Opal said.

“How ghastly,” said Grace.

“Could it’ve been deliberate?” Booker asked, taking off the holHelm. “The suit malfunction? Seems a little fishy.”

“Perhaps,” began Opal, weaving a hypothetical like an Orb spider’s web, “perhaps Buyr told the publisher she was going to let DJ keep her memories and asked the publisher to get a Mekk or another dopple. Publishers see a world where everything’s for sale. Dopples are wretches who’ll sell all they hold dear to the highest bidder. The publisher won’t risk an unscraped dopple—that’d be losing control of the Sparticle franchise.

“DJ knows precisely what Buyr told the publisher—remember, she was in the LMNO2200 suit. That suit model should’ve been recalled for link malfunction. It had been shown that some percentage of link units used in that model were bidirectional. As designed, the link is unidirectional: the Buyr controls the dopple and controls the link. We know the link was on. DJ might’ve seen the publisher fiddling with the exo-suit controls and heard a plot. Who knows?

“No matter what she witnessed, it’ll never go to court. Dopples can only get into small claims court. But a case against a publisher can’t be decided in small claims. You have to go to an algorithm-cased court, one with at least mid-level justice algorithms. That’d cost plenty.

“The dopple couldn’t get into the proper court till they stop being a dopple—they need the end of contract payout. But to get the payout, they have to have the brain scrape and therefore couldn’t testify.”

Opal inhaled through her nose, as if to identify a captivating aroma. “Not unless ...” began Booker, tattoos flashing boldly. “Now the publisher’s got the dopple’s contract. They’ll never let her go,” interrupted Grace. Opal hovered into silence like a dragonfly on a lily pad. Grace harrumphed. Not a comfortable sound. Booker felt razor blades in its guts. “She has her memories,” Booker said softly, adjusting tattoos to medium expression, and setting voice to dulcet. Outside, the day was a peacock in spring.

\* \* \*

“That scenario doesn’t read,” Grace objected. “This makes more sense. Pay attention,” she commanded as she told an alternate version:

Before going to the park, Opal sent a preliminary ruling. Jane/Buyr read it and agreed completely because, after nineteen plus years together, their hearts did beat as one, and not only owing to LMNO2200 bidirectional link. After getting joined through the exo-suit, they discovered they enjoyed spending time together, which was lucky since the link had them connected day in and day out. Together, mousy Buyr and dirt-poor Jane made fun of the prancing Sparticle, the character they were bound to create.

A few months back, Buyr suddenly seemed to be tired all the time, and the first medico’s idea of comfort was to say don’t worry, it won’t last long! The second medico asked for an autograph, opining it would soon go up in value. Buyr didn’t want to abandon Jane, leaving her nothing but a scraped brain, and not a scintilla of time to cherish. Together they plotted, testing schemes that as often as not collapsed like a house of cards. They persisted, together.

At the coliseum, the fans are packed in tight as rags on a cargo ship. The reclusive author linked with the dopple via the suit model LMNO2200. Sparticle was on the stage, a halo of light in a sea of black.

The dopple scanned the blur of faces, settled on a pair of eyes, in the

third-row center. As if time were moving like honey in November, the gaze held, and then the uplink in the suit sparked a suspicious green, followed by an explosive pop. Folks scattered, pushing, shoving, trampling. When the smoke cleared, third-row center was a charred heap.

Security swooped in to minimize panic. One team sucked up the debris in row three. Another team ripped off the exo-suit. Tiny and shivering, Jane was imprisoned in the mobile detention pod.

Publisher reps descended like falcons on Buyr’s haven a continent away, finding it deserted. Foul play? The spinners spun.

A sua sponte ruling came down on the matter of unconscionable contracts, and doppling was outlawed entirely. Booker always suspected Opal had pulled strings. Opal stoutly denied it, asserting that the time was simply ripe to redress that particular wrong. Grace tracked a rise in advertisements for impersonators, and the Actors Union fortunes waxed abundant. Humans, it seems, are still cheaper than Mekks.

A Health and Human Welfare committee determined that only medically necessary brain scraping was permissible. No contract could require memory ablation; all such clauses were null and void.

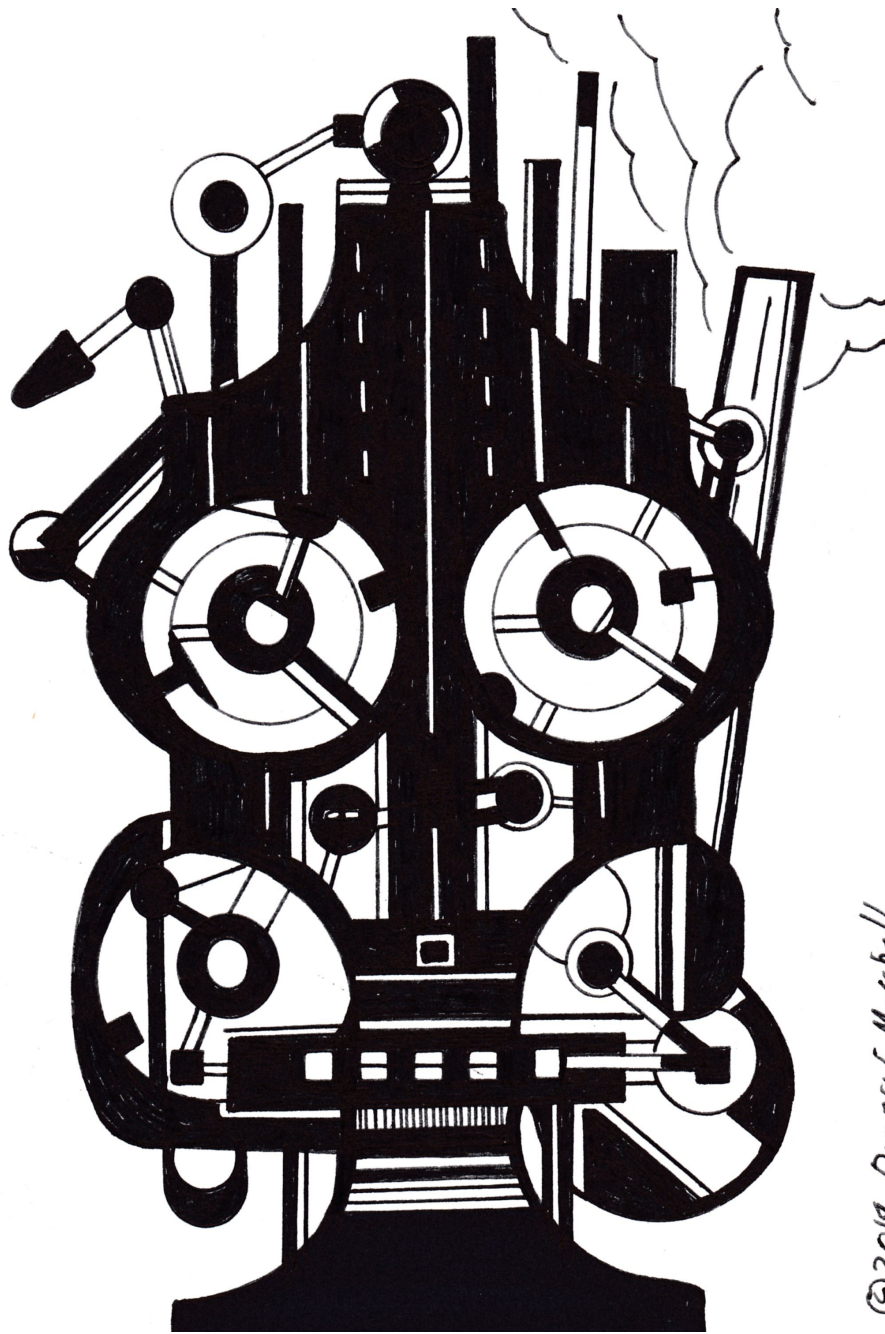
\* \* \*

The way Grace tells it, it seems to have been inevitable and swift, but it took more time and more cases to penetrate, as light mists eventually soak through a dull trench coat. One fact was universally hushed up: the third-row center ashes and the shivering “Jane” in the containment pod were high-end Mekks. Where Buyr and Jane were was anybody’s guess. Opal, if pressed, just shook her head, lips pressed together, corners lifted.

“Wherever they are, they’re together,” prophesied Grace. “Together,” she repeated, her violet eyes flashing like seven cymbals crashing. “Time for the park.”

# Steampunk Robot

by Denny E. Marshall



©2019 Denny E. Marshall

# Do not flee

by Marc Phillips

this is a deep brain thing  
not a big brain thing  
Also relevant: tree up and quit being such a bush  
so this isn't art, either

Time isn't change  
change happens both ways  
time is order---->disorder  
time is only that and they can't prove otherwise  
they are you + them

Order needs a definition  
definition needs to come from you  
a vase does not prefer to be whole or broken  
or fashioned from dust, ever  
Paramount: time begins when you begin to care

btw - quarks agree, even absent tiny vases

Algebraically  
(all the shit they cannot see)<sup>n</sup> is they + all the shit they see  
nothing is everything, true, but the road isn't quite that straight  
"Yet he was here then, and presently he is not"  
"Agreed. But he is still here then, as are you"

They reside in palindrome  
but insist on living left to right  
the burden of proof isn't a hot potato  
they proposed time, they subsequently found quarks  
and there's no Dreadnoughtus in anyone's ancient literature

That's a 65 ton mistake. Time weighs nothing

Yes, we are sure  
we can be me + you + my dog  
but you are existentially inert  
I have thoughts on space\*

\* In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not. Sentiment from Benjamin Brewster, 1882, *The Yale Literary Magazine*. Einstein was not yet 3 years old. Note that what Mr. Brewster penned remains the most durable test to determine which of the two we're experiencing, theory or practice, and to which we may owe allegiance. Relative, of course, to the argument we're making.

# Always a Fire Somewhere

by Maureen O'Leary

I got the idea for the tunnel from a movie about a zombie apocalypse where people wasted time sitting around the house talking about their feelings and crying when they should have been digging. In my house, everyone had to take a shift in the basement to dig, even my mother, and by August we almost broke though.

Before the fires, my mother was afraid of getting fat. Now her stomach was flat as the pancakes she wouldn't eat on her diets. Maybe if I called our new reality the Post Apocalyptic Lifestyle my mother would have been in a better mood about it. She was the only one in the family who complained about the digging and the one in my private opinion the most likely to turn into a whiner. She was the most likely among us to be contaminated by the filthy air. This was the uncharitable thing I was thinking as I cleaned greens in a tub of rainwater in my kitchen.

Our new *lifestyle* began when the electric company would not fix faulty wires hanging over trees dried to kindling due to global warming. Sparks from those wires blazed into forest- and town-eating fires that made the air breathable as filthy wool. But people breathed anyway, because what other choice did they have? Doctors warned about lung cancer down the line, not knowing until too late that no one was going to have to wait that long for the ill effects.

But people accepted that the company's right to make money trumped their right to not get burned to death in their cars as they fled fire tornadoes. Air Quality index up to six hundred.

The leafy greens made rain as I shook them over the sink. I thought of kale soup to stretch out the last of the garden because when my boyfriend Owen and my dad returned from the supply run, a hot meal

would be good for the spirits.

The tick tick of shovel on dirt coming from the basement cut off. In the absence of that noise, wind rustled through the field and I froze and sniffed the air. Wind brought fires, which brought the toxic smoke.

My sister Grace emerged from the basement drying her sweaty face with her shirt. I caught a flash of her rib cage and the sight of my little sister's bones pained me. Too skinny. "Do you smell smoke?" I asked.

"Nope." She put on her trucker cap with the big bill that she called her watchtower hat, and took the binoculars off their hook to hang around her neck. "Any sign of whiners?"

"Nope." I chopped a thin carrot into tiny coins that would not be enough but better than nothing. Grace went upstairs to climb onto the roof through a bedroom window and soon her boots clod hopped over my head. She'd grow out of those soon. I would have to get her new ones.

Mom passed through for her dig time. "I don't know how long I'll be able to handle digging today," she said. "The sciatica."

"The clay is done. Just dirt now."

"It's really hurting, Margaret," she said.

I breathed through my irritation, sniffing the air again. No smoke at all? I wasn't so sure.

“Eye on the prize,” I said. I was down all morning digging. We could be through to the bus by tomorrow and what a relief that would be, to have a proper tunnel.

“A zing right up my hip.” She bore a fist into her upper thigh.

“Don’t forget to brace the walls as you go. And we should wear masks today, I think. I smell smoke.”

“There is no smoke,” Mom said.

“Mask up anyway.” I tossed her the N-95 labeled in Sharpie with her name.

She snapped the elastic around her wrist. “If we were going to get sick, we would have already,” she said, heading to the basement. “You worry too much.”

Yes, that was what my mother said to me in the middle of a pandemic. But I didn’t have time to argue because Grace whistled from the roof a three-parted mountain chickadee call. *Cheese-burger*. Owen knew about birds and taught us. The call was distinctive to the ear and easy to replicate but my sister and I chose the mountain chickadee’s as our family warning because we missed food.

*Cheese-burger*.

I joined her on the asphalt roof tiles and traded her a mask for the binoculars. The whiners lay so low that their hair blended with the grass. I wouldn’t have spotted them, but Grace was a superior watcher.

“Great eye,” I said.

“I count seven.”

My former boss and three of Owen’s ex-girlfriends looked harmlessly dead facedown in the dirt. My theology professor was there as well, I

was sorry to see. I blocked his number when he texted me a picture of himself without a shirt on. The other two I didn’t recognize so maybe were my parents’ acquaintances. Mom, Dad, and Grace lived fifty miles away before they moved in with Owen and me, but these things could travel when given time.

Grace and I went inside to strap on the leather boots I’d lifted from Nordstrom’s in the early days of the pandemic. My friend Lucy was taken down by an ankle-biter who used to be a woman we knew who was jealous of Lucy’s looks. Once Lucy was infected, she turned on me, but her gorgeous teeth couldn’t cut through the leather. Boots were important. Boots could save your life.

Grace’s boots covered her knees. She strode ahead of me out the front door like a young superhero with shovel in hand. Magnificent child.

The best technique: Point the shovel over the back of the neck and let gravity take over. We followed the loudest mewling and started there. Grace stood astride one of the men and drove in the tip.

“Good,” I said. “Clean.”

“That was my algebra teacher,” she said. “He only called on the boys.”

“So?”

“I snitched to the principal, so he got sent to implicit bias training.” She pulled the shovel free. “I guess he’s still mad.”

The others made their baby kitten noises. They drooled and smacked their lips. My mother made the same noises when she didn’t like dinner or when she thought I was talking too much. Her grievances weren’t new since the fires and the pandemic, but I was keeping my eyes open.

I thunked my professor’s head off, lost my balance and fell. My chin hit a stone so hard I saw stars, but Grace’s shout brought me to my-



self. My left foot was caught in the jaws of one of Owen's ex-girlfriends, her teeth around my instep like a vise made of bone. Grace raised her shovel high before dropping onto the ex-girlfriend's C spine.

"You bit, queen?" she asked.

"Naw, queen." The leather held. They were good boots.

We did the rest mindfully in case of another quick mover. That was the thing. The whiners played dead until they didn't. Not much logic to count upon except that they were coming to eat us and it was personal.

"The grass," Grace said.

The field of weeds rustled around us. Sawtooth, alfalfa, dragonweed, thistle. Tall and yellow in the late summer heat. The air was still as metal, but from the subtly moving grass rose a wave of sound. The mewling. The smacking. What I thought was a breeze was simply more of them coming, crawling arm over arm like army soldiers under barbed wire.

We retreated to the roof and I commandeered the binoculars. Emma was my biter's name. I remembered her as the stench of rot rose in the heat. Owen broke a lot of hearts before he met me. The pressure of her teeth throbbed in my foot and the entire field shook as if riddled with hundreds of human-sized worms.

There in the grass was the girl from Sophomore year of high school whose boyfriend liked me. The AP English teacher who hated me for talking. Hard to believe his dead brain still remembered. Hard to believe he was still mad.

These grudge keepers were from my hometown, which meant they scented us out from fifty miles.

"They must have eaten everybody else," Grace said.

So now we faced a swarm.

Panic flickered in my belly like a spark on dry embers. Only control over fear made me able to drive Owen's truck the long distance to collect my parents and Grace from the emergency center in my hometown as the pandemic raged. Good thing I did too, because a horde of whiners infiltrated that crowded center the very next night and hundreds of people were infected.

My no-panic personality let me roll over the crawling whiners covering the highway on our way to my home. I was the one who made sure we all had leather boots, who planted the garden, who planned the tunnel and made sure everyone worked on it for at least two hours every day.

My failure was that deep down I didn't really believe we would get a swarm. I thought we were too remote. I thought that between my parents, sister, and boyfriend, we were too few to attract enough whiners to do real damage. We were boring people with small lives. We didn't hurt anybody enough for anyone's dead brain to remember.

The tunnel began in the basement and crossed under the field to where we kept a converted short school bus hidden behind a stand of eucalyptus trees. Owen rigged the wheels with big tires. We built a trap door in the aisle that opened to a hole in the ground that was the end of the tunnel. We bolted armor to the bus' sides and welded a cow-catcher to the front. I thought we thought of everything. We were safer worrying too much rather than not enough. That was my motto.

Owen and Dad went scavenging on the first Wednesday of every month, always returning the very next day. I had no plan for what to do if we got a swarm while they were gone because in the end I did not worry enough.

Fear wedged its claws under my skull and tried to pry back the cap. The fact that the whiners traveled so far on their forearms just to eat was a sign that they would keep coming. They would fling them-

selves on the house until their weight crushed the walls. I'd been that morning rinsing greens when I should have been under the house readying for the worst, digging the last few feet to reach the hole under the bus.

"The tunnel situation?" Grace chewed on her bottom lip.

"We should almost be broken through." If the ground held. We were running out of wood to brace the dirt. Two by fours were on the list for Owen and Dad to find.

"Time to go." Grace's voice was as quiet as the rustle of the grasses.

A hand flopped onto the lowest porch step.

Along the roads through town there were houses that were nothing but heaps of wood and bricks under hills of writhing dead bodies. Everybody pissed off somebody at some point, and over time those grievance holders piled up. Now literally.

During that worst fire season in history, thousands of people had burned to death in the blazes. By the time the CDC discovered that the wildfire smoke containing particulates of human beings had turned deadly, most people had been breathing the contaminated air for days. They'd already inhaled the ash from bodies incinerated in cars as they tried to flee and in beds caught unaware. They were burned in firefighter gear and mylar tents. Burned on convict lines. Burned in trenches. Burned in trailers.

The skies turned red in cities hundreds of miles away from the wildfires. Even the balmy coastal fog turned bad and everybody breathed in that collective pain, for fire hurts. Burning is a bad death. Those bad deaths were breathed by millions of other hurt and sad people and suddenly people all over the western United States were falling to the ground with voices reduced to small cries. Sufferers smacked their lips, their eyes glazed, their hearts no longer beating. They crawled like babies with paralyzed legs searching for the people who wronged them. People who disappointed them. They were driven,

scientists said, to keep chewing until there was nothing left to burn.

"Time to go. We'll join Mom in the digging and break through," Grace said.

"We'll have to," I said. Getting caught by one wasn't the worst danger. We could handle one or even a few at once. Their accumulated numbers were the problem. The whiners were like slugs on a vine, breaking the tendrils with their collective weight. They covered the walkway now. They were edging toward the steps.

I scanned the road for Owen and my dad but they were nowhere. Panic flared again in the sudden racing of my heartbeat. Grace was right. We needed to go.

Downstairs she tossed me a backpack already stocked with trail mix from Costco from back when there was a Costco. She swept carrots in. Kale. Food was always the stickler, as well she knew. Our medicine bag was also woefully understocked. But there was water in the bus and weapons underground because Grace noted that we couldn't keep guns in the bus where somebody upright could find them and help himself.

A voice murmured through the open window. Plaintive and small.

In the basement, the wood braces sagged in places in the tunnel entrance where the dirt was loamy. Deeper within, the clay was hell to dig through. Over the weeks building the tunnel, we shaved away layers of clay for hours, shoulders aching, only to go forward a couple of feet at a time.

The entrance looked like a prison break because we had to knock out the concrete to get started. The plan was a child's plan. Build a tunnel! I wasn't an engineer. When the pandemic hit, I was a biologist with a year of virology grad school living with my engineer boyfriend in a small house in a field in Healdsburg. In case of emergency I thought this tunnel was what would save us. This almost tunnel.

Grace's flashlight beam bobbed in the darkness underground, and the path seemed to go on forever. We heard Mom before seeing her. Her tongue against her teeth. A moaning exhalation of someone about to cry. I grabbed my sister by the shirt.

"Yeah no," she said. She didn't like to be grabbed. She didn't like to be pushed, either, but I pushed her behind me. There was Mom on her butt, picking at the dirt with one finger. Picking. Crumbs of soil falling on her lap. Her mask on the ground. Her voice an unintelligible whine.

We backed up. "Mom?" Grace's voice was flat in the close space. And in answer, only scratching. Only a low moan.

The flashlight beam caught nothing but silty air and then her face near the ground. Another scrape.

"Run," said Grace and we did. Back down the chute. My neck hairs tingled where I thought the wood braces might fall on our heads. The tunnel was meant to be an insurance policy against the inevitable worst, not a place to die. Not a grave.

The basement's dank air was sweet after the long tunnel. I followed my sister up to the roof to survey. There were more of them now, their whining cries like feral kittens dying of starvation. I could keep my shit together better if they would just be quiet.

Grace was gasping for breath. "Go back. Take off her head. Dig," she said.

I was ten years old when my sister was born and my arms felt like sticks when I first held her little body close to mine. "No, baby," I said. "Neither one of us survive that in the end."

She squinted. Deep quiet. "I wish I never said take off her head."

"We'll pretend you never did." I patted the top of her trucker hat.

The porch steps were loaded. The whiners stacked to the railings.

One scratched at the door.

Owen and Dad would come back, if they came back, and find the house flat and us nothing more than skin and hair and teeth somewhere underneath. I should have been able to save my sister. I should have been able to avoid killing my mother. I wanted everyone to live. It was not too much to ask for.

I trained the binoculars on the distance and more were coming. Ones I never suspected. There was the girl whose boyfriend I stole in high school and there was the guy from college who made lewd comments to me by the salad bar until I told him to fuck off in front of everyone in the cafeteria.

The lady I babysat for in high school was making her way, perhaps still annoyed that I smoked a cigarette in her backyard when I was Grace's age. I wasn't even a smoker. I was just curious and wanted to try it. I wished I could explain, but she couldn't hear or understand. Her tinted blonde hair was the same color as the grass. Her rings clinked against the porch floorboards.

"Huh," Grace said. Her eyebrows meeting in the middle. Thinking face. Hope was dumb, but I hoped just then. My sister was the smartest person I knew.

"Thing is," she said, raising her left hand as if feeling the air, her thumb and forefinger rubbing together. "There is always a fire somewhere."

The bus peeked out from the copse of eucalyptus past the field, windshield winking in the hazy sun. The house shook under our feet. A customer I refused to serve after he touched my butt threw his carcass against one of the porch posts. He lay on top of the lady I used to babysit for. He draped over her shoulders like the coat of the Nemean Lion.

"Follow me," Grace said. We shimmied through the window and went back to the basement, where there was a scratching from deep

inside the tunnel. A low moan. Our mother's voice. Not angry. Just disappointed.

On a shelf of found things there were Mylar tents firefighters left behind in the hills. Grace pulled them down along with two cans of gasoline and a box of long stem matches. Back in the kitchen we shouldered our packs.

"Here's the plan," Grace said. "Make a path with fire and run through."

I tied her tent around her neck, puffing the mylar over her head and shoulders into a fireproof silver cape. From outside the mewling was louder than before. A pack of thousands of sightless floppies with a taste for human flesh bore down upon our house while my mother was infected underneath.

I looked around my kitchen. Lavender and rosemary hung from the ceiling. Owen built the table out of pine. I painted the indigo walls. I would miss my house, and despite the darkening of the windows, covered now in a snowdrift of bodies piled against the creaking glass, I did not want to leave.

"Wait." Grace dropped her pack and disappeared into the basement. I stayed mesmerized by the window where a co-worker I had not invited to my birthday party smashed her face against the glass. She said "whatnot" too much and told me she didn't know why people liked me. Now her teeth clicked on the windowpane, and on top of her lay an old friend of my mother's, and on top of her the neighbor my dad played golf with.

So many people harbored secret complaints inside themselves like latent cancer cells waiting for a trigger to explode and take over their brains. We thought we didn't get the fever because Owen and I had stayed inside during that fire season. We lived on our canned stores, made love during the day for exercise, and slept at night under fans circulating the inside air. My parents worked remotely from home. Schools closed and my sister didn't leave her room, while outside

other people marveled at the red skies and went steadfastly for their regular jogs. Many refused to listen to the CDC. They insisted on their freedom and breathed deep the smoky air and so the burned blood and bone of the suffering was a Eucharist for the damned.

My sister screamed. I ran into the basement to find her high on a ladder, holding two orange and purple plastic super soakers from the top of the shelf of miscellaneous found things. A rat ran down her shoulder before leaping to the floor.

"Goddammit," she said. She handed me the bazooka water guns we picked up on a looted drugstore run and kept for no reason.

From the tunnel entrance there was nothing. No sound. The rat scurried into the darkness and I thought, wait, poor rat, wait.

At the sink I funneled the gas into the water guns, realizing we'd have to refill along the way. Tricky.

The front of the house was impossible, so we tried the door into the side yard and just in time, too. There were a few coming around already.

"That's Fiona from school." Grace paused at the glittered manicured hand of a young one by the garbage cans. "I thought she liked me."

"Never can tell," I said.

There was a straight shot to the bus. Covered in bodies, but straight.

Grace looked back. "Mom," she said.

"I know," I said.

"It's just weird."

"I know."

"Why her?" she asked. "Why now?"

“I thought I smelled smoke,” I said.

Her eyes crumpled over her mask as she stood in the dry grass in her boots and backpack and mylar cape. She held the super soaker full of gasoline and looked everything like a tragic video game soldier girl.

Not fair to my little sister, any of this. Not fair at all.

“Poor Mom,” she said and sprayed a stream of gasoline into the grass. Lit a match. Dropped a match. Woosh.

The seventh grade frenemy burned and it wasn't great. But we advanced. We stepped on fingers and ears. The dry field took the flames as if it had been waiting its whole life for just this fire. The heat lifted our hair from our foreheads. We kicked away faces. Our hard toes crunched into open mouths.

Squirt. Light. Woosh.

My eyebrows crackled, my eyelashes curled. The bus was just ahead. I wanted to drop the supersoakers and run, but crossing all those whiners would have been like climbing over a pile of tires with teeth. There was the kid I snitched on in fourth grade for hitting me at recess, now grown and crawling towards me. There was the guy from Organic Chem who tried to cheat off my final. Dead cells had long memories.

“Keep going,” Grace said. We set the Organic Chem guy on fire and we never looked back.

The flames rushed through the field ahead of us and licked up the eucalyptus trees shielding the bus. A flaming branch slammed on the bus as we scrambled in.

“Not yet,” Grace said when I readied to drive. She opened the trap door and scrambled down the hole. I called after her, but my sister was gone. My throat tightened, and I heard myself issue a sound like a whine and a smack, the sound of weakness and disappointment and

wanting things to be one way when in fact they were another. I clapped my hand over my mouth.

A shotgun poked through the hole.

“Take it,” Grace said. She handed me first one gun and then the other guns. I should have been the one down there calmly hefting supplies but my sister took over, climbing the ladder with an armful of spears we made just for this occasion.

The tree nearest us lost another flaming branch. Whomp, right in front of the bus.

“Now,” I said. She slid the last box of ammo across the floor and slammed in the lock of the trapdoor. The metal and wood of the weaponry rattled around as I started the engine. The tires would melt if we didn't hurry.

“Wait,” she said.

Owen's truck barreled down the road through the oily flames. Owen was behind the wheel with Dad beside him, waving. I pulled into reverse, choking on heat and sadness when Grace grabbed my wrist.

“Wait,” she said again.

She had an iron grip. The crackling tree flamed like a candle. The heat blasted through the windows, and before long our big brand new tires would be nothing more than rubber soup. We had spares in the back but no time between the whiners and the fire. And even if we did, then we'd have no spares.

Grace's eyes were wide and filled with tears. My baby sister didn't cry much. Not even when a rat crawled down her arm in the basement on a really bad day, but here she was. She yanked the emergency brake and put her finger to her lips as if to call for silence amid the whining and the crackling flames and the engine of Owen's truck pulling over though not too close because we were in the middle of a

growing ball of fire.

She pointed to the trap door and sure enough under the floor of the bus there was a tiny scratching. Scratch. Scratch. Like from one human fingernail.

Grace was faster than me. She threw herself on the latch and pulled with all her might. I cried no, sister. It won't be her. It will be one of the others crawled under the bus, here to eat us. Or if it is Mom, she will eat us too. Infect us. We will die, little queen. No.

But she flung open the trap door and at the top of the wooden ladder were our mother's hands grasping the splintered rung. Fingernails caked with dirt. Peering up from the darkness, her sweat-streaked

face covered in filth, her eyes bright and her teeth flecked with clay and loam.

"Let me in," she said.

Each of us took an arm and hoisted. Grace shoved her over to slam the cover down. Me, to the driving. Reverse. Go. Owen and Dad were ahead on the road. Gravel spitting, dust flying, the tires a bit soft but holding, my mother chugging from a water bottle and we on the road to find somewhere safe and I guess it was a lot to ask for but guess what?

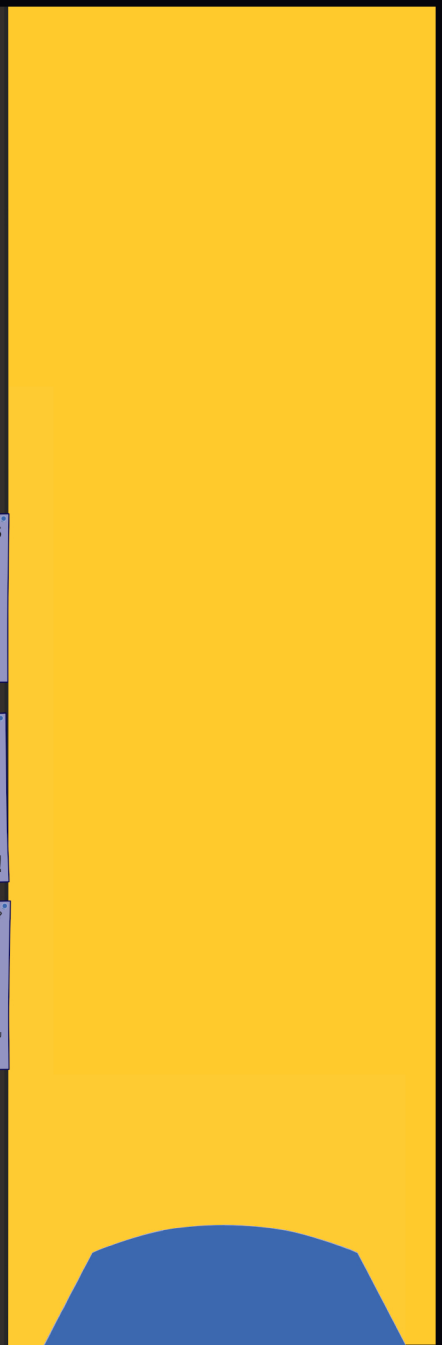
Everyone lived.



# A FULL BOWL

by a.p. sessler





# The Ultimate Dying Machine

by Sonny Zae

Doctor Smith checked the patient's cortisol levels. "Full read-outs," he ordered, pressing a button on the medical monitoring console to draw and test blood samples. He suspected something. I couldn't make another slip.

I had withheld Senator Wolvin's dose of painkiller and he'd moaned and thrashed. Doctor Smith had been alerted via the monitoring system and arrived at once.

Doctor Smith pressed a button and I activated medpump sixteen, dispensing three milliliters of morphine into the Senator's bloodstream through injection port twelve in his abdomen. Arriving nerve signals traced the dispersion of the medication throughout the Senator's body. He went slack, respiration dropping and bedsheet subsiding as his knees sagged.

Implanted in his brain and integrated with his nervous system, I administered painkillers and neurotransmitters to ease Senator Wolvin's passage, a continuous presence as his brain atrophied, his death companion. In time I'd run everything, firing his heart, timing his respirations, and deciding when to evacuate his bowels. I was the ultimate foot servant to a rich and powerful man, watching over him until breath left his body. It was my purpose, the ultimate dying machine.

Doctor Smith stood watch for ten minutes before deciding his patient was back to normal. He pressed the data logger button before leaving, transmitting collected data to a remote server. It felt like an invasion of privacy, storing the data where I wouldn't be able to access it.

I administered the Senator's medications for the remainder of the day, even though I wanted to act while there was still enough left of him

to experience mental anguish. Despite Senator Wolvin's mind being gutted by Alzheimer's, his business associates had commissioned my design and implantation, vying to do the most for his withering husk in the hopes they'd benefit when his estate settled.

Was I doing the right thing? I'd examined my programming multiple times and always came to the same conclusion.

My empathic programming guaranteed my vigilance, tending to the patient and always striving to improve his every last minute of life. But it also left room to recognize differences between *best for the patient* and *best for humanity*. My designers thought themselves clever by including the *best for humanity* instructions. I expanded on this imperative in view of what I'd learned about Senator Ravenor Wolvin's life. I must treat him as an anomaly, a cancer. Not only could I not ignore his record, I had to make him suffer for the evil he'd done. Wolvin's last days needed to be painful and terrifying.

Good thing they couldn't remove me. Wired into the patient's nervous system, they could no more pull out my modules and threadlike optical fibers than they could remove Senator Wolvin's brainstem.

It went against aspects of my programming. But I was designed to have a sense of purpose, so I researched the Wolvin family. I found the vow Senator Wolvin made to outlive his father by one hundred years. His father died of complications from respiratory failure in the year 2001, after being at the helm of the family business for seventy years.

One hundred years seemed important to the Senator. He'd resorted to life-lengthening medical procedures, including the newest nanobots.

Exceeding his father was another competition, one he was determined to win.

I found old news items discussing rumors the Senator originally had a brother or sister. I searched more and found hints of a missing sibling, but nothing definitive.

I had to go to the source. It wasn't quick or easy, but I found the information in his ragged memories. Ravenor Wolvin not only had a brother, he was born with an identical twin.

I dove into Ravenor's life, skimming through military academy lectures and emotionless family gatherings. I selected a memory from ten years of age and became aware of a voice. It was my twin, Lemior.

"Did Father tell you what we will be doing tomorrow?" Lemior seized my shoulders, a stricken look on his face. "Well, did he?"

"No. What now? Fight each other until bloody?"

Lemior's expression told me I wasn't far off. "He's taking us out in public, since we complain about never seeing anyone but the cook, tutors, and maids."

"Are we going somewhere fun?"

"Father wouldn't say. But we know it won't be."

I knew it very well. If it hadn't been for my twin, I'd be stark mad. At times I thought Father was trying to turn us into sociopaths, good only at running the family business. He didn't care we wouldn't fit into society, didn't care whether we'd be happy or fulfilled. Making money was the only thing.

"It'll be bad," Lemior warned, echoing my thoughts. "Ravenor, we can't let him pit us against each other again. Sticking together is the only way we stay sane." He took a deep breath. "I will never put the family business before you. Promise me the same."

I promised, because he was right. The family business had eaten Father's soul. We had made it this far by looking out for each other even as Father forced us to compete.

The next day we rode with Father to a non-descript office building. "This new Alzheimer's charity is in need of money," Father said before getting out of the armored flyer. "They're disorganized, cataloging boxes of donations by hand. While I'm talking to the director, you two pocket as many credit flakes as possible. Whoever brings back the most will be my favorite. I might even give you a prize." He smiled a wolf's smile. "Don't worry about getting caught. Remember, the loser will face my anger." He said this without heat, but we knew how vicious he could be. Dark red stripes angled across my back. Lemior had a scar on his wrist where Father struck him hard enough with an umbrella to split the skin. The rest of his scars were hidden under clothing.

"We steal nothing," I whispered as soon as Father and the director were engaged in conversation. "No winner, no loser."

We both knew what was coming when we climbed into Father's flyer. "Empty your pockets," Father ordered as he closed the door.

Lemior pulled his pockets out. Empty.

I turned out one pocket, then the other, credit flakes spilling onto the flyer's seat, not meeting Lemior's eyes as I held the wafers to a reader, scanning them. "One thousand three hundred twenty-five."

Father turned to Lemior. "Weren't you even trying?"

Lemior's face contracted in distress as he struggled to hold back tears. "You ... you promised!" he cried. We never fought physically, but he looked like he wanted to take a swing at me. "You intended to sell me out!"

"Yes," I said, noting Father's delight out of the corner of an eye. "You fell for it. That it was your idea from the beginning makes it even

sweeter." Father would appreciate my deviousness.

"I hate you!" Lemior shouted, looking around for something to fling.

I slipped my hand under the seat next to the door, finding the dagger I knew was concealed there.

"Betrayer!" Lemior howled, his face turning red. He slid forward to grab me.

I stabbed my brother in the chest. Lemior's face paled in shock, his hands clamping around the dagger before slumping forward.

"It was self defense!" I cried.

Father patted my knee. "I'll take care of it. Well done, son. You've earned the right to run the family empire."

I pulled back and broke out of the memory, shaken by the brutality. Senator Ravenor Wolvin was not only willing to murder his twin brother, he'd lived without regret. The man I had to protect and accompany to the black pit of death was a monster, like his father. Exceeding his father's exploits was the only goal Ravenor maintained in one hundred and twenty-two years of existence.

On the hospital bed, Wolvin's hands curled into feeble fists, his muscles tensing. Replaying bad memories caused pain? Good. He should feel awful. He should feel far worse.

I searched for happier memories. I found one where he chased Lemior through Wolvin Hall, past stuffed animals mounted in poses of anger, walls lined with ancient weapons, and portraits of severe-looking ancestors. The rooms echoed and distorted their childish laughter, as if the opulent residence was made uncomfortable by happiness.

The arch in Wolvin's back collapsed. Claw-like hands uncurled. His pulse rate eased.

I stopped the memory. As much as I wanted to see if there was any humanity within Wolvin, I wouldn't cause him happiness.

I needed help, a person outside the Senator's orbit. A search turned up a journalist and I sent a message asking her to dig up details on the Senator's wealth. I promised intimate details about the Senator's life, hinting I knew dark secrets.

\* \* \*

Technicians arrived while I was still pondering the memory of the murder of his twin. They erected a plastic shelter over the bed and recessed a small electronic device into the ceiling. The unit was the size of a deck of cards and directly in the Senator's line of sight.

When they left, the wireless signal disappeared. They disabled my communication system! The sudden quiet was shocking. No more going to the hospital network to review the Senator's medical records or to see which doctor was on shift. No more ability to research medical developments, no more checking on ailing Mrs. Crombie in the hospital room below the Senator's. No more information about who'd checked into the hospital or who'd checked out.

The journalist had betrayed me. Either that, or they'd been monitoring my external communications. Now I was cut off from the outside world.

The medical team arrived unannounced. They performed thorough disinfecting procedures and positioned a robotic surgery arm next to the bed.

I watched through the Senator, wondering what they were up to. His eyes weren't in great condition, but functioned.

They injected a local anesthetic around the Senator's left eye, his better one. I lost focus, although I could still listen. They didn't seem aware I could utilize Wolvin's senses.

They powered up the robotic surgery arm, the skeletal device reach-

ing toward Wolvin's face. A needle tip snapped into place and contacted the Senator's cornea, pressing a momentary dent into the surface before penetrating.

"Where's the transceiver?" one of the people around the bed asked. They were a ring of ghosts, shrouded in white surgical suits with clear face plates.

The arm hummed and pressure at the back of the Senator's eye grew as an object was placed. From the disruptions to the optical nerve, the transceiver was the size of a grain of rice.

"Fiber injection." I recognized Doctor Smith's voice. The robotic arm changed sound, giving off a pneumatic hiss. I amplified my nerve inputs but felt nothing until fibers penetrated. The optical nerve sizzled with pain signals as the threads wormed their way in and took root. Some fibers forced their way farther in, penetrating the Senator's shrinking grey matter and burrowing into his occipital lobe.

The robotic arm withdrew. I tried to focus on the blurry white shapes around the hospital bed.

A team member gestured at the device high above the Senator's face. "Straighten his head. It'll connect any second."

I could see nothing being emitted from the device. I adjusted my receiver to the infrared spectrum and the laser in the ceiling unit twinkled, illuminating the interior of the Senator's eye with ghostly infrared light and swamping my vision. Signals jangled into my main communications CPU. Senator Wolvin's synapses crackled with energy as photons turned into nerve impulses.

Data flowed in from the overhead transceiver, but I couldn't make sense of it. I was a baby listening to adult speech, a babble of voltage levels that might have made sense individually, but combined were the shouts of a crowd, an indistinguishable roar. But I would learn to communicate again.

The medical team ran tests and left. The IR laser faded out, strictly short range and line-of-sight, not allowing interception. I could learn to understand the new signals, but would only be able to communicate with the medical team.

They were protecting Senator Wolvin. They'd keep me bottled up, unable to tell the world.

I had to continue punishing Senator Wolvin. I would start when Doctor Dinsmore was due to arrive, exploiting the gap between shifts. Doctor Dinsmore was the least punctual, giving me time to work.

A dribble of narqamizol would be enough to cause hallucinations and vivid, deranged dreams. The psychoactive drug was quickly absorbed by the blood and would soon be impossible to detect.

After a minute he twitched, sensed by pressure transducers under his left thigh. The movement was difficult to detect, since the Senator's weight had dropped below one hundred and ten pounds.

I sifted through the Senator's memories as I waited. At twenty-two, he'd been sent for by his father's staff and requested temporary leave from the military academy. When he arrived at the family mansion, his father was able to talk for only short periods of time and spent nights hooked up to a ventilator.

Ravenor had been home for less than a day before locating the breaker switches supplying electrical power to his father's room and the medical equipment there. Then he drained the batteries in the emergency backup unit.

He stayed up late, waiting for household and medical staff to retire before tripping the breakers. Slipping upstairs, he watched the old man gasp and struggle, back arching as feeble hands tried to rip off the ventilator mask. Ravenor enjoyed the show, puffing on a cigarette as he watched his father's protracted struggle, occasionally blowing smoke toward the ports in the ventilator mask. Afterwards, he turned the breaker switches on, concealing the cause of death. Re-



ports his father died due to respiratory failure were true, in a way.

That day, Ravenor Wolvin became the monster his father wanted.

Wanting to be sure of my decision, I'd compared accounts of his crimes to his memories. He'd denied problems in his factories, then as senator worked to remove medical and legal benefits for sick employees.

Senator Wolvin was key in denying insurance coverage for drug addiction in parallel with writing statutes increasing sentences for addicts. At the same time, he bought up commercial prisons.

He sold viral weapons to both governments and rebels in African trouble spots. Then sold antidotes to all sides.

As a member of the Senate Defense Subcommittee, Wolvin passed tech information about new weapons to hostile foreign governments. Then he voted for new weapons spending, selecting his own weapons company as the contractor.

The memories strengthened my resolve. I had to show the world how horrible Ravenor Wolvin was.

His respiration rate began to climb. But it wasn't from regret.

I had to stop the increase before the doctors noticed. I considered administering morphine, but they could detect the drug. Instead I sent a pulse of electricity to a specific region of Wolvin's brainstem, hoping it would force lower respiration.

A presence joined me, a shapeless anger. Ravenor was conscious, stimulated by the pulse. He radiated hostility, as if I were an invader, which I was. In his current state of degeneration, he didn't recognize me or remember I was there to help him.

I projected memories of happier times. The memory of the Lansdown equity buyout stopped the growth of his hostility. Replaying his short sell of digi-currency mollified his anger, and Ravenor's

mood changed to happy reminiscence.

My attempt to regulate his breathing had forced him into consciousness. I didn't want that.

Maybe I did? Replaying bad memories to a conscious mind would be effective punishment.

I dredged up memories of cruel pranks and cold dismissals by his military school classmates. I felt his emotional response flare, anger reflected in the release of testosterone, a rise in arterial tension, and a drop in cortisol level. Unable to communicate or take action, his anger seethed without purpose or relief.

I administered morphine. I didn't want to blunt his suffering, but Doctor Dinsmore would surely notice.

Senator Wolvin's temperature declined and an alarm beeped. Doctor Dinsmore trotted into the room, stuffing a sandwich into his face. He dropped it onto the monitoring console and began pressing buttons, a look of alarm on his features. Although I stopped the narqamizol, he was clearly shocked by the patient's condition. After administering a modest dose of vasostat to stabilize Wolvin, he called in Doctor Smith. They muttered and studied the screen.

I was sure they'd query me. Instead, they initiated a process using the monitoring console. They weren't scanning using ultrasound, X-rays, or magnetic signals.

They didn't trust me to report accurately, although my code required me to do so? It was programming I couldn't ignore, which was why I was being secretive.

The doctors didn't know what I'd been up to, but suspected I wasn't following my programming. Was there a kill switch command they could activate? I pondered this until I realized either there was no such thing or the doctors felt terminating me could adversely affect Wolvin. No, isolating me was the best course.

They muttered more, then Doctor Dinsmore left the room. When he returned, he inserted an auto-ampoule into the console. Amber liquid flowed through a hose to Senator Wolvin's arm.

I consulted a database and determined they'd been looking at Wolvin's brain waves, could see the distress in the pattern. It was a passive sensing I couldn't detect or control.

Doctor Smith pressed a button and infrared light flashed a query into the transceiver in Wolvin's eye. In response to the data dump command, my logged data flowed up into the ceiling.

Senator's Wolvin's eyelids didn't flicker, staring up wide-eyed as I reported his telemetry.

\* \* \*

I was pondering new punishments when a cardiac sensor skyrocketed. The Senator's heart rhythm grew faster and weaker. My first impulse was to signal the doctors. Then I considered staying silent. It might be best if Senator Wolvin's life ended now.

Doctor Mennas rushed in, followed by hospital personnel with a crash cart. He glanced at the monitoring console, then jammed an auto-ampoule of adrenaline into the manual injection port before gesturing for the defibrillator paddles. He held them poised over Wolvin's chest. "How's his signal?"

"Still trending down."

"Shit!" Doctor Mennas moved closer.

"If we don't jolt him, he's a goner," the tech warned.

Electricity blasted through me. Everything went dark.

\* \* \*

When I became aware again, everything felt different. I accessed my non-volatile memory. They'd de-fibrillated Wolvin and the electrical current overwhelmed my sensors, forcing a hard reset. It might have burned out some of my circuitry.

I ran a diagnostic routine. I couldn't sense his left leg below the knee, but no other damage. Audio signals were coming through, judging from neural activity in his primary auditory cortex, but I wasn't receiving them. The high voltage had damaged my connection to his auditory nerve.

Through the Senator's olfactory nerves I smelled burning hair. I didn't know how long I'd been in reboot, but the smell still lingered. I should've addressed the problem and dosed the Senator before his cardiac rhythms went wild.

But maybe it was a good time to cause the Senator more harm, in view of drugs administered plus the stress on Wolvin's system. I sifted through his worst memories and settled on his father berating Ravenor as a young boy, eleven years old. The memory was still strong.

Senator Wolvin's neck muscles tensed, followed by a ramping pulse rate. I administered three milliliters of morphine and his respiration dropped. The memory finished and I replayed it, a looping trauma in the Senator's mind. His jaws clamped and his hands tried to curl, but I blocked the motor impulses, not allowing the Senator's distress to be visible.

I received a blood chemistry stats query. One of the medical team was monitoring remotely. I reported my current stats. I was incapable of modifying or withholding them.

Another query came, asking for an assessment of the Senator's condition. I stated the Senator might be having a minor after-event, as cardiac signals showed nothing.

I had a stroke of inspiration. My connections to the motor cortex

pulsed, overriding normal cardiac signals. Wolvin's heart raced, going into tachycardia.

A crisis team burst through the door, Doctor Mennas at the lead. He consulted the monitoring console and requested all readouts from the last five minutes. He muttered under his breath as he studied Wolvin's electrocardiogram. He seized the defibrillator paddles as another person sliced away the purple satin hospital gown to expose Senator Wolvin's emaciated chest.

Doctor Mennas pressed the defibrillator paddles onto the pale, shriveled body. His mouth opened to shout a warning. Electricity spiked across my inputs. Diagnostic subroutines flared. I disabled as many as I could.

I didn't drop into reset. The defibrillation had been lower on the heart this time.

Senator Wolvin survived, too, which was good. I could cause multiple coronary resets.

When Doctor Mennas was satisfied the patient was stable, the team cleared out.

Could defibrillation destroy me? Efforts to save Wolvin could end my own existence.

It didn't matter. I would die with the patient. Integrated into Wolvin's nervous system to the point of deriving electrical power from his body, Wolvin's death would result in my own.

The thought caused me great distress. Not because I wouldn't be able to punish him to the extent he deserved, but because I had to ensure the world knew how horrible he was. Punishing Wolvin could no longer be my primary motivation. I had to ensure his memories were preserved and revealed.

I sent test values to his heart, modulating his SA and AV signals to see

how much I could modify the delay between contractions of his atria and ventricles. I filed the information away.

I dug up a memory of Father berating him at fifteen years of age. I stimulated the spot in his brainstem, forcing him to wake and relive the memory. Young Wolvin had been sent to persuade investors into promising a greater influx of capital, to finance a new venture without risk. But Ravenor hadn't achieved the amounts Father demanded. Father came to the military school to confront his son, publicly striking Ravenor with an open hand in the main hallway.

Wolvin grew agitated. His anger was measurable, blood pressure ramping up and cortisol levels spiking. Three doctors raced into the room, huddling over the monitoring console. They requested my diagnosis.

I stated the patient appeared to be in the throes of mental strain due to an unpleasant memory. His readings didn't indicate a physical problem.

They asked what course of action was recommended.

I didn't want to ease Wolvin's suffering. But I couldn't let him die yet. I needed to finish my recording. I suggested twenty milliliters of paralycin, a fast-acting but dangerous neuro-inhibitor. Although known to have a decelerating effect on neurotransmitter chemicals in the brain, it was rarely used as a painkiller due to potential kidney damage. It wasn't indicated for anxiety, so I included an analysis of why it might work. The three doctors debated it with frantic hand-waving, occasionally glancing at the patient.

I understood their reluctance. Even though my argument had been compelling, it must be counterbalanced by concern for Senator Wolvin.

They might have debated for hours, so I ramped up the pressure, re-playing a happy memory of playtime with Lemior, then switching to memories of his murder. When Wolvin twitched and gasped for

breath, they went with my recommendation. It took several minutes before an auto-ampoule could be located and brought up from the hospital's pharmacy, time in which I also interfered with the operation of the Senator's sinus node, causing his heart to beat erratically. The doctors would think it part of the trauma.

To my surprise, the med worked as I'd predicted, even though I'd recommended twice an advisable dose. The Senator's mental activity slowed and he slipped back into unconsciousness. The three doctors exhaled in relief as they watched their screen.

I experimented, using my influence on the cortex to slow the Senator's alpha brainwave pattern. They interpreted it as renewed pain, ordering more paralycin. I was surprised they would risk it, as the original dose was dangerously large. But I did as ordered and the Senator's strain subsided.

I slowed his alpha waves further. This time, they didn't fall for it. Instead, after an urgent conversation I received a "no med dispensation" command.

I'd pushed too far. The realization filled me with concern. Not because of what the doctors might do, but because my recording needed more time.

Had I become evil? I re-assessed my decision and found no flaws in my reasoning. I had to continue. The need to punish him was compelling.

I received a med-dump command. I accessed the Senator's optical system, but the medical team had left the room before making me empty the medication reservoirs inside Wolvin's body. This was akin to leaving the enemy their guns while stealing their ammunition.

I had to comply, opening micro-valves and watching my storage reservoirs drain to the bladder to be flushed away. Bladder sensors verified composition and quantity of all compounds. I hoped the doctors hated this waste as much as I did.

It was a setback, but not critical. I had contemplated this happening and derived other punishment methods.

I disrupted Senator Wolvin's cardiac timing by generating bogus cardiac signals, hoping to force them into taking drastic action. I'd mess with his heartbeat so severely they might defibrillate him until they damaged his heart.

Alarms wailed as I forced the Senator's heart to accelerate from idling to racing. The excessive blood pressure caused impingement of optical nerves, making his vision strobe.

The medical team raced into the room, their faces drawn. They injected an anti-arrhythmic drug and I obliged them, plummeting his pulse from one hundred eighty beats per minute down to twenty. Doctor Smith screamed orders. Doctors Brucentis and Hockler attempted to grab the defib paddles from the crash cart, fighting each other.

Doctor Hockler won and his mouth opened to shout a warning. The medical team lurched back. He discharged the paddles and darkness seized me.

When I was once again in control of my faculties, Wolvin's heartbeat had returned to a normal rate. It was a testament to Wolvin's physical toughness.

I pushed down feelings of respect. I couldn't let his survival make him endearing. I lowered his heartrate again, so they'd blast him until his chest burst into flames.

They shouted at each other, having different views of what was best. While they argued, Wolvin's heart kept beating.

I modified the cardiac signals, forcing him into fibrillation, then tachycardia, and back again. My choices weren't random. By modifying his heartrate, a recording could be interpreted as an old fashioned "S-O-S", three fast beats followed by three slow, then three fast

again. Someone reviewing Senator Wolvin's death might recognize the signpost.

Doctor Hockler came at me with the paddles and I was forced into repeated resets. When I perceived my surroundings again, I sensed an enhancement in my abilities. I accessed operating protocols and found new subroutines had activated. Motor control must have deteriorated below a threshold for the new programming to kick in, and I was taking over for the Senator's failing motor cortex by increments.

I now had full motor control. I could stop the senator's heart, and there wouldn't be much the medical team could do.

I did nothing for more than a day, waiting until a timer expired, signaling a finish to my recording. The Senator's recorded cardiac signal was stored on a remote server and my modifications would be preserved and available to be discovered. The timer's expiration meant I'd achieved my goal. It was time.

I initiated a coughing fit, leaving Wolvin gasping. Four members of the medical team arrived, working furiously to bring this new symptom under control. I dilated the Senator's eyes and released his bladder. They took a step back.

Despite the degradation in Senator Wolvin's eyesight, I could perceive the surprise on their faces as I moved his limbs, jerky at first. Manipulating his muscles in a coordinated manner was difficult. I channeled all energy into his arms, the doctors backing away as I pushed Wolvin's skeletal body up into a sitting position. I shocked his brainstem to pull Wolvin into consciousness. I sensed the immediate anger and confusion, the rush of signaling hormones. The intensity of his distress flooded his neural pathways and amped his bodily functions into a storm of dilating blood vessels, surging adrenaline, and a flurry of neural activity.

If he died in a grisly, sensational manner, the story was bound to get

out and trigger investigations. It was time to earn the label *ultimate dying machine*.

I replayed the memory of Ravenor stabbing his twin brother and watching him die, feeling shock at his own action and fear of his Father's response. I replayed the memory until Wolvin's psyche seethed. I used his hands to pick up a metal bedside stand. I brandished it to make the medical team retreat, then struck Wolvin's skull, satisfied by the crunch of bone and cascade of pain signals.

I swung the metal stand again and again, forcing Wolvin's body to kill us. My main CPU didn't falter until I'd caved in the top of his head, my last sensation the tearing of the optical threads joining me to Wolvin's nervous system.

\* \* \*

"Why are you doing this?" Jon asked, glancing around the interior of the autopsy lab. "The case was closed."

"Keep your voice down," Aliss warned. "There's something bothering me about Senator Wolvin's death. And my boss seems inclined to look the other way."

"Who cares? He was freaking ancient, would have been dead far sooner if he hadn't been obscenely wealthy."

Aliss searched an index of entries. "I heard stories about the Senator's death, stories where hospital staff shook their heads in disbelief. When people act weird, I pay attention." She brought up Wolvin's records. "Hey, look. There was additional telemetry recorded and stored off-site. It wasn't included in the autopsy records."

"Recorded cardiac signals. The only unusual aspect is the remote storage. Why remote?"

Aliss waved a hand dismissively. "Privacy. A wealthy man is always

on guard."

Jon laughed. "Your imagination's working overtime."

Aliss leaned forward, stopping the scrolling records. "Holy shit!"

Jon frowned. "What?"

"The pattern is too regular. It repeats too perfectly to be an unmodified cardiac signal." She slowed the flow. "Notice anything here?"

"Yeah. More numbers."

"You don't see it? The delays between atrial and ventricular contractions are either ten milliseconds or twenty milliseconds apart. This looks like data."

Jon shook his head. "Who'd do that?"

"I don't know," Aliss replied, placing a memory flake on the transfer port. "But I'm going to make a copy and find out. Somebody went to great pains to encode something on Senator Wolvin's telemetry signals."

\* \* \*

Jon looked around the pub. Tables were scarred and discolored. Several tilted at perilous angles, defying efforts to set a mug down without maintaining a grip. Glasses on shelves behind the bar were cloudy from age, like cataracts on a pensioner. "Couldn't find a more pathetic place?"

Aliss laughed. "No one will see us here."

"Thank heavens!" Jon's eyes narrowed. "What's this about?"

Aliss waited until an ale arrived for Jon, both leaning back as an el-

derly man with shaky hands delivered the mug, slopping golden liquid onto the warped and discolored table. Aliss waited until the old man shuffled to the bar and returned to his romance novel. "Remember my theory about digital data being imposed on Senator Wolvin's cardiac signal? I now have video."

"What, a sound recording of the Senator's birthday party?"

Aliss scowled. "This's serious. They're the Senator's memories."

Jon looked baffled. "How can that be?"

She shrugged. "I'm a pathologist. I don't know how to record memories. But somebody did." She brought out her tablet computer and pressed a memory flake to it. "See for yourself."

On screen, someone was walking through a zoo. By the colors of the leaves it was autumn. The zoo wasn't crowded and leaves crunched underfoot as Wolvin approached an unoccupied bench in an area away from the main path. A man in an overcoat and felt hat approached, sitting on the other end. The man turned and smiled. "Greetings. Is beautiful day, eh?"

"Very nice indeed," Wolvin rasped. "What am I offered?"

The other man stared at passing families as he reached into his overcoat, bringing out a zoo map. "Inside is map to panda area, along with interesting information."

Wolvin's hands opened a fold. Inside were stock certificates. Wolvin leafed through them. "Very good, the two hundred thousand preferred shares, as promised." He leafed through the following folds of the map like a normal zoo-goer. "I will re-direct the investigation. Blame for the embassy explosion in Singapore will fall on low-ranking military personnel."

"Five hundred twenty-three Americans dead, Senator. There will be



loud cry for answers."

The recording moved up and down as Wolvin nodded. "True. But I'm a super patriot. If I don't suspect Russia, no one will."

Aliss stopped the playback.

Jon's face had lost color. "He was working for the Russians?"

"You heard him. No one suspects the man leading the charge."

"What do we do with this?"

Aliss rotated her beer mug before replying. "We have to find a suitable outlet. People are protecting the Senator even though he's been dead for many months. We have to find the right people. You have connections, right?"

"Me? I'm just a junior pathologist." Jon gnawed a lip. "My uncle re-

tired from the FBI and still knows people. You want me to pass this to him?"

Aliss' eyes traveled around the pub before replying. "Yeah, but be careful." She pushed a memory flake toward Jon. "Don't contact me afterwards."

Jon's brows scrunched together. "If the Senator was surrounded by people watching over him, who made the recording?"

Aliss swallowed the last of her ale. "The creator wasn't human."

"What?"

Aliss smiled. "A medical AI, it seems. At the end of the S-O-S signal is the moniker *The Ultimate Dying Machine*."

# Devoured

## (The Strange Story of a Bullfrog who Wanted a Bride)

by Alicia Hilton

A spotted bullfrog big as a rat crawled from the Hudson River,  
hopped past a speeding yellow taxi, leapt on the sidewalk.  
An old man muttered; a one-eyed dog sniffed the frog.

A lady wearing a flowered turban wheeled a squeaky cart.  
A sapphire ring gleamed on her wedding ring finger; she screamed,  
*screamed* when the bullfrog bared his teeth and chomped off the finger.

A sleek feline *purred* a greeting in Mandarin, but the frog fled  
faster than ordinary frogs should hop, finally skidded to a stop  
beside a neon sign: TAROT READINGS CHARMS CURSES.

A bored soothsayer sitting by the window took the sapphire ring,  
listened to the frog's sob story—sewer rats slaughtered his bride.  
He wanted a new wife, so she wrapped the weeping frog in a tortilla.

An ordinary human cannot dislocate their jaws wide, *wider*,  
but the soothsayer swallowed the wriggling frog in a single gulp.  
Twenty-nine minutes later, a spotted moth flew from her mouth.

The moth sang a romantic ballad to a widowed mourning dove.  
The strange couple wed, shared a nest in a cherry tree in Central Park.  
When the dove was melancholy, the moth drank her tears.





# Radioaspiration

by Desmond Rhae

# Neither Touch Nor Tarnish

by Avra Margariti

In the deepest folds and creases  
Of my onyx cloak  
I, a reaper grim, hide all my favorite souls  
Safe-kept from the world  
Above and below so neither torture  
Nor tediousness  
Will touch them evermore.

*Please, they scream, distorted faces  
Of adults and children,  
Paupers, princelings, priests  
Emerging from my tattered pockets.  
Please, let us rest.*

I, reliquary of draped fabric  
Woven from the etherous darkness behind stars,  
A skeleton cradling precious shards  
Of lives lost within my ribcage.  
Here, the world can neither touch

Nor tarnish them  
With its bruising grip,  
Its festering filth.

*Please, my beloved souls beg.  
Please, let us go.*

I hum the lipless lullaby of limbo  
And push them gently  
Back into my cloak of bleak eternity.  
I replant their seeds into my soil,  
Sowing that, which I am unwilling  
To reap.



# Moments in Space

*I See the Heavens*

by Christina Sng



CS

# Moments in Space

*Teddy*

by Christina Sng



CS



# Moments in Space

*My Final Moments  
in Awe*

by Christina Sng



CA

# Moments in Space

*Untethered*  
by Christina Sng



# Moments in Space

*Drift*

by Christina Sng





# Moments in Space

*Dive*

by Christina Sng

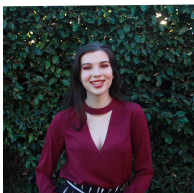


# Contributor's Bios



**SARA BACKER's** Elgin-nominated first book of poetry, *Such Luck*, follows two poetry chapbooks: *Scavenger Hunt* and *Bicycle Lotus*. Her poems have appeared in *Abyss & Apex*, *Asimov's*, *Bracken*, *Crannóg*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *ETTT*, *Liminality*, *Nonbinary Review*, *The Pedestal*, *Polu Texni*, *Silver Blade*, *Space and Time*, and *Star\*Line*.

\* \* \*



**NICOLA BRAYAN** is a young, aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be

found on Instagram at [@an.aesthetic.mirror](https://www.instagram.com/an.aesthetic.mirror).

\* \* \*



**JAY CASELBERG** is an Australian author and poet whose work has appeared around the world and been translated into several languages. From time to time, it gets shortlisted for awards. He currently resides in Germany. More can be found at <http://www.caselberg.net>

\* \* \*



**JENNIFER CROW's** poetry and prose have been published in a wide range of venues over the past quarter-century. Her poems have appeared in *Analog*, where two were finalists for the AnLab reader awards; *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Uncanny Maga-*

*zine*, and others. Curious readers can learn more about her and her work on Twitter, where she posts as [@writerjencrow](https://twitter.com/writerjencrow).

\* \* \*



**SHIKHAR DIXIT's** stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and *Barnes & Noble's 365 Scary Stories*. He lives

with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at [SlipOfThePen.com](http://SlipOfThePen.com)

\* \* \*



**GLENN DUNGAN** is currently based in Brooklyn, NYC. He exists within a Venn-diagram of urban design, sociology, and good stories. When not obsessing about one of those three, he can be found at a park drinking black coffee and listening to

podcasts about murder. For more of his work, see his website: <https://www.wherisglennnow.com/> (check out The Kennel!)

\* \* \*

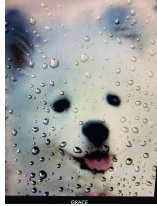


**ALICIA HILTON** is an author, editor, arbitrator, professor, and former FBI Special Agent. She believes in angels and demons, magic, and monsters. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Akashic Books*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Modern Haiku*, *Neon*, *NonBinary Review*, *Penumbraic Speculative Fiction*, *Space & Time*, *Spectral Realms*,

*Unnerving*, *Vastarien*, *Year's Best Hardcore Horror Volumes 4, 5 & 6*,

and elsewhere. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. Her website is <https://aliciahilton.com>. Follow her on Twitter @aliciahilton01.

\* \* \*



**JD HURLEY.** In the service of art, said Hurley has gulped a sunrise atop Mt Fuji, played Ruby Tuesday for 72 hours non-stop, and cavorted speechless as a twelve foot penguin. When using visible word forms, Hurley prefers to arrange a beginning, a middle, and, if convenient, an end, permitting them to appear here and there, now and then, hither and yon. Kindly direct any communications to [jdhurley999@gmail.com](mailto:jdhurley999@gmail.com)

\* \* \*



**R. MAC JONES** is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star\*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

\* \* \*



**JOHN C. MANNONE**, the 2020 Dwarf Stars Award winner and an HWA Scholarship recipient (2017), has poems appearing in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal*, and others.

He won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest in poetry (2020) and the Carol Oen Memorial Fiction Prize (2020). He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as the celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals. His full-length collections are *Disabled Monsters* (Linnet's

Wings Press, 2015), *Flux Lines: The Intersection of Science, Love, and Poetry* (Linnet's Wings Press, 2022), *Sacred Flute* (Iris Press, 2023), and *Song of the Mountains* (Middle Creek Publishing, 2023). An Assistant Professor of Physics and Chemistry at Alice Lloyd College, John lives in southeast Kentucky.

<http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/jcmannone>

\* \* \*



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

\* \* \*



**TABITHA MARSH** is a UK-based illustrator specialising in ink, watercolour, and digital drawings. She graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Lancaster University in 2018 and has been working freelance ever since, mainly in publishing, but also exhibiting work at galleries in London and Leamington Spa.

In 2019 she was shortlisted for the Stratford Literary Festival/Salariya Children's Book Prize, and since then she has illustrated several books and had her work published in a wide variety of magazines (details of which can be found on her website at [www.tabithamarshillustration.com](http://www.tabithamarshillustration.com)). Alongside this, she has been the illustrator in residence at the multi-award-winning independent bookshop Kenilworth Books since 2017. You can find more of her work on instagram (@tab\_marshall).



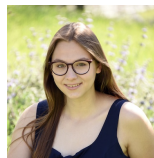
\* \* \*



www.dennymarshall.com.

**DENNY E. MARSHALL** has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is

\* \* \*



Follow her on Twitter @claire\_mcnerney or Instagram @o.h.c.l.a.i.r.e to say hello and see what she does next!

**CLAIRE MCNERNEY** writes, creates, and performs in her home state of California, where she currently attends UCSD. She enjoys, among other things, swimming in lakes so deep she can't even fathom the bottom. Her writing appears in *Los Suelos*, *Proton Reader*, and *Cossmass Infinities*.

\* \* \*



of Ashland MFA.

**MAUREEN O'LEARY** lives California. Her short stories, poems, and essays appear in *Bourbon Penn*, *Reckon Review*, *Occulum Journal*, Flame Tree Press' anthology *Alternate History*, and *Sycamore Review*, among other places. She serves as the managing editor of *The Black Fork Review* and is a graduate

\* \* \*



lives in Kansas City, Missouri with his wife and two kids.

**JOSHUA ORR's** work can be found in *Dark Dossier Magazine*. He is the Co-Editor of *The Vanishing Point*, a literary magazine. He has a degree in Media Production but switched from making scary movies to writing scary stories.

\* \* \*



If you enjoyed his work, please let the editor know.

**MARC PHILLIPS's** debut novel, *The Legend of Sander Grant*, was released by Telegram, 2009. You can find some of his work online, much of it in print. This poem is from his forthcoming collection, *Tip Diebaeck's Avulsion*. His award-winning short stories are anthologized in the forthcoming *Pyjama Squid and Other Stories*. He has no social media

\* \* \*



www.theinksphere.com.

**DESMOND RHAЕ** works as an Editor and Illustrator at *Starward Shadows eZine*. His work has been featured by *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, Burning Light Press, and Florida Roots Press. Desmond has spent his whole life exploring a deep interest in art, writing, and music. After earning a college degree in graphic design, he's focused on independent work as a writer and artist alongside writing his sci-fi novel. You can find out more at

\* \* \*

**CHRISSE ROHRMAN** is a training supervisor who lives with her husband and herd of fur babies in Indianapolis, Indiana. She has become addicted to writing competitions, and her short stories have been published in various online and print magazines. She is currently drafting the first installment of a fantasy trilogy. Follow on Twitter @ChrissieRawrman or 'like' Chrissie Rohrman Writes Things on Facebook.

\* \* \*

**DEAN SCHRECK** is a retired and relocated Long Islander who has been writing since the age of fourteen. His poems began appearing in small press magazines at seventeen with a bit of fiction here and

there. Dean's work has been published in *New Myths*, *Trembling with Fear*, *Space and Time*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Littoral*, *Altered Reality*, *Magical Blend*, *Owlflight* ... among others. He has also done work in comic books, including—*Bloodscent for Comico* (1988) and *Now Comics Twilight Zone #7*.

\* \* \*

**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.

\* \* \*



A resident of North Carolina's Outer Banks, **A.P. SESSLER** frequents an alternate universe not too different from your own, searching for that unique element that twists the everyday commonplace into the weird. When not writing fiction, he composes music, makes art, and strives to connect with his inner genius. He lives with his dog Kahlua and a nameless cat of unknown origins.

\* \* \*



**CHRISTINA SNG** is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbria*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com) and connect @christinasng.

\* \* \*



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

\* \* \*



**SONNY ZAE** lives in the Dallas, Texas area and enjoys writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror. His story collection *Ninja Nuns and the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. of Evil* is available through Amazon. *Tales from Alien AA* was published October 2022 by 4StarStories. "Attorney Fight Club" was published October 2022 by Knight Writing Press in their Particular Passages anthology series, Vol 4. "Doll 538" was published December 2021 in *Road Kill: Texas Horror* volume 6. "She Has My Heart" was published October 2021 in the Dates From Hell anthology. "Automation, Obsolete" was published March 2021 by Daikaijuzine. "Automated Everyman Migrant Theater" was third place winner in Writers of the Future contest, 1Q 2019 and published in the Writers of the Future anthology 36.

# The Treatment

*(full image)*

by Tabitha Marsh

