

penumbra

speculative
fiction mag

June 2k22 • vol vi issue 1

Creating for Anxiety

Can writing, painting, and gaming
help our (and others') mental health?

plus work by

Kaitlyn Lynch • Shikhar Dixit • Joshua Grasso • Colleen
Anderson • Nicola Brayan • Adele Gardner • Deborah
L. Davitt • Alex De-Gruchy • Bryan Miller • Kurt
Newton • Ritiksha Sharma • C. I. I. Jones • Christina
Sng • Carl Scharwath • James Rumpel • Ngo Binh Anh
Khoa • Jennifer Silvey • Carl Taylor • Elby Rogers •
Denny E. Marshall • Jesper Nordqvist

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 2019–2022 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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

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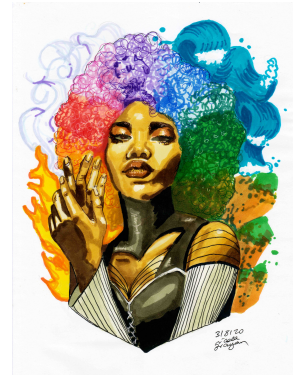
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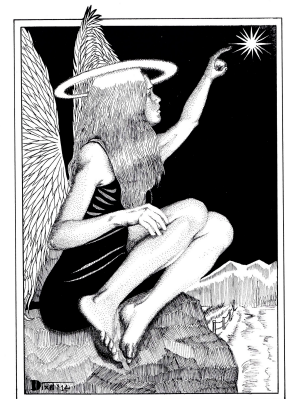
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*cover: Civilization by
Tim Hildebrandt*

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Last month I was invited to be a panelist at StokerCon by a writer I greatly respect, and the convention was in my home city—so no travel costs, no hotel costs, just the convention itself. It would have been—should have been—perfect. And, in a time before Covid, it would have been. Probably. But I suffer from anxiety, and with the addition of a pandemic I ended up not going to the convention. It wasn't just anxiety; there were other factors involved. But I have to admit not getting myself to go to an enclosed public space (where there were indeed Covid cases cropping up) was in large part due to anxiety.

This wasn't a new issue for me; I have had anxiety and OCD nearly as long as I can remember. And it isn't a new issue for a lot of people. Sometimes it's better, other times worse; for the most part, for me, I have found ways to handle it or to mitigate it. And much of that is through writing.

In this issue our first article in a long while is about that very thing: Can we use creativity (as in writing, but also art or even interactive role-playing games) as way to help ourselves? Can it be used as a therapeutic tool in a professional setting? And has it been successful?

This June issue is also full of amazing work (as always! :)). While the incredible cover art (*Civilization* by Tim Hildebrandt) works well with our article's theme (I think; it works for me), it also reminds me of some of the stories herein, principally "Slobbering Sevillano" by C. I. I. Jones, which gives us both civilization and myth. We also get into the mythic with Ngo Binh Anh Khoa's "The Little Joys of Sisyphus" (with which *Fragile Rock* by Elby Rogers pairs nicely), Colleen Anderson's "The Toad Stone," "A Provincial Exorcism" by Joshua Grasso, *Occult Red* by Ritiksha Sharma, and "Only the Devil Played Fair" by Alex De-Gruchy. You can also see the mythic (and mystic) in *Elemental* by Nicola Brayan and Christina Sng's "History

of Our World." And then how we encounter the mystical in James Rumpel's "The Oracle" (and, somehow, Denny E. Marshall's *Swiss Army Mars Lander*).

"It wasn't an Autumn Day, as one might expect when encountering a scarecrow story" could be our sentiments as well as those in Carl Taylor's "The Final Straw"; we kinda already wish it were autumn, and we'll give you a hankering for that season as well with Taylor's story, as well as Kaitlyn Lynch's "Straw Man" and "The Crow-People" by Adele Gardner. You'll also get a hint of it in the background of Shikhar Dixit's *The Angel's Wish*. (Although perhaps I am misunderstanding the word "hankering.") For those who prefer many seasons, we'll give you a more varied climatic view in Kurt Newton's "Moonlight Apocrypha" and Bryan Miller's "Unquiet Planet." For those who are not as much into the seasons as what can be grown in them, sample Deborah L. Davitt's "Through the Garden, Unseen," Carl Scharwath's *Meditation*, and Jennifer Silvey's "The Shack and the Plums."

All this scrumptiousness is followed by a future on Mars with the continuation of Jesper Nordqvist's *Mondo Mecho*.

I seem to have wavered ("woven"?) from the mythic to a strange understanding of how seasons work to food ... all of which do connect (I insist!), but also give you more understanding of how my mind works. When it's working.

Enjoy, and we'll see you in August, where you'll be able to harvest even more ... Oh, I should stop now.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

Creation Therapy

*Can creative works be therapy,
or therapeutic?*

(I'm advised that, as this article discusses mental health and possible ways to treat it, or at least alleviate some of the issues and symptoms, that I need a standard disclaimer here ... so ... The information presented below is offered for educational and informational purposes only, and should not be construed as personal medical advice. I am not a doctor; you should consult with your own medical or mental health practitioner about any treatment or advice they have.)

In the late 1980s I wrote a paperⁱ as part of a university honor's project on using fantasy role-playing games (D&D in particular) as therapy, similar to the ways role-playing and thematic apperception tests were being used. At the time, D&D was still seen as being either a) the devil's own handservant, luring children into the clutches of Satan (or rock music, or something equally hellish) or b) creating mental problems in susceptible college students and causing them to break with reality, suddenly deciding that they were really wizards or elves and wandering off into the woods or killing their fellow students in the delusion that they were enemy dragons or somesuch (the hysteria stemming from, I think, one or a few actual cases

Detail from *Civilization* by Tim Hildebrandt



where something like this happened and a swarm of fiction that followed). My paper was probably not the first of its kind or anything that groundbreaking, but it certainly seemed like it when I wrote it.

Also around that time, writing as therapy (either official-like, with a guiding therapist, or as self-help) was becoming a thing, but was still viewed with skepticism as to whether it was more than generally helpful (James Pennebaker had only just written about his studies of expressive writing as therapy starting in 1986,ⁱⁱ and in the early 90s some mainly thought of it as beneficial as “emotional catharsis [getting it off one’s chest].”ⁱⁱⁱ Although authors had probably used fiction writing itself as a sort of therapy for hundreds of years (Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, for instance^{iv}), fiction itself has only recently been more “officially” discussed as therapy.

The point here being that anything actually intended as therapy wasn’t fictive, and wasn’t to be found in either character development or role-playing.

Times have changed in the 30 years since I wrote that paper (and changed, and changed again), and I wondered ... has anyone tried to use these things in different ways, as therapy for any number of mental health problems? And do authors see their work as therapeutic, for either themselves or others, when they write it?

As many of you know, I suffer from anxiety and OCD myself. This is not new; my first memories of both conditions are from my childhood, and were entwined in ways that tied religion and the fear it can engender (if you do anything wrong—step on that crack, don’t step on that other crack, go the wrong way round that table, don’t say you’re sorry to God every time you do some tiny thing that may offend Him—you’re sentenced to Hell and damnation). This grew worse over time, sometimes spiraling quite out of control. I ended up in a ball on the floor of my room, in the center of the concentric circles of my braided rug, mentally asking for forgiveness and a new beginning, negotiating a way I could be released from these “habits” that I might be able to function, to leave my room, to go out in the world and not be compelled to do these things that would make me

the subject of ridicule (although I got really good at hiding what I was doing so that, at least out in the world, people couldn’t tell that I was counting five of this and five of that, stepping in certain ways over/on cracks in the walk, and so forth).

Reading, then writing, and then fantasy RPGs were a few of my escapes from this world. And to a certain extent I guess I did escape—at least, I gained control over the worst of it, the truly suicidal parts of it, with a few exceptions during which I did get counseling, most recently (ironically) just before the pandemic—which has done its own job of exacerbating my anxiety.

However, if there is good that has come of it, the pandemic has also introduced a lot of mental health issues (and awareness) into the public domain, anxiety chief among them. Surveys have shown that 28%+ of adults in the US have reported dealing with anxiety in the past year,^v and there has been a surge in demand for therapy,^{vi} also indicating increased awareness that it is a real problem, not just “in someone’s head.” With this awareness, there’s an increased possibility of real help, and of further explorations of ways to treat, or at least lessen, anxiety and other issues. And interestingly, these explorations include the many ways we create ... well, stuff.

Creativity as Therapy?

Art as therapy has been an accepted part of professional treatment since the 1940s, and although its effectiveness has sometimes been questioned, many studies have shown it to be effective in treating trauma and depression. It is also used for anxiety and many other disorders, as well as a way to cope with physical issues.^{vii} With the guidance of a therapist, one is able (in a best-case scenario) to “decode” the nonverbal messages, symbols, and metaphors often found in these art forms, which should lead to a better understanding of their feelings and behavior so they can move on to resolve deeper issues.”^{viii} For myself, while I realize one doesn’t need to be an artist to use art as therapy, my ability to draw or paint (er, inability to draw or paint as well as I would have liked) didn’t really help me; I looked around at others’ works, far better than mine, and I actually felt worse about myself. I know (and knew) it wasn’t a competition, but I was

still beset by worry: Why couldn't I get the visions in my head onto paper? I couldn't even paint models or figures very well; picture the paint mostly on my hands, rarely on the figures, flaking away the moment it dried. I needed another avenue.

So what about writing? Does it help?

Well, it does seem that expressive writing has also become much more a tool in counselors' toolboxes; journal prompts created by a therapist or books of prompts are being used to help with trauma, stress, and now even physical issues, much as art therapy is used, although with even more caveats (for example, just using it to vent emotions has not been shown to be as helpful as trying to understand those emotions, and can in fact trigger distress).^{ix} Writing actual fiction, however, has not become so much a part of the therapist's arsenal. Which, I suppose, is to be expected; most people seeking counseling are probably not looking to start writing short stories or novels just to get through their anxiety and therapy. But can writing fiction actually work in this way? Do authors set out on a journey of self-therapy in addition to the work involved in trying to write an interesting story?

Jay Bechtol, an author and social care worker whose work "The Fall" appeared in these pages and in our "Best of" anthology last year, says he doesn't write as a form of self-therapy, but that "like any artistic expression, drawing, singing, knitting, etc. these are great ways to explore and express feelings that might be harder to express in a simple conversation with someone. Any kind of writing, whether for publication or for a private journal, can be very therapeutic." He believes that "[f]or general health and wellness purposes, self-directed writing can be [a] wonderful means of taking care of yourself. However, if you are having more significant issues, a good therapist will encourage you to be open and clear about the direction therapy should take. Patient directed therapy is very effective. And, a good therapist will call you on your shit (hopefully in a thoughtful and supportive way), [and] some of those things that an individual might ignore (intentionally or unintentionally) a therapist will help explore. Those explorations are often the keys to recovery."

Author and filmmaker Lenore Sagaskie is even more enthusiastic about the idea. "Writing is my go-to self-therapy for my anxiety. Ever since I can remember, I've put my thoughts and feelings down when I'm thinking about something a little too hard, not only to purge them from my head but giving me an outlet to process them. I know some people swear by keeping a journal and writing entries daily. I've never done that because it's only the stray thoughts that trickle in from time to time that I need to keep in check. I utilize the notes app on my phone or one of the plethora of notebooks I have strewn around my house and car."

She continues, "I think writers have incredibly rich imaginations because we spend a lot of time in our own heads, sifting through our thoughts, trying to make enough sense of our stories to put them into words. Sometimes that's an easy process and it flows effortlessly. That is the part of the process we live for: when it flows well, we vibe with it, get it out of our head, then free up space for new ideas and stories. It makes sense that we process and reflect while we write, and through our stories we create characters dealing with the same emotions and feelings and thoughts that readers have experienced themselves or can relate to. When I wrote my short story, "The Remaining One" (Penumbra vol v, issue 4, and forthcoming in our "Best of, vol v"), it was to process the loss of my sister to cancer a few years ago. While my story was about two sisters with supernatural abilities, I wrote it as a form of self-therapy, processing the pain of her loss and dealing with an unknown future. It helped me to understand her loss and acknowledge that I didn't always have to be strong when I was dealing with the heartache of losing someone important to me."

About therapy, Sagaskie agrees with Bechtol that finding the right therapist is important. "I have social anxiety and trust issues. Initially, therapy was a difficult process. I was lucky to find a therapist that understood that I'm a good communicator when it comes to completing tasks and getting jobs done but that I lose that ability when it's time to communicate my feelings and deal with my anxiety. She understood that writing was an outlet and part of my process, and actively encouraged me to continue."

And the writing doesn't even need to be published, or publishable, to be helpful. Author and artist Marge Simon, a frequent contributor to *Penumbra*, gave one example: "In the late 70's, I was a single parent. It was a very bad time for me, at work. My principal was horrible. I took to my typewriter and wrote sad prose things, ugly poems late into the night. Kind of "pouring out my soul and heartache, etc." I wrote nothing worth saving, but it was just for myself. I didn't feel like talking to anyone, there were no goals involved. I think it helped get me through, just like painting (which I went back to after I'd saved enough for a house down payment, moved to a new school and a great principal!). Yes, you can use yourself as a resource!"

Incidentally, Simon goes more for self-directed therapy. "Everyone I know of with anxiety issues etc., pays for a counselor/shrink, etc. By the same token, some of them come to me for advice and share their problems. Anyway, after unloading on me, they go right on seeing their shrink or psychologist, etc. Perhaps they feel if money for time listening is involved, it raises the quality of the experience, although no actual advice, no solutions or cures are directly given. I'm for self-directed therapy, personally."

I too have often been able to stave off the worst of my anxiety, and even OCD, by delving deep into writing. This can devolve into unpublishable nastiness that I've discovered is me yelling at myself, but sometimes it really helps me to work things out by, in effect, separating myself out into different characters and playing the different roles, the different points of view. This can end up being very archetypal, however—Anxiety itself as a character, or Mr. Justice—which only works well in very specific situations, story-wise. This is where, for me, a good counselor has been able to take a look (or listen) and give me a little direction, even just a little nudge toward something a little more epiphanic.

But I'm Not Writing, I'm Reading

What about from the other side? Can one be involved in a non-interactive situation (like reading a book, or playing a set story in a videogame)^x where one has a therapeutic experience? My own

experience has been a bit spotty in this regard—reading or playing has helped get me thinking, but almost inevitably goes in a direction at some point that doesn't quite fit (even though I might love the story the author or RPG has told). And I don't go out there looking for something to be therapeutic; sometimes the experience just ... happens.

Bechtol has had a more personal experience. "I wrote a story called 'Off the Furrow' that was published in *Rock and a Hard Place*, it follows a woman on the road searching for drink of alcohol. I had a couple people mention that it hit close to home for them, but was it therapeutic? Not sure. Having said that, I think any story can be therapeutic if it connects with the reader. And yes. I've read plenty of stories that I would say were therapeutic for me, right time, right character, right theme, right tone, right issue/plot. There's a poet up in Canada named Richard LeDue and his poems almost always hit me right, make me feel less alone in my insecurities. Ephiny Gale, down under, writes some strange Sci Fi stuff that also hits me right as well; also, another Canadian, Patrick Malka, writes some horror that does wonders for me."

What about "interactive storytelling"?

While I have found writing on my own to be the most helpful, in some instances the interactive storytelling of fantasy rpgs (not the videogame kind, but with a human DM/gamemaster) has been the best way to get at issues (although I can't think of a reason that it can't be other types of rpgs). I think in an interactive game story it is important for the story (and characters within) to be directed in some way by someone trained to do these sorts of things as therapy—and the character created for the game can be the kind of person one wishes one was, or can be a stand-in for oneself in some ways, and the interactions that character has with others and with the general storyline can lead to greater understanding of oneself and possibly some partial resolution of issues. At least, that's what I claimed in my paper in the wayback times.

Creating such RPG experiences would be, I think, more work for the therapist/counselor than just doing expressive writing sessions, or

asking the patient to journal and then discussing what comes of that. Tailoring an interactive story takes time, and while some elements could possibly start out as generic (the landscape, some of the background characters), the actual adventure and close companions of the player/patient would probably have to be individualized. (This is part of why I created my AI engine, actually ... I thought it might be able to create and develop NPCs in ways that could help the therapist by taking some of the development load off of them.)

There are a lot more articles about using RPGs as therapy today, and they're generally positive. They tout the development of problem-solving skills and working with groups (e.g., Matt Nolan of North Texas Counseling Associates, who actually have a Dungeons & Dragons Therapy group). They allow clients to explore different solutions in experiences without real-world consequences, practice projection and empathy, and look at things from an outside-themselves point-of-view.^{xi} From personal experience (not in a counseling situation), I would caution that some people take the "no real consequences" thing a bit too far, in ways similar to those that happen on the Internet—which is why I'd hope that an actual therapist would be able to direct such situations in some way (such as Nolan describes), or actually provide in-game consequences that mirror those in reality and discuss what happened after in a sort of "post-game talk." But as a whole, it seems RPGs—in an interactive, in-person, counselor-directed sort of way—have indeed become a therapeutic tool.

Whatever You Do ...

I wanted to end this article with ... well, what seem to be the usual exhortations to find help, or something helpful, even if it is not ultimately writing, reading, or interactive storytelling. And to say that I know from my own experience that this is not easy. But they're words that have been said so often, especially in the US, where we are bombarded with anxiety-inducing news at every turn--if we're not being offered "thoughts and prayers," we're being told to find help for our mental distress through various hotlines, etc.

In my own worst moments, I have thought that nothing would help,

or even that there was no reason to help me specifically; why would anyone even care? I say this not to gain sympathy (or horror, or disgust). I say it in case you're out there, ever feeling this way. But ... there's always someone who will care, people who know you now, people who knew you in the past, people you have not yet met. And there are many different kinds of therapy, some self-directed, some not, that can help us find our way through the dark forests of our minds to the special stories each of us holds within, that can help us to tell our stories, if only to ourselves.

(Again, I am not a doctor or therapist, and the opinions above are meant as informational only, and should not be construed as personal medical advice. You should consult with your own medical or mental health practitioner about any treatment or advice they have. And there are hotlines to help in emergency situations: the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, for example, which is both for crisis and emotional distress.)

Interviewee bios

Jay Bechtol has worked in mental health for over thirty years and has a Masters in Social Work from Cal State Los Angeles. He takes care of his own mental health by playing hockey poorly.

Lenore Sagaskie is a Canadian/American writer, director, filmmaker, living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. Lurks on Twitter and Instagram @lenorewrites

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

Notes

- i. Unfortunately (or fortunately?) I can't give you a reference for this; it's somewhere on a floppy disk, and of course was never published anywhere. You'll just have to take my word I wrote such a thing.
- ii. Pennebaker, J.W. & Beall, S.K. (1986). "Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95, 274–281.
- iii. "Writing therapy: a new tool for general practice?," www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3505408/, referencing another article: Pennebaker, J.W. Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychol Sci*. 1997; 18(3):62–166.
- iv. "The Therapeutic Benefits of Writing a Novel," Jessica Lourey, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/discover-your-truth/201706/the-therapeutic-benefits-writing-novel.
- v. "The Pandemic Raised Mental Health Awareness. Will It Last?," Sofia Quaglia, www.verywellhealth.com/pandemic-mental-health-awareness-5213655.
- vi. "Online therapy is in high demand as coronavirus anxiety drives people to get help without leaving their homes," Anna Medaris, www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-anxiety-leading-people-to-online-therapy-2020-3, ref'd by "The Importance of Mental Health During a Pandemic," www.nu.edu/resources/the-importance-of-mental-health-during-a-pandemic.

- vii. "What Is Art Therapy?," Kendra Cherry, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-art-therapy-2795755; "Art Therapy," *Psychology Today*, www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/art-therapy.
- viii. "Art Therapy," *Psychology Today*, www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/art-therapy.
- ix. "Writing to heal," Bridget Murray, www.apa.org/monitor/jun02/writing; "Expressive Writing," John F Evans, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/write-yourself-well/201208/expressive-writing.
- x. Yes, videogames are interactive ... but generally there is a set storyline from which you cannot deviate very much, if at all. It's not interactive in the sense that you can change the entire direction of the game.
- xi. Matt Nolan, "Therapeutic Benefits of Role-Playing Games," ntxcounseling.com/2021/01/11/therapeutic-benefits-of-role-playing-games; Rory Lees-Oakes and Ken Kelly, "213 - Using Role-Playing Games in Therapy," counsellingtutor.com/role-playing-games-in-therapy.



Meditation

by Carl Scharwath

Through the Garden, Unseen

by Deborah L. Davitt

You can never see her face
as she walks through the garden
naked and unashamed—

barely infer her form
where the rose petals
form her shoulders,
where the sword-like leaves
of the innocent daffodils
cut in her waist,
where the lilacs bloom
the curves of her breasts—

her arms are lifted in revelation—
no, down at her sides
to match her relaxed contrapposto
no, both at once
infinite
in her contradictions—

and then she's past
the wind blowing her hair back
from her face
nothing but shadows here
as the ragged toothed edges
of the philodendrons rustle.

She wasn't here for you—
she's in search
of some giant still left on earth,
some fabulous monster
in which she might,
by some quirk of fate,
be able to believe.

A Provincial Exorcism

by Joshua Grasso

I: The Arrival

Turolld arrived late at the Duke of Boxwood's estate, nestled deep in the tangled woods of this forgotten part of the country. The coach had nearly split a wheel negotiating the pockmarked roads, and the horses had to be threatened and cajoled to go any further (though they were particularly stubborn, obnoxious creatures). Finally, as the sky faded into twilight and the stars began twinkling in earnest, he made out the tell-tale ruins that marked the beginning of the estate. All that remained of an old castle that had been ransacked in ages long past, built by nobody-knows-who and certain to stand until no one remembered a sorcerer named Turolld ever existed.

Normally, he would have already turned back. The money wasn't sufficient to offset the loss of coach and horses, and if you had met one of these down-at-the-heel dukes you had met them all. What brought him here was something else entirely ... that whispering, conniving lust known as curiosity. Not for this area of the country, which he could scarcely find on a map; no, it was the duke's letter, and more specifically, a single passage that decided the matter at once. Toward the bottom of the second page, the duke wrote, *as a sorcerer, perhaps you can translate? These are the only words my daughter has spoken to me for three weeks, though I know not if they be words or rabid nonsense:*

Vek'yatin yekahmoos, vek'yatin ethrasil.

His request, which had been written in a long-winded, poorly expressed letter of three pages, was to help him exorcise his daughter. She had become possessed by spirits and would no longer eat, dress, or behave like a sensible young woman. At first he dismissed this as

simple rebellion--she refused to marry the local dimwit, or her father wouldn't spring for the finest dresses from Belladonna or Paris. Yet as the letter rambled on, Turolld could pick out details that pointed to a true possession: loss of appetite, spotted flesh, walking backwards, and most telling of all, speaking in tongues.

And not just tongues of nonsense, as some girls did; he *knew* this language. It was a message he had heard before, had written down in his long and desperate search to speak to those who had passed beyond. To those who might have seen his Master. Sometimes, especially on nights like this, he felt he was close ... that one day they would find each other.

The coachman pulled up to the gates and gave a "halloo," several times. Eventually, a servant ran up with a lantern and unlocked them, signaling them forward. As they approached the house, Turolld noticed signs of a once-great estate now fallen into casual disgrace. It must be difficult to keep an estate so off the beaten path up-and-running. Perhaps he had fallen out of the king's favor? Lost an heir? Or made too many? Whatever it was, his daughter's possession was merely the latest in a long line of disappointments to this Royal House. And it might not survive the night.

The servant waited patiently for the coach to reach the courtyard and the sorcerer to dismount. Behind him, an older, heavyset woman quivered nervously. He felt he recognized her from somewhere, but her face suggested too many faces. However, the look in her eye confirmed it; she knew him, too. As he stepped down, he noticed her whisper something into the servant's ear, who nodded and dashed into the house. Then she inched forward, her hands clasping each other, lips frantic to speak.

“Master Tuold, a thousand thanks—you do great honor to our household,” she said, with a deep curtsy.

“I came as soon as I could, though it wasn’t easy to find,” he said, approaching her.

“You might remember me, if you take a long look backward. I was Lady Borowski, before my marriage. You were yet an apprentice with your master, Hildigrim Blackbeard. You cured my father of his most unfortunate ailment.”

Oh, so she was from *that* family. He suddenly eyed his surroundings with a deeper layer of scrutiny.

“Ah yes, I do remember—such a pleasure to see you again,” he said, kissing her hand. “I didn’t realize you had become the Duchess of Boxwood.”

“Oh—no, as to that, I’m not the duchess,” she said, with a slight blush. “I’m widowed these twenty years, Master Tuold. I came to stay here with my cousin, a near-relative of the Duke, and became attached to the young mistress; I became her guardian, so to speak. As there was no duchess the duke didn’t mind. I’m just Anja now.”

She led him into the house, which despite a number of candles and torches, retained its gloomy demeanor. Shadows seemed to sit at every table and glower in every hall. He followed her to the Grand Foyer, a roomy if dark expanse which reeked of mud and rotting foxglove (he discreetly held a cloth to his nose when she wasn’t looking).

Taking a seat on an ottoman and gratefully accepting a warm cup of tea, he asked about the duke’s daughter, Lady Alexandra. Anja grew tense, her frown threatening to overflow in tears.

“I can’t explain it, Master Tuold. I’ve known her since she was this high,” she said, gesturing to her knees. “In perfect health. Overflowing with kindness, sharp as a whip. But all of a sudden, she

turned on me. On all of us!”

“Can you tell me about these words she said to her father,” he said, unfurling the letter. “*Vek’yatin yekahmoos, vek’yatin ethrasil?*”

“Yes, those very words!” she nodded, taking the letter. “She stopped speaking to us a few weeks ago, but in her worst moments, she would mutter these words, sometimes shout them to the ceiling. Always these words, and always in the same order. Do you know what they mean?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I do,” he said, taking a long sip of his tea (it was very good). “An invocation to the dead. To allow them passage into our world.”

He heard a series of crashes down the hallway. Anja gasped, then tried to divert his attention, asking about the health of his Master. He saw this tactic for what it was and leapt up, demanding to see the young mistress.

“I beg you to wait till morning, when she’s rested. She’s always more difficult at night,” she urged.

A woman’s scream swept through the hallway and made Anja leap out of her skin. Several screams—each one louder, more desperate than the last. Tuold dropped his cup and swept through the hallway with Anja close behind, the screams growing closer and more coherent: something about *stop her—close the door*, followed by a crescendo of *no’s*. He reached a closed door with two servants stationed, grim-faced, to meet them.

“Let me inside at once!” Tuold demanded.

The servants traded panicked glances, since their orders were to let no one through until she calmed down—if she calmed down. Yet the master had also mentioned something about a diminutive fellow with a prodigious beard who might be able to help. Hoping this was the man himself, they thrust open the doors. Tuold pushed them aside

and flung himself into the room.

A great bowl smashed against the wall, hurled by a red-faced sixteen-year-old girl. Her hair flew wildly about her face, some of it plastered to her head with sweat and grime. An older man, perhaps the duke himself, attempted to wrestle her to the ground. She quickly jerked to one side and made him stumble to his knees. Tuold ran over to assist him. When she saw him she convulsed with rage or fear, her teeth clenched tight. He made a gesture of command: at first it rooted her to the spot, but she quickly shook it off and grabbed the nearest object--in this case, a wooden globe. With incredible strength she ripped it out of its cradle and tossed it madly. Tuold ducked and it smashed to pieces against the wall, a few fragments striking him as he watched in confusion. He picked off a sliver of a foreign coastline and tucked it into his sleeve for a keepsake.

“Distract her!” he shouted to the duke.

The duke nodded and waved his hands frantically, drawing her wrath; she picked up several books and hurled them, quite accurately, at his nose.

Meanwhile, Tuold ran across the room and cast a spell of holding. Smoke whistled around the girl’s body and formed a circle around her feet. She gave a hellish shout and thrust twisted fingers in his direction: his feet leapt from the ground and planted themselves on the ceiling, where he hung like a confused chandelier, coins from his pockets raining on chairs and tables. The spell proved effective even so: she couldn’t move and began flailing in a frantic attempt to flee.

“When I count to three, get ready to catch her,” he said.

The duke nodded, rubbing his bleeding nose.

One ... *two* ...

“*Vek’yatin yekahmoos! Vek’yatin ethrasil!*” she howled.

Three!

Her eyes closed and her head fell lifelessly against her breast. She fell forward and into her father’s arms, who gave a deep sigh of relief.

“Quickly, to her bedchamber,” Tuold ordered.

“Yes, right away!” the duke nodded, then with a look up, “and you ...?”

“Ah ... I’ll be right behind you,” he said, tugging at his feet.

But try as he might, he was stuck. He had no idea what spell she hurled at him or what fiend dreamed it up to torment him. After a few attempts, one of his feet came loose, but the other one held fast. If he had to spend the whole night flailing like a lunatic up here ...

“Master Tuold, may I be of assistance?” Anja asked.

“Yes, perhaps. If you could find ... hmm, some mandrake root? Or tormentil. Either one. That would be lovely.”

Anja dashed off to fetch them, leaving him swaying like a bat in the darkness.

II: The Confession

The next morning, Anja reported that the young mistress had rested well and was remarkably chipper. She even said “good morning” and wolfed down her breakfast, the first she had eaten in days. The duke invited him for tea and cakes in her bedroom, since she was eager to meet the magician who had saved her life. Tuold, for his part, had *not* slept well, as he had spent no less than three hours on the ceiling. By the time he finally got down (crashing head-first on the table, no less) he couldn’t escape the feeling that he had only been told enough (what the duke himself knew) but not what the girl (or Anja) knew

was the truth.

When he entered Lady Alexandra's bedroom, he found the duke hovering over her bed, offering her more of this and that, and peppering her with kisses. She seemed like a completely different person from their encounter last night: hair neatly braided and pulled aside, her face bright and eyes dazzling, flashing from one object to another before picking him out.

"Oh, is that him? The sorcerer?" she asked; then in a whisper to Anja, "But he's so short!"

"Ah yes, this is Master Tuold, the magician I spoke of. He came straight from Belladonna to see you," the duke nodded, as if proud of his own achievement.

"Please, dear Master Tuold, forgive my conduct last night," she said, offering her hand. "I don't remember a thing, naturally (I never do), but papa told me everything. Did I really hurl a globe at your head? And books at papa's?"

"Possession is a strange thing, my lady; it endows people with strength far beyond their own. The personality, too, suffers a sea change, verging on the monomaniacal."

"Was I really *mono-whatever*?" she said, with a slight giggle. "I'm sure I wouldn't have really ... you know, *killed* anyone. Certainly not you or papa. I've never done that before, have I? Just broken a few bones, though I did push that one servant out a window ... but I'm sure he didn't mind."

The duke traded glances with Tuold, as if to say, "I've never seen her like this. Is she well?" Tuold had no idea. To say nothing but dead-speak for days, and now to ramble on in this giggling fashion seemed disturbed, to say the least. He would have to try to draw her out, but without upsetting her prematurely. Some memories might be too fresh for her to confront in the morning.

"Tell me, Lady Alexandra, do you remember anything? The words you spoke, your visions?"

"Anja, dearest, could you bring me more tea? And some jam? But not the strawberry—I think it's turned. The peach? There's a dear," she said, cutting him off. "Now what were you saying? Something about last night?"

"We don't mean to upset you, darling," the duke said, pouring more tea. "If this is too much for you—"

"Nonsense, I'm only too happy to oblige!" she said, accepting the cup. "Though now you mention it, perhaps you had best leave me alone with the sorcerer, so we can confer in private. I might have to say things which might sound, how should I say ... somewhat *vulgar* to your ears. I am your only child, after all."

"Yes, of course, just call me if you need anything. I leave her in your capable hands, Master Tuold," the duke said, giving him another look.

Anja quickly darted in with the tea and the jam, then fluttered away, though not without giving Tuold a little tug on the sleeve by way of encouragement. Tuold waited for the girl to begin, but she seemed quite content with drinking her tea and spreading jam over the crumbled remains of her scones. After demolishing what was left, she finally looked up at him and smiled, talking with her mouth full.

"You're quite sure they can't hear us?"

He nodded.

"Do go and check."

Reluctantly, he ran to the door and listened; not a sound, no whispered breathing behind the keyhole. He returned and assured her they were completely alone.

She immediately flung down the scones and upset her teacup to grab his arm. The fingers seized on his wrist and her face turned white, eyes bulging in terror.

“Master Turoid, you have to help me! I fall at your mercy! Promise you’ll help me—promise you won’t go home!”

“Yes, yes, I promise, of course,” he said, patting her arm. “But tell me everything.”

“You have to promise not to think ill of me, you of all people, Master Turoid!” she said, still grabbing his arm. “It’s hideous, shameful what I’ve done. Papa will never forgive me.”

“Of course not, I wouldn’t dare—”

“But you don’t know what I’ve done! If you knew, you couldn’t look me in the eyes; you wouldn’t speak to me in public!”

“I’m sure you’re exaggerating—”

“No, if you told me you had done such a thing, I would spit on you, walk on the other side of the road. Disgusting, degenerate—that’s what I would say in your presence.”

“Indeed? Then why not tell me—”

“I can’t, it’s too hideous!” she said, dissolving into tears. “You’ll never forgive me!”

“By all the gods and devils, just tell me what you’ve done! Out with it!” he demanded, giving her a good shake.

Composing herself, and wiping away a few tears, she narrated her story. There was something that lived at the bottom of the nearby lake. She didn’t know what it was, not at first, but it seemed to call to her; at night, when the stars shone bright, she could hear its voice. Like the sirens. It frightened her at first, but gradually, it became

familiar, even comforting. Finally, she felt bold enough to ask the presence what it wanted. For several visits it merely cooed in her thoughts, telling her nothing but begging her to return the following night. Then, after days of teasing replies, it finally spoke to her: *come to my arms, child, and drink deep of my moonlit kisses!*

So she did. She waded into the lake beneath the full moon and felt it sweep through her toes, her body, her throat. As she sank down and let the water close over her head, she saw a shape approach. Not a man, as she expected, but something soft and delicate—almost feminine. What followed was both love and drowning, comfort and terror; she sank ever deeper and only looked up to see the moon shimmering, broken in a thousand pieces. And then, with a final gasp of life, she let herself go.

“I drowned, Master Turoid. I let her kill me!”

“*Her?*” he asked.

“Yes, she’s a spirit, a woman who once drowned herself, who now leads others to their doom,” she said, clutching her head. “And she took me as her prize. And I ... I let her do it, I wanted her more than anything I’ve ever wanted, more than going to the city, or wearing my mother’s jewels.”

“But Lady Alexandra, you’re here, you’re not dead,” he said, patting her gently. “And you’re safe. Whatever she’s done, I can protect you, just as I did last night.”

“No, she let me go—she wanted me to find you,” she said, frantically. “You see, I couldn’t help her, I wasn’t strong enough. But she thinks you might be. She wants you so desperately to help her!”

“Help her ... how?” he asked.

“I don’t know if I should tell you ...”

Lady Alexandra found the strength to continue, though it cost her

considerable shame. The Woman had been poisoned long ago by her malicious stepmother, a witch who had designs on her father's wealth. She dumped the Woman's body in this lake, an enchanted lake which harbored powers of the ancient earth. It brought her back as a creature of vengeance, eager to find her stepmother and drown her in the stygian depths.

Which she almost did, luring her stepmother to the edge of the lake and seizing her by both ankles. The stepmother escaped—minus a toe, ripped off by the Woman—and fled into the woods. There, she became a comely young milkmaid and began her career anew, moving from boy to boy, and girl to girl, to evade the Woman's eye. And since the Woman couldn't haunt the innocent, she needed a go-between to abduct potential suspects and enact her timeless revenge.

"And that's how she found me," Alexandra continued, sobbing faintly. "I was so willing, so lonely. And though I don't remember agreeing, I performed her will to the letter. I've lured young women of the village to the lake ... and drowned them. With my own hands. But each time, when the Woman seized them, it wasn't her ... just another poor innocent. I fear we'll never find her, and I'll have to keep killing, night after night, until there's no one left!"

Knocks at the door. The duke cried out, "My dear, is everything all right in there? You've been so terribly silent! I couldn't hear—er, that is, I couldn't tell if you needed anything or not."

"Yes, I'm fine, the sorcerer has been most helpful," she called out. "We're nearly done!"

Then, to Turoid in a whisper, "I haven't found a woman in days—she'll be furious! Please help me ... come to my chambers this evening. There you will find her. Make her listen to you! Make her abandon her quest!"

"Not to worry," he assured her. "Go about your day, be cheerful. I'll compose some spells and plan a course of action. Rest assured, my lady, your deliverance is close at hand."

"Yes, I knew you wouldn't forsake me," she said, smiling gratefully. "Now, could you pass me that jam? I could do with another spoonful."

III: The Assistant

Parasha asked everyone in the household about the sorcerer. Some said he was short, almost child-height. Others, that you didn't notice his height from the color of his unkempt beard (jet-black—or almost blue; though some said he was clean-shaven). Obviously she could never see for herself, as a lower servant had no business in that part of the house. But she had to see him at once—before nightfall. He didn't know the secrets of this place, what could happen to him here; what had happened to the *others*.

Her only chance was to trade duties with Maryusha, who fetched laundry from the young mistress' room. Then she could pass him a note or whisper something in his ear when Anja wasn't looking (but she was *always* looking). The only trouble with that was that Maryusha lorded her position over the rest of them and would never, not for a month's salary, forgo a single day of strolling into the grand apartments—or being seen to do so.

But even Maryusha had a weakness. Parasha found her mending stockings by the meager fireplace, every now and then removing a flea from her blouse and chucking it in the flames. When she saw Parasha, she merely hissed through her teeth, as if to say "wrong day, wrong room."

"Maryusha, dearest, let me take the laundry for you to the Grand Apartments. I really wouldn't mind."

"No, I don't imagine you would," she scoffed. "But as it happens, neither would I. It's the only blessed thing I look forward to in this flea-bitten life. So piss off."

"Not so hasty. Maybe you haven't heard about the sorcerer who

arrived last night.”

“I heard about him,” she said, snapping a flea between her fingernails. “Mostly that he’s not much to look at.”

“Yes, I heard that, too. But you *do* know why he’s here?”

“Because of the young mistress, I imagine,” she said, with a rolling of her eyes. “Why else would he come?”

“That’s not what I heard,” she said, leaning forward in a whisper. “I hear that Anja caught wind that someone on the staff was pregnant again. And she’s tired of trying to get rid of the bastards. So she told the sorcerer he could come and take it off their hands. This very night.”

Maryusha dropped the stocking and almost leapt backwards into the fire.

“What do you mean, *this very night*? Wouldn’t he have to wait until ... well, the moment of birth?”

Parasha shook her head meaningfully. No, these sorcerers had ways of removing the child. Not that it was exactly healthy for the mother, mind you, but Anja didn’t seem too concerned for that. Teach the little slut a lesson!

“Ah, now that you mention it, I could use the rest ... that is, if you wouldn’t mind fetching the laundry, my dearest,” she said, wiping her brow.

Parasha didn’t torture her any further, merely taking the basket from her hands and scurrying toward the great house to find Anja. Surprisingly, she found her crossing the courtyard with the sorcerer at her heels, yammering away about something important (which is how she always talked). Parasha ducked behind a cart and held up the basket for good measure. Then she peeked out and listened:

“Tell me, Anja, before your mistress fell under this spell, what kind of girl was she? You said she was smart. Anything else?” Turolld asked.

“Oh, she was *everything* else,” she said, with a laugh. “Clever, saucy, kind, observant. One in a thousand in this kingdom. I took to her at once.”

“And she’s devoted to you as well?”

“Oh my, yes, we’re like sisters ... she tells me everything,” she said, with a solemn nod.

“And her father?”

“She adores him, and of course she’s the apple of his eye. His only daughter ... and the mother dead.”

“Yes, how did she die? Did you know her?”

“Only briefly, Master Turolld. She died from a long illness a few months after my arrival. I’ve done what I can to be useful.”

Parasha had to scamper out now, since they were getting beyond earshot. Luckily, they paused just before entering the house, as the sorcerer had something in his shoe. As he shook it out, Anja continued in her most piteous vein (hypocrite!).

“I do hope you can help her, Master Turolld. If there’s anything I can do ...”

“In fact, there might be,” he said, slipping his shoe back on. “Can you recommend a servant I could use for the night?”

“Oh?” she said, with a cough. “Master Turolld, forgive me, but the duke runs a respectable household ...”

“Ah, no—I mean as an assistant for my spellcraft, to assist in the

exorcism. Someone serious and mature, but not prone to ask questions.”

“Yes, of course, Master Tuold. Forgive me for not asking sooner,” she said, with a shamefaced grin.

At that moment, either because Parasha made a gasp or Anja had sensed her all along, she looked over at the cart and they locked eyes. It wasn’t a pleasant look.

“Now I think of it, I know just the girl. Come with me, I’ll introduce you. She’s got a good head on her shoulders, just tell her what to do and she’ll do it. And if she doesn’t, I’ll give her what for!”

Parasha froze; lifted the empty laundry basket; lowered it; dropped it behind her.

“I didn’t know you were allowed in the grand apartments, Parasha. A recent promotion?” she said, glowering.

“Oh, yes—I mean no, forgive me ... Maryusha ... didn’t feel well, asked me to take over.”

“You needn’t worry about that. Instead, you can assist Master Tuold for as long as he needs you. Follow his commands to the letter, and if I hear that you’ve been slacking, child ...”

She swore and promised and ducked her head until Anja stalked off in search of grander prey. Once she was out of earshot, Parasha looked down at the sorcerer and decided to be as forthright as possible. Sorcerers respected that (or so she had read in a third-rate novel).

“Now Master Tuold, there are three things I absolutely won’t do: I won’t steal anything, I won’t tell lies, and I won’t eat anything with nutmeg. It gives me gas.”

“Oh, ah, shouldn’t be a problem. I won’t ask you to steal, lie, or eat

anything you don’t want,” he said, offering his hand. “But I might ask you to help me exorcise a spirit, cast ungodly magic, and assist in the capture and execution of a malicious witch. Is that acceptable?”

“Oh, I don’t mind witches and magic—my own grandmother cast spells,” she said, with a shrug. “When do we start?”

“This very minute. But first, I need you to tell me everything you know about the young mistress. If we’re going to cure her, I need to know everything the family won’t tell me.”

“Begging your pardon, Master Tuold ... but what’s in it for me? If Anja caught wind of my gossip, I would lose my position.”

“Naturally, I wouldn’t expect you to risk something for nothing. What can I offer you?”

“Well, just between you and me, I could do with a book,” she whispered, with a grin. “The late mistress taught me, though since she died, the library’s been locked up tight. I’d take anything, though I do prefer something frightful. Gothic stories, if you have them.”

“If we survive this, I can take you to a small bookseller in the very heart of Belladonna. He has the latest editions from abroad. You can pick whatever you like,” he said, still gesturing for her to shake his hand.

She finally shook it, clearly astounded by his offer.

The newest editions! She had never read anything that wasn’t at least a decade old—or older. With a little curtesy, she took him aside and whispered, “I’ll tell you one thing they haven’t told you. But I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

And when she told him, his face went pale and his eyes grew large. She was right: he didn’t like it at all. But now, at least, he understood.

IV: The Trick

Tuold instructed the Duke to lock him in Alexandra's bedchamber and post guards at the door. No one was to enter or leave the room without his approval. If anything happened to him, they were on no account to listen to anything Alexandra told them, no matter how she begged, pleaded, or assured them. The duke reluctantly agreed, though even Tuold could tell that he would renege at the first "please, papa, open the door!" In fact, he was counting on it.

Once locked in, Tuold instructed Parasha how to arrange the room: all mirrors taken down, nothing silver in sight. All furniture had to be placed at an angle from the bed, and the bed itself had to be pointing north. Alexandra, dressed in her nightgown and sitting with her legs tucked beneath her, watched with interest, but kept silent. Almost as if she had seen these preparations before.

"You know what to do?" he asked Parasha in a whisper.

"Act terrified. Act nervous. Draw all their attention to me," she said.

"Exactly. And don't be alarmed, whatever happens. I have a plan."

"Be careful, the young mistress is crafty. Mind what I told you."

He nodded. Parasha noticed that Lady Alexandra was watching them closely. But she quickly laughed it off, and said they might as well get comfortable—it could be a very long night. The Woman never came when expected.

"How can you tell when she's coming?" he asked.

"It's always different; sometimes I feel dizzy, or my heart starts beating rapidly," she said, laying across the bed and kicking up her feet. "But other times, I just hear her voice, calling me from a distance. Though I don't hear anything now."

"Master Tuold, I'm frightened," Parasha said, glancing at the door.

"Are you sure you want me to stay? You seem to have everything well in hand ... I should probably get back to work."

"Nonsense, don't be alarmed. Just follow my orders and you'll be fine," he said, patting her shoulder.

"Perhaps you *should* let her go," Alexandra said. "If I threw books at papa goodness knows what I might toss at her."

"But this time I have you in a circle of holding," he gestured. "You won't be able to leave the bed or throw anything outside it."

"In that case, I'm so relieved," Alexandra replied, cracking her knuckles.

As the sun went down and the shadows from the candles lengthened, Parasha waited, listening. She knew something was off, that the possession wasn't as straightforward as it might appear. No, they weren't waiting for the Woman to call her; Alexandra seemed too relaxed, or impatient, for a girl about to be invaded by a foreign presence. It suddenly occurred to her that the Woman might be under *her* command ... that she was the one giving orders.

"Master Tuold, did you hear that?" Parasha whispered.

He had. Not a footstep or a window opening, but something deeper, as if beneath the room itself. Alexandra seemed unconcerned, lying down with her arms crossed, as if waiting—or repulsing—sleep. Tuold reached out with his senses to every corner of the room and felt its approach. The Woman? No, not her ... but something else, coming closer.

A vase smashed over his head and he staggered forward, trying to steady himself. But other objects appeared out of nowhere: candlesticks, bedpans (he dodged those) and an ornate mirror (he wasn't so lucky). The glass shattered against his skull and fell alongside him like a glittering rain. Parasha screamed and drew back, but Alexandra pounced from the bed and caught her.

“I have her, mother! The little fool, I told her what would happen!”

Slowly, a presence materialized just behind Tuold, the cracked mirror still in her hands.

“Anja!” Parasha gasped.

The old woman spit on the floor, motioning for Alexandra to bring her closer.

“You were always too observant—that’s why I wanted rid of you tonight,” she said, grabbing her face. “I don’t know what you told him, but it wasn’t enough. I’ll drain his magic as I did the others’—but unlike them, he’ll give me so much more. A student of Hildigrim Blackbeard! Alexandra—take her to the lake. Feed her to the Woman. I’ll be along presently.”

“Are you sure he’s such a prize?” she asked, looking down at him. “He said he cast a spell of holding, but I danced right out of it. And the other night, when I tossed him on the ceiling ... he seems weak, mother.”

“He underestimated us, that’s all. He didn’t see a young girl and an old woman as much of a threat. His mistake!”

“Please, you can’t do this, I beg of you, mistress! I did nothing wrong!” Parasha wept.

“Silly fool, you’re a snoop and a gossip,” she snapped. “We’re well rid of you. You almost alerted the last sorcerer, and I saw you make eyes at this one. No, you’re better off at the bottom of the lake with the Woman. Now go!”

Alexandra marched her to the door and began crying at the keyhole: “Papa, come save me!” Not surprisingly, the duke was waiting just a few feet beyond, desperate to hear the good news. At her first cry he ran for the door, but cautioned himself not to unlock it: *remember what Tuold told you!* It wasn’t her asking, after all, but that evil

sorceress. Give the sorcerer time, he told himself, and don’t give in to Alexandra’s wiles. Not this time.

“Papa, please! I’m better now—he’s cured me! But he’s fighting with the Woman and I don’t want to get hurt! Let me and Parasha escape! Save us, papa!”

He spent a frantic minute warring with himself before he relented and opened the door. As soon as he saw her he threw open his arms to receive her—only to draw back in terror. She looked pale, her eyes vacant and looking past him, not recognizing him at all. Parasha struggled, but Alexandra clutched her hair like a bridle and pressed forward.

“My child! What’s wrong ... has he done something to hurt you?”

“Get back to your room!” she shouted.

With a sigh he backed away, feeling for the darkened stairwell behind him. He had such high hopes for Tuold, but in the end they were all the same. Six sorcerers now, each one buried clandestinely in the wilds of his estate. Thank goodness he had Anja to help him in these matters; he would be lost without her. He whispered good-night to his daughter and vanished up the stairwell.

Alexandra marched Parasha outside and along a moonlit path into the surrounding forest. The servant made frantic attempts to struggle and cry out, though it was only for show. While the sorcerer seemed surprised and vanquished, she knew it was all part of his plan. At least, she *hoped* this was all part of his plan ... or that he even had a plan.

“Where are you taking me?” she cried out, so Tuold could follow her voice.

“Where do you think? To the cold embrace of the Woman, who hungers for human flesh,” she said, jerking her along. “She drives me day and night to find her stepmother, knowing good and well she’ll

never find her. Tonight, you'll have to do. At least you won't be missed. I've killed a few people I almost regret, like my best friend, Irina. You'll see her bones at the bottom of the lake."

Soon the enchanted lake glittered between the silhouettes of branches and leaves. Not an insect stirred or a frog croaked near its banks; yet the entire forest seemed to watch, breathlessly, for the waters to part. Alexandra pushed Parasha toward the lake and shouted with full-throated gusto:

Vek'yatin yekahmoos, vek'yatin ethrasil!

Parasha crawled away from the water's edge, expecting a tentacle to splash out of the depths and lay hold of her. But nothing happened. The waters remained still, the night continued to sleep. She looked back at Alexandra, who stared blankly into its depths, looking, waiting ...

"I've brought her to you! Don't you want her? I think this is the one!" she cried.

Parasha scanned the shore for any sign of the Woman, her breath as still as the water. She also listened for some sign of Tuold, expecting him to come crashing through the brush—or even out of the water itself, to surprise them. But only deathly silence invaded the lake. Alexandra paced back and forth, repeating the invocation under her breath and stamping her feet. Where was she? She always came when called, especially when she had a tempting sacrifice in hand!

"There's something wrong ... I can't hear her, or she's been silenced. We're going back," she said, reaching for Parasha.

But Parasha evaded her, running behind a tree and ready to fight her off with whatever was at hand—a rock, a branch, her teeth, if necessary. Alexandra howled with rage and lunged at her, but stumbled at the last minute and crashed against the tree. She drew back, dazed and bleeding, enraged at the servant's insolence.

"There's nowhere to run! The Woman will find you! You can't

escape!"

Apparently, she could; Parasha raced through the brush and darkness back to the estate. She stole glances behind her, but Alexandra was nowhere to be seen. So she continued into the house and made her way through the halls and stairwells to Alexandra's room, grabbing a knife from the pantry for good measure. She had never killed before, but if she saw Anja—especially that grim, haughty look she often gave—she wouldn't think twice.

She paused outside the door, listening. Someone was still in the room, though there were no voices. Yet she could hear a faint hum, the sound of breathing, or gasping, just beyond. Parasha cracked open the door, knife at the ready. She would strike at the first thing that moved.

Inside, she saw Tuold standing in the corner, arms crossed, looking pensive. Across the room, which required opening the door a crack further, she beheld Anja on her knees, clutching and clawing at her throat. The old woman finally staggered up and tried to run to the door, but came short, losing her balance. Anja crashed against the wall and snatched at the curtains, which brutally tore in her grasp as she sank down.

"Never! I won't let you!" she gasped.

All the while, Tuold stared on, clearly disturbed by the proceedings but unwilling to help. Parasha instinctively opened the door, her eyes wide, as if under a spell. Tuold saw her and motioned her to stop.

"Stay where you are!" he called. "Don't confuse her. She's found her prey."

She wanted to ask questions, but she couldn't lift her gaze from the sight of Anja on her knees, howling and snorting with every ounce of her strength. Then, like the transition of night to day, she stopped struggling and stood bolt upright. Inhumanly upright, as if something had pulled her taught, breaking her spine to do so. That's when

Parasha saw she was levitating just above the floor, her slippers hanging down, the left one slipping off. Exposing a foot without a toe.

Anja's head turned to Tuold and grinned in a lifeless, mirthless, manner.

"I thank you, sorcerer, for locating the witch. She has much to answer for ... and all eternity to pay the price."

"You'll release your hold on the girl?" he asked.

"She is free. Her mind will be wiped clean ... she will only remember what you choose to tell her."

With that, Anja hovered to the window and unbolted it. The panes swung open and filled the room with the moist chill of midnight. As the moonlight fell on the old woman's face, she said the familiar phrase once more, but this time like a lullaby: *vek'yatin yekahmoos ... vek'yatin ethrasil*. Then she hurled herself out of the window and plunged into the darkness below.

Parasha gasped and ran to the window, though there was nothing to see, no sign of the body. She never heard it land, either; it seemed to boil away on the night air, settling like mist in the treetops. Tuold came up behind her and clasped her shoulder.

"I don't understand ... what happened to her?" she asked.

"The Woman found her witch. It was Anja all along."

"But that's not possible ... I was here when she arrived," Parasha objected. "I saw her come from far away—she knew nothing about these lands."

"*She* didn't, because the witch was already here," he explained, closing the window. "She'd been hiding in the estate for years, now as a cook, now as a servant. But when Madame Borowski arrived, the

witch took possession of her. It was the perfect disguise, since the witch typically preferred young men and women. And as Anja she had access to Alexandra, who became her willing—or perhaps unwilling—accomplice."

"Then why was she after you?"

"Her ultimate objective was to exorcise the Woman herself. But she wasn't strong enough. She needed powerful magic--mine, the other sorcerers'. She knew me by reputation, or more specifically, my master. She hoped with his magic she could finish the job."

Parasha reflected on the strange relationship between Anja and Alexandra, which did indeed seem to be more like master and servant—just the wrong way around. Alexandra revered her, and a few times had let the word "mother" slip when addressing her. Alexandra's late mother was a saint, the kindest soul imaginable; the severity of the comparison repulsed her.

"And how did you know? Was this your plan all along?"

"Regrettably, no ... not until you told me about the other sorcerers," he said, with a laugh. "When I realized I was the sixth one to arrive, I knew it was more than a run-of-the-mill possession. But once I solved that, the rest started falling into place, particularly as I watched Anja—her movements, her speech."

"But how did you summon the Woman here? I thought she could only move through Alexandra?"

"No, and that's why I had to get her out of the way, which is where you came in," he said, sheepishly. "I cast a spell to teleport her directly to the room, directly *into* Anja's body. Or whoever she was."

They both looked at the window again, half-expecting to see Anja clawing her way back into the room, howling for revenge. Yet nothing appeared, and the night softened, thick clouds obscuring the face of the moon.

“I suppose we should find Alexandra and return her to her father,” Tuold said, dusting his hands. “I certainly wouldn’t mind getting paid.”

“And she’s ... back to normal? Even after all she’s done?”

“She won’t remember a thing,” he nodded. “Whether that’s just, given the extent of her crimes, I can’t say. Others will have to stand in judgment.”

“Anja corrupted her, I saw the change,” Parasha said, following him out of the room. “Though I’m not sure she needed much persuasion. She was always ... a willful child.”

“Then maybe I’ll have to return someday? If so, I’ll need an assistant. Magicians work best in pairs.”

He looked at her meaningfully, though she didn’t catch his meaning at once.

“What--*me*? A magician?” she said, with a piercing laugh. “But I couldn’t! I’ve spent my entire life on this estate, cleaning, doing laundry.”

“And reading books—you said so,” he reminded her. “Your preference for gothic novels is as good a preparation as any. Witches, possessions, dark magic ... you’re already familiar with the landscape.”

“Hmm, you did promise me some new books,” she said, twirling her hair thoughtfully. “I always felt I was meant for more than this place, though it sounds foolish when I say it now.”

“On the contrary, maybe that’s why I’m here,” he said, pausing in the shadows. “I came here to find my Master ... but maybe I was meant to find my apprentice? Maybe this is fate’s way of telling me to move on, to stop waiting for the dead to speak?”

“Could you tell me about him? Your Master?”

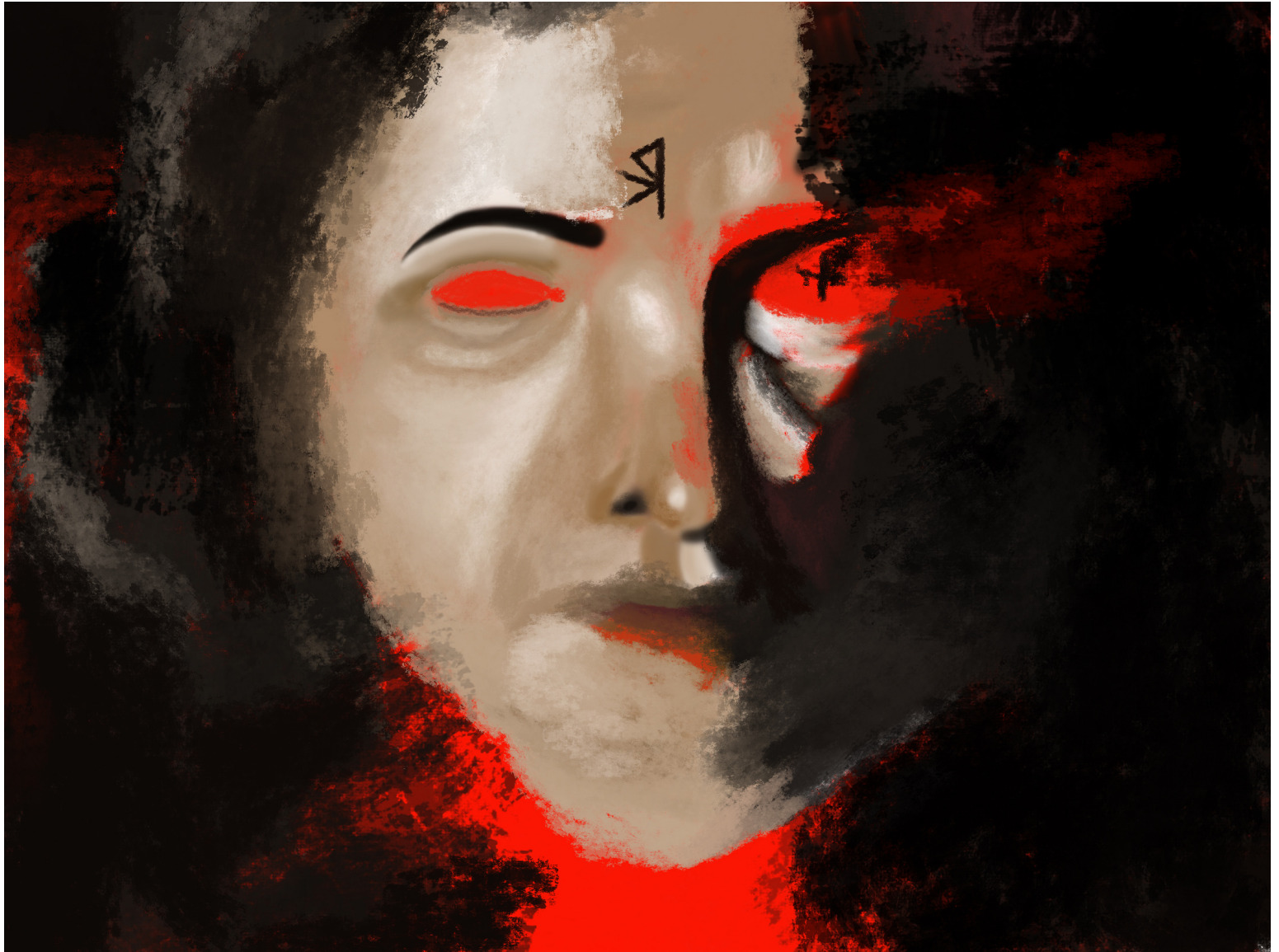
“Ah, that might take some time. But I suppose we have a long ride back to Belladonna. You are coming, aren’t you?”

In response, she toppled a vase from an antique stand—priceless, from long before the Insurrection—and watched it shatter. Tuold gasped.

“I’ve always wanted to do that ... these old heirlooms glaring at me day and night. And all they needed is a good push.”

“As a magician, you might be tempted to shatter a lot of vases. You’ll have to work on that.”

“Then let’s hope I have a good teacher,” she said, taking his arm.



Occult Red

by Ritiksha Sharma

Only the Devil Played Fair

by Alex De-Gruchy

The three killers sat by lanternlight
In a shack in the hills in the howling black night
The whiskey uncorked and the cards dealt
The Devil alone wore no gun on his belt
But he smiled like one who had strangled despair
And only the Devil played fair

A dead branch scratched at the cracked window
Through the gaps in the boards a chill wind did blow
Foul blood coughed into a handkerchief
Sunken-eyed and pale a man shook like a leaf
But he didn't look for sympathy there
And only the Devil played fair

Luck twirled her skirt with hands won and lost
Ugly joy and knife's-edge rage brittle as frost
The Devil pointed out a hidden Jack
A gunshot put a cheater on his back
But the game went on beside blood, brains and hair
And only the Devil played fair

The Devil said to the cleaned-out outlaw
"I told you straight what we were playing for"
A cylinder spun as six bullets flew
Then there came a claiming of what was due
But there were always more games and players elsewhere
And always the Devil played fair
Only the Devil played fair

The Final Straw

by Carl Taylor

It wasn't an Autumn Day, as one might expect when encountering a scarecrow story. It was actually the middle of July, the ripened center of an otherwise humdrum New Jersey summer. A humid day, one with the density of wet ink. The scarecrow's unseasonable nature is what made it first stand out to Lara Reitman. Well, that and its uniquely bicephalous manner. Two heads is not a feature commonly encountered in nature.

Lara's husband Tom was working late that evening at the law firm, so Lara rounded up her children and walked them to the local park. She was running out of ways to kill time. There was Lara pushing the stroller, and there was Percy, her five-year-old son, and little Candice, age two. And Tom somewhere, somewhere in the encroaching darkness, working late again in his spacious office in Jersey City. Or so he said.

Percy tugged intermittently at Lara's free hand, the one that dangled from the stroller, his little fingers sticky with pine cone sap. The park was only a few blocks from their house. The Reitman's lived in a nondescript suburban town in Central New Jersey. Every few years they spoke of moving to "the city," only they couldn't agree on a proper definition of that term. Her husband insisted city meant New York, and she Philadelphia, and so they remained in a fixed stasis somewhere near Princeton. Equidistant between the two metropolises. As Lara taught the children, "Better to be safe than sorry," and "Fools rush in."

And she was the girl who played it safe. Grown into a woman who plays it safe. At forty-one Lara Reitman stood at the crossroads of inertia and regret. It was not a lonely place, though she often felt alone. It was not an unpleasant place, though it was far from pleasing.

It just was, and she just was ... and she knew it.

It was not her intellect that marked her for such mediocrity, such *fraternité* with the mundane. When she wanted to, she could be quite charming, and she possessed a keen if often obscured sense of humor. By any measure she was above average at almost any endeavor she undertook, and yet ... she was somehow less than the sum of her parts. Or rather her life was. It wasn't just that she no longer worked outside the home, it was the very decision-making tree that led her down, down into a monochromatic trail of days. She was passive in her own existence, and only just now awakening to that fact. Not making a decision was still a decision, why hadn't she realized that before?

It pained her to think this, to know this of herself. She would stand in her kitchen each morning, adrift as her dog tapped its toenails on the linoleum and her children fussed; she couldn't help but feel lost. Betrayed somehow, but by what? By whom? By Tom? By her own children? By herself? Just how, she wondered, had she come to be such a deveined prawn of a human? So gutted, so empty inside. Her very being nestled in the passing of moments; her grip on life looser than sand in an hourglass. Dissolving. Gone. And Tom appearing to flourish the more she stagnated; promotions and business trips and cactus-bellied rage whenever she dared question his comings and goings.

She thought of these things as she pushed the stroller, and gripped her boy's sticky hands, her eyes ever alert for any suburban danger: errant cars, cracked sidewalks, strangers, or worse yet, people she knew. She had married the first boy who sat next to her in Freshman English class, she took the first job she was offered after college

(administrative work at a local public relations firm). She vacationed one week each summer, ate sensible meals, worked out three and a half times per week, had two children aged *exactly* three years apart. According to her cell, she averaged 2.1 hours per day on her device. She weighed between one-hundred-and-forty-four and one-hundred-and-forty-seven pounds. Yes, everything was fatalistically predictable for Lara Reitman until late in the afternoon on the day she encountered the two-headed scarecrow.

Now they had reached the park. Percy ran madly and scorched through blaze-orange tunnel slides while Lara leaned against Candice's stroller and read a romance E-Book on her phone's Kindle App. One brown eye on the screen, the other on her two children. The park was small, secluded, chosen for its lack of traffic as well as its proximity. For a while, they had the whole mulch-swaddled place to themselves. She texted her husband.

"What time will you be home?"

"Whenever I'm done with this brief."

"That doesn't help me plan dinner."

"Eat without me. I'll get something here."

"It's Friday."

"I know ..."

They had been together fourteen years, married eight. He insisted they wait until they had paid off their student loans before tying the knot.

"Careful, Percy," she called to her son, who wished to hang both upside down and backwards from a swing. When she was young her mother told her the story of a local boy who died on a swing,

suffocated by twisting it this way and that. Apparently that kind of thing really happened, *could* really happen. Or was that something her mother made up to keep her in line? Was it some mere apocryphal tale? Could it really be that so many children die shoelaces-out on escalators or with plastic bags over their heads? Did her beloved cat really go to live happily ever after on a farm? It's not so much the lies she was told as a child that bothered Lara, as much as her mother's unwillingness to clean them up or admit to them years later. Who could divine fact from fiction after enduring such an upbringing?

Then a movement in the wooded lot to the side of the park. A shadow cast in duplicate, the flash of orange. Had somebody lost a ball or a safety cone in that dense thicket of brush and deciduous trees? Was somebody out there, in the woods?

A voice seemed to call to Lara, as though from within her own mind.

"Lara, come. Come, meet me in the woods," it said.

"Time to head home," she called out to Percy. "Come on!"

He ignored her, of course. Lately it seemed that all the males in her life were impervious to her pleas.

"What, you trying to avoid me?" a cheerful voice called from behind Lara. She swung around to find Daphne Henderson, the head of the local PTA, and a dearly close "frenemy."

"L.O.L.," Daphne spelled out to Lara. "Did we sneak up on you?" Next to Daphne was her son Dylan, age seven, a mat of curly blonde hair blowing in the suddenly shifting winds.

"You sure did," Lara said, trying to hide a rising seafoam of anxiety. "I didn't see you. We were just about to head around."

“Aww, please don’t.” Daphne said. “We just got here!” She pouted in the same manner Lara had observed so many times at PTA meetings.

“Meet me in the woods,” a voice again said to Lara. “Now.” The voice was somewhat sinister, and yet ...

“Can you do me a huge favor?” Lara said.

“Anything for you, darling.”

“Can you keep an eye on my two for just a minute? We lost a ball in the woods earlier and I want to go retrieve it.”

“You’re going into *that*?” Daphne said, pointing to the woods and not hiding her skepticism very well.

“Yes.”

“But you’re wearing Burberry.”

“So I am ...”

And then they were behind her, fading away as Lara tucked between thick branches and the detritus of acorns and the moldering leafy remains of prior autumns. It felt good to finally decide to do something. Could it be that even a somewhat crazy decision was better than standing flat-footed as life passed by? Or was she simply losing her grip, imagining things?

“Getting warmer,” the voice said.

Can you hear my thoughts? No reply.

“Colder, more to the right,” the husky voice said. “Good, getting warmer again.”

Then before her widening eyes stood a large, two-headed scarecrow. He was nearly seven feet in height, his torso wide to accommodate an

extra skull, and he wore small sugar pumpkins as shoes. Each face had a cloak behind it, not unlike the hood of a cobra. His broad left visage was perplexed looking, but self-satisfied; the right one bore a cold-lipped scowl. When he spoke, it was with one voice from two directions, as though his heads were but two separate speakers blasting stereo and bass. He wore two large flannel jackets, puffed and blue, and he appeared to be sweating some in the summer heat.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Lara said.

“I called, and you came,” he said. “What does that tell you?”

Lara’s eyes panned across the woods as she tried to articulate an answer.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I always tell my children not to speak to strangers.”

“But we’re not strangers,” the two-headed scarecrow said. “I’ve been watching you your whole life. You see, I’m your guardian angel.”

Lara couldn’t help but laugh, even though she didn’t wish to be rude. “You,” she said. “How could *you* be anyone’s guardian angel?”

“Is it because of my appearance?”

“Well, truthfully? I mean, you are a two-headed scarecrow.”

“Us guardian angels take the form necessary,” he said. “In one prior incarnation I was a winged fish, in another a large tuber, and most recently I presented as a bronze-age dwarf who wore carpal-tunnel wristbands.” He laughed, a soft delicate laugh with the timbre of a rich cello. His laugh was jarring in its innocence, incongruent with his spoken voice. “The myth isn’t that guardian angels exist, it’s that we only watch over one person. I have many children of the sun to observe.”

Lara took a step closer; she helped stuff straw back into his flannel

shirt. “Why would my form be a two-headed scarecrow?” she wondered aloud.

“What would Freud say?”

“Umm, that I’m *crazy* for imagining such a monstrosity.”

“What does a scarecrow signify?” the raspy voice said, stretching forth from both sets of tight lips.

“Aren’t you a totem of death?” Lara said.

“But also of hope ... And scarecrows are meant to terrify those who may take away the harvest. Do I need to ask who or what is pecking at you lately?”

Lara felt the wind sweep through the ravine; it blew her brunette hair wild. Her nose was stuffy with allergies, but still she could detect the aroma of distant barbeque.

“I should be getting back,” she said. “I left my children.”

“They’re fine,” the two-headed scarecrow said. “You left them with Daphne.”

“But still—”

“—Hop on my back,” the two-headed scarecrow demanded. He was now kneeling down, his gloved hands flat on the layer of wooded debris.

“I can’t. I mean, I shouldn’t.”

“I can take you to uncomfortable truths,” the scarecrow said. “But that’s exactly what you need. If ignorance is truly bliss, then why do you feel so god-awful?” The scarecrow’s furthest right eye winked. “It’s up to you, Lara. The decision is yours and yours alone.”

Without overthinking it, she climbed onto his back, and was soon swept away as he crawled on all fours, his two heads bopping and loose but his speed rapid as he bounded through the woods and back, back toward her home. Lara caught a glimpse of Daphne as she hurtled by; she had all the children sitting in a circle around her and her hands were on her hips. Daphne wore a muted expression on her face, her eyes fixated on her platinum-banded wristwatch.

Then Daphne and the children were left behind, and the scarecrow all but soared through the air. Yes, they were now flying through that stoic little Jersey suburb.

“Where are we going?” she whispered in the scarecrow’s right-center ear.

“Jersey City,” the scarecrow said. “To the law firm of Pickney, Englewood, and Cardino.”

“Perfect,” Lara said. “That’s where I wanted to go.”

“I know you did.”

“How did you know? Can you read my mind?”

“Well, no, but you entered that law firm’s name into your GPS,” the scarecrow said, and when Lara looked down she realized she was driving – driving her Honda Pilot while the scarecrow rested in the passenger seat with its dusty pumpkin feet on the dash.

“I’ve never hallucinated before,” Lara said, hoping she was in a dream, wondering if her new dosage of myriad prescription medicines had somehow interacted negatively.

“I suppose not,” the scarecrow said. “Hallucinating requires imagination.”

“You know what? You’re just like every other man in my life,” Lara

said.

“But I’m not a man,” the scarecrow insisted. “I’m a scarecrow.”

“Yes, yes, just a simple two-headed scarecrow with a masculine voice,” Lara said dismissively. “Got it, bud.”

“So, you think your husband is having an affair, huh?” the scarecrow said, apparently keen on changing the conversation.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Of course it is, I’m your guardian angel.”

Lara surprised even herself by lowering her defenses. “I know that lawyers are busy, but ...”

“You shouldn’t measure your self-worth by others,” her companion said. “What do you want to do? Who do *you* want to be?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “That’s the problem. My whole life I’ve been taught to bend to the whims of everyone around me. I mean, no wonder I’m this twisting twig in the wind.”

“It all ends today,” the two-headed scarecrow said, his faces contorting into somewhat menacing visages in the passenger seat.

They arrived in Jersey City sometime around dusk. Lara called Daphne to ask if she could keep the children for a while. After all, good old Daphne could handle babysitting two extra kids for a few hours, couldn’t she? She was the PTA President, for Christ’s sakes. “Are you sure everything is all right?” Daphne asked. “Of course,” Lara shouted.

Soon enough Lara and the two-headed scarecrow were entering the

lobby of a great glass building. The lobby placard read “Pickney, Englewood, and Cardino: Attorneys at Law, Seventh Floor.”

“You know what’s almost comical,” Lara said, once the two of them were alone in the elevator. “I’ve never actually been here before. My husband has worked here five years and I’ve never once seen his office.” The scarecrow apparently couldn’t think of anything to say in reply, so he just shook his heads.

The elevator doors slid open and soon they were in an expansive but faceless corridor, momentum taking them to the glass entryway doors of the firm.

“Try not to get any straw on the floor in there,” she commanded, as though the scarecrow were one of her children.

“I’ll certainly do my best ...”

Then inside, inside where there was solitude and silence save the sound of electric pulse and the mild hum of vacuum from down a hallway. The firm smelled like burnt candles, sage, and now, of pumpkin.

Shuffling feet and then they were faces to face with an old man in a poorly fitting suit.

“Oh dear, I suppose the cleaning service left the door open,” the man said, sweaty-like. His voice was congested-sounding. “Umm, how could I help ... you?”

“I’m Mrs. Reitman,” Lara said. “Is my husband around?”

The elderly lawyer glanced around the hallway, tiny tributaries of sweat forming around his temples.

“I’m afraid he’s left for the evening,” the lawyer said.

“How long ago did he leave, Mr. ...”

“Cardino. I’m afraid he left early today. I understand he has a summer cold.”

“Oh, does he?”

Then Lara and the two-headed scarecrow were back in the Honda Pilot, ignoring incoming calls from Tom flashing on the Bluetooth.

“He’s having an affair, I knew it!” Lara said.

“You know what they say when you assume,” the two-headed pumpkin said evenly. “You make an ass out of u and me.”

“I have no time for your empty platitudes right now,” Lara said.

Anger can sometimes be a gift, helping us address realities we would rather not face. But it can also lead us astray, if our sense of reason becomes divorced from reality. As Lara drove recklessly across the soundscapes of Route 1 that evening, she almost forgot at times that she was accompanied by a large two-headed scarecrow. Every now and again she remembered, but only because the interior of the SUV increasingly smelled like a petting zoo.

Then home, home into the boxed terror of that center colonial. Inside where the sound of the children greeted Lara, assuaging her primary concern. At least the children were safe.

And then she was face-to-face with Tom, who stood next to a dangling kitchen witch, both man and toy witch leaning against the plate cabinets. He had a yellow beer in his hand and his face was the

shade of cherry cola. He was still wearing his navy suit from that morning.

“I was about to call the police,” he stammered. “Daphne *almost* called the police. We could have had child services involved over this.”

“How’s your summer cold?” Lara said.

“Oh, I know all about your insanities,” Tom shouted. “Don’t even get me started.” He finished the beer and tossed it into the kitchen sink where it clanked against the faucet. The lights in the kitchen strobed; Tom had installed LED lights on a line that had a dimmer.

“You left *our* children with Daphne, with not so much as an explanation,” Tom said. “She thought you were abducted. *Then* you drove to my office and harangued poor old Cardino with some scarecrow costume? I mean, do you want me to lose my job? You do realize I’m the sole income earner around here, don’t you? Do I have to have you committed?”

“What about the fact that you lied?” Lara said, her fists balled and hugging her midsection. “You’re the one who left work early today feigning illness.”

“Cardino was just confused because you scared him half to death,” Tom said. “That was a misunderstanding.”

“You’re such a bad liar,” Lara said. “You’d think a lawyer would have it down pat.”

“Look, I was working on a brief,” Tom said. “I never said whether or not I was working on it at our firm’s physical location.”

“No,” Lara said eagerly, relishing the pain now. “I imagine you were quite detained at some second-rate motel.”

Tom paced; it was evident he wanted another beer, but he was afraid

to walk to the fridge because he didn't want to hear it. She wanted him to go for it so she could scold him like she did Percy when he placed his hands near the oven range. "You tracing the same path as your father?" she would say. But instead he held firm at his location, even as his eyes plead for leniency or understanding.

"You shouldn't have abandoned the children," he muttered.

"But it's perfectly fine for you to go off and have an affair?"

"The children are your job," Tom said, his nose flush and his eyes downcast. "Do you think I like working all these fucking hours at a job I hate?"

"Oh," Lara said. "So you deserve to blow off some steam, is that it?"

"You're acting completely unhinged," Tom said.

"Gaslight much?"

And for a while they both stood in their kitchen, unsure how to proceed. Rarely had their marriage veered into outright hostilities, and although Tom was a lawyer, he was seldom in court and not used to arguing on his feet. For like Lara, Tom was ultimately an indecisive person. He was the boy who played it safe. Grown into a man who plays it safe – hence law school. At forty-one Tom Reitman also stood at the crossroads of inertia and regret. It was not a lonely place, though he often felt alone. It was not an unpleasant place, though it was far from pleasing. It just was, and he just was ... and he knew it.

Later that night, after the children were asleep, Lara waltzed into the marital bedroom and asked Tom to strip naked and wait for her in bed.

"Close your eyes, honey."

He complied, and so she took his silk ties and strapped his wrists firmly to the bedpost.

"So, we're okay?" Tom whispered, eyes still closed.

"Tell him that you're better than ever," commanded the two-headed scarecrow.

"Of course, dear. Better than ever," Lara said sweetly. "Now, open your eyes."

And Tom screamed when he opened his eyes and saw Lara above him.

"I'll try anything you like," Tom said. "But why this? I mean, why are you wearing that two-headed scarecrow costume?"

"Shh," she said, pointer finger over his mouth, then a full right palm.

All around them straw, and the remnants of straw floating like dust through the room, visibly floating before the dying light of his and hers nightstand lamps.

"Choke him," the two-headed scarecrow said. She started to, and watched her husband's face start to twist and turn, felt the pulse of his splayed out arms struggle against the headboard, felt the suction of his lips as they gasped for air. Then she stopped, broke free of the scarecrow, and ran into the bathroom for a good long cry.

Then a thought came to her, a thought all her own. She had ignored making decisions for so long that she was out of practice. Now when she made a decision, it was a poor one. She creaked open the bathroom door and witnessed the two-headed scarecrow speaking with her husband. They spoke in low-tones, almost inaudible.

"It's a classic trick," the two-headed scarecrow was telling Tom. "Accuse the other person of what *you're* doing. She goes out and has an affair, and then blames you for being unfaithful. Think about it ..."

Lara couldn't believe her ears. The scarecrow was not only two-headed, he was also two-faced.

"Lara," her husband bellowed. "Are you seeing someone else?"

Lara ran, out of their bedroom, then out of their house; if she had had the stamina to leave the town or even the state she would have. The crickets chirped and the houses blurred, all the same as always in that enclave of cul-de-sacs and "McMansions." She tripped over a sewer grate and sat on the lukewarm pavement, blood coming slowly to her scrawny right calf. It had to be past midnight, and she sat in fear of a stray police cruiser or a nosy neighbor. It wasn't real fear, more a concern about being questioned. Why was she, such a nice suburban "housewife," out there so late at night, bleeding all over the sidewalk? Did she need a ride home and had she been drinking ...?

Her scarlet fists pulled her knees up from the sidewalk. She returned to her house, but didn't enter. No, she walked to the tool shed. Inside there was movement, some kind of nocturnal animal sent scurrying. With her Flashlight App she surveyed the tools. A chainsaw, a hedge trimmer, a weedwhacker, an old lawnmower, two glimmering shovels, and a single black rake.

Of course, a rake. That is the tool one uses to dispose of lingering Autumn. She removed the rake from the hook and moved it back and forth in her hands. It was a solidly built rake, a wooden handle, but its head and tines were a solid composite metal. This would do nicely. She took the tool in her right arm and crept back into her house.

Up the stairs, making sure to first stop and check on the children. They were both sleeping, and appeared to be unharmed by the bizarre events of the evening. Lara then entered her bedroom, where she found her husband cuddled in the arms of the two-headed scarecrow. Her husband was snoring, but as her eyes adjusted she could tell that the scarecrow was awake, that three of his four eyes were open.

She raised the rake over her head.

"Move," she commanded.

"Don't do it," the two-headed scarecrow said. "I was just trying to help."

"Out of my bed, now."

The scarecrow lumbered out of the bed and stood nearly as high as the ceiling. "I really am your guardian angel," he said. "It's a good thing that your husband now doubts your faithfulness; he needs to know that you're still desirable. And you needed to be reminded that your husband has his finer qualities too."

"Oh, give it a rest already," Lara said. "Just pack up your tricks and lies and get the hell out of my bedroom."

"But—"

"One more word out of you and I'm going to use this," she pointed to her rake.

The two-headed scarecrow put his heads down and started to walk past her. It was evident that he was not going to say another word, not while Lara held a rake in her hands. But as he brushed into her on the way out, she changed her mind. She decided to destroy the fucker anyway. She brought the rake down, and the scarecrow leaked straw like a piñata struck. Again and again she thrashed, thrashed to the soundtrack of the crickets outside and to her husband's thundering sleep-apnea snoring. She thrashed until her arms were tired and her head ached, and the two-headed scarecrow was just a pulverized layer of cloth and silage.

The next morning she awoke spooning her husband. As the first stray

rays of sunlight fluttered in like tiny butterflies through the blinds, she almost laughed at the wild dream she had. Dream? More like a nightmare. But then Lara felt something poking her bare legs. When she sat up, she realized that all throughout their bed, as though the Reitmans' were sleeping in a rabbit hutch, was a nice even layer of straw.

The Angel's Wish

by Shikhar Dixit



Straw Man

by Kaitlyn Lynch

There was always something about the scarecrow in the far right corner of the farmer's field that made his skin crawl. The farmer's daughter he liked, however. She was beautiful and pale and fragile, and when she stood out in the cornfield when the wind was blowing real hard, if you looked just right you couldn't tell her apart from one of the tall stalks planted right there in the earth. Yellow-haired and reaching up towards the heavens, swaying in the breeze. The only difference was that the corn just stood there all vacant-like day in and day out, and she would never be seen without a smile on that pretty face of hers. It wrinkled her nose and showed off the freckles under her eyes.

He swore she was made of sunshine and whatever it was that Granny put in the moonshine that made his whole body warm right down to his toes. Sunshine and real moonbeams, maybe. Everything lovely on God's green earth. And all in a white sundress.

His name was Henry, and hers was Annamae. Her father, the farmer, his name was Tucker Dilworth, and everyone in town had hated his family back as long as anyone could remember. The thing of it was that no one could remember why. Tucker himself was a miserable old man, and it seemed like he'd just been born that way. Like he'd just come out of the womb wrinkled and cussing and drunk as Cooter Brown. It was a miracle a man like that could've had anything to do with making someone as lovely as Annamae. She must've been all her mama. Not that anyone would know, of course, since her mama ran off close to the day Annamae was born and didn't have either the heart or the good sense to take her baby with her. No one blamed her for taking off on Tucker. Folks questioned her leaving Annamae behind, but when that little girl started to grow up, just about everyone selfishly thanked her poor old mama for

blessing our little town, even if it wasn't what she meant to do.

Henry was the most thankful of all, since he and Annamae were born the same year, so he had the gift of growing up side-by-side with her, and sometimes even hand in hand. From the time they were children on, they were near inseparable. Only had eyes for each other. Everyone knew that they'd wind up getting married one day, if ever her daddy would loosen his grip on the things he called his own to allow it.

Nights, Henry would go to sleep and he would find his dreams wandering down a path that always led to Annamae. She was even lovelier in his head than she was in person, if that was possible.

But sometimes, the dream would follow a darker path to the farm, all the way through the high winding stalks of corn, and he'd find himself standing face to face with that ugly scarecrow. He'd blink, and all the stalks of corn would become Annamae — thousands of exact copies of her, glassy-eyed and lifeless, swaying in a frigid night breeze. He would try to cry out, but find his mouth held shut, stitched tight. So he would try to claw at the threading and rip the sutures out, but then find he was unable to move his hands or arms. At some point, Henry would realize he was trapped inside the scarecrow on its pole, and he was looking down at his own body. Watching helplessly as whatever now had control of him looked back up at him and smiled.

But then he would wake up, and then he'd go about his day like nothing had happened, even though it'd given him the cold sweats and set his heart racing. And then he'd forget the dream ever happened to begin with, and that would be that. Henry would forget

about the scarecrow.

The scarecrow never forgot about him.

* * *

“Annamae!” Henry stood at the edge of the Dilworth farm, a handful of wildflowers held tight in one sweaty palm. “Annamae, come out here!” Yelling that loud made his voice sound like it was being pulled out of him the way a horse pulls at a plow when the blades are caught on roots. He could go closer and not have to shout so much, but the last time Annamae’s daddy caught that boy on his farm he dished out a tongue lashing everyone could hear for miles, and Henry was afraid this time he’d get out a real whip. “I’ve got something for you!”

Annamae peeked her head out from the dairy barn, hot summer breeze whipping her corn silk hair around her face like little halos going in and out of view. She dropped the wooden pail down in the mud and straw and lifted up the hem of her dress before running barefoot and full speed towards where Henry waited for her. He nearly dropped what he was holding when he caught her up in his arms, spinning her around, a tangle of hair and limbs and smiles. He set her back feet-first on the ground, gently and oh so carefully, as though he were afraid she’d shatter if he dropped her on the wrong edge.

“What’d you bring me?” she asked breathlessly, smile wide on pink cheeks, hands clasped behind her back.

Henry returned her smile and licked his lips, looking her over once before answering. He saw her every day, and somehow it still always seemed like a miracle that he was allowed to look at her with his own two eyes. Up close like that, even. It almost felt like a sin. “You’ve gotta close your eyes.”

Annamae let out a little giggle and clapped two tiny hands over her eyes. She began to bounce on her heels as she waited for her

surprise. “It must be something awfully special.”

“Oh, it sure is, just you wait.” He hitched up the legs of his trousers and bent down, one knee grinding into the dirt. With one hand he offered up the bundle of wildflowers, and with the other he reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a loose ring. Small, gold, with one tiny diamond set right into the center. It wasn’t much, but at least it was something proper. It was more than his momma had ever gotten, even. Taken him saving whatever he could scrape together from farmhand work and errands and odd jobs since he was old enough to understand chores were things he could sometimes ask for payment for. Folks in town never had much to spare, but whatever anyone did have, they were always real generous with. “Okay, go ’head and open your eyes.”

Slowly, Annamae uncovered her face, and then her eyes fluttered open. When she saw what Henry was holding, a gasp so powerful it nearly knocked her clean off her feet tore through her. She lunged at Henry and threw her arms around his neck, and he rose to meet her halfway, both of them laughing.

“Are you asking me what I think you’re asking?”

Henry simply nodded as he looked at her, both of his arms wrapped so tightly around her it was like he was trying to trap her forever in this moment.

“Yes! Yes, of course!” They both burst into fits of laughter again, but this time peppered here and there with kisses. The wildflowers lay forgotten somewhere near their feet. Henry was still holding the ring so tightly the little metal spokes holding the diamond in place had begun to bite into his palm, but he hardly felt it.

When they finally broke apart, Henry unclasped his fist and delicately slipped the ring onto Annamae’s waiting finger. And then they just stood there for a moment, Annamae admiring the ring and Henry admiring Annamae. The both of them were smiling so wide it seemed like their faces would shatter into a million tiny pieces.

Slowly, the laughter hidden behind their teeth ceased, and a hush fell over the both of them.

“What d’you think my daddy’s gonna say about this?”

Henry chewed at the inside of his cheek and stuck both his hands deep inside his pockets. “I don’t expect he’ll like it very much. But you’re a grown woman, and he’ll just have to make do without you.”

Annamae nodded solemnly, still looking down at her left hand in quiet awe. “I suppose so.”

* * *

Telling Tucker Dilworth about their plans to marry did not go over near as smooth as the two were hoping, and they were already planning on it being a bumpy ride to the end of the rainbow. When Annaemae walked into her daddy’s house wearing an engagement ring, he threw a fit so loud it scared all the birds out of the fields, and anyone walking by the farm on any side could hear him hollering to high heavens. Annamae just stood there the whole while, hands clasped in front of her, head down, eyes on her feet, taking it all. She knew in her heart her daddy meant well. He just didn’t have the words to express it sometimes. Her heart was golden, and she didn’t altogether have it in her to consider the fact that some other people might have hearts made of coal.

But as upset as he was and as much as he screamed, he couldn’t change the fact that his little girl had her heart set on marrying Henry Olsen. She cried herself to sleep that night.

Henry went home and dreamt of her, like he always did. This time, though, the dream had Tucker Dilworth, front and center and fifty feet tall, screaming in Henry’s face, standing between he and Annamae and telling them that, as long as he was alive, he would never allow his daughter to run off with some worth-nothing no-account.

In the dream, Henry possessed an unworldly strength, and when

reasoning and then arguing with Tucker didn’t seem to do any good, he slashed the old farmer to ribbons and watched as he dissolved into puddles of what looked like tar. It smelled like how anger feels. Raw and rotten and mineral.

It should have made Henry’s stomach turn.

But he only knew that he’d won. He only felt pride.

In the brief moment just before he woke up, Henry looked down at his own hands, and saw that they were made of straw.

It was a fitful sleep, and Henry tossed and turned all night until the sun rose and found him sweating though his bedclothes. He woke with a start and bolted upright, tangled in the damp, sour sheets.

He tried to forget about the dream as he rose and dressed himself.

Things like that tend to stick with you, though, like a piece of chewing gum you’ve picked up on the bottom of your shoe. Every third or fourth step and you feel that little suction and hear the smack of it as you’re walking, and no matter what else you were thinking of before, your mind can’t help but jump back to the girl you passed a mile back, walking along with the bubblegum and chewing it like she was a cow with a wad of cud in her cheek.

That was how moving through town with this dream itching at the back of his mind felt. Every couple of feet, it would pop back up, waving and hollering and demanding to be seen, when all Henry wanted to do was put his blinders on and trot right along to the farm to see Annamae in peace.

When he got there, however, it seemed like the farm was the least peaceful place on earth at the moment. Dozens of people crowded the house at the center of the property, milling around, weaving in and out of the rows of corn. Following huge invisible lines, heads down, wringing their hands, just moving for the sake of moving, it seemed. Like ants on a hill.

As he got closer, his heart began to pound in his chest, the irrational waking sleep feeling of the dream ringing loud in his ears. He began to call out for Annamae, and, one by one, hands in the crowd pointed towards the farmhouse as the people they belonged to stopped to stare at Henry as he passed by.

He moved through the crowd, still calling Annamae's name. At the doorstep of the farmhouse, he began to hear an unearthly wailing coming from the inside. The door hung open on the hinges. Henry stepped over the threshold and followed the crying through the house. He stopped at the door to Tucker's bedroom.

Inside, Annamae was kneeling on the wood floor, holding her father's broken, lifeless body, covered in his blood, and screaming at the top of her lungs. A white nightgown covered her frame in place of her normal sundress, but it was stained with large splotches of bright, vulgar crimson. Everywhere else her skin had sallowed so much from grief or shock it matched the color of the fabric. Her hair had once been tied back into a loose braid, but pieces were now loose and hanging limply around her face. She looked like a child's doll which was once beautiful and pristine, but had been dragged through hell by one wrist and would shatter at any moment.

Henry couldn't tell just how long she'd been sitting there like that, nor did he dare to ask. In truth, the thought didn't cross his mind until much later. In the moment, seeing the two of them there like that, splayed out in such a gruesome scene, the only thing he could think of was himself. Himself and that damned nightmare.

Surely, if he were somehow responsible for this, he would know? He would have woken up covered in blood? There was certainly an abundance of it in the room; everything was completely drenched in blood spatter. The floor, the walls, the window. If Henry had been the one who had done this horrible thing, he thought, there would have been some trace of it in his own room.

And there was not.

But there was that *dream*. And that felt like responsibility.

"Annamae ..." he finally croaked out after standing there watching her, open-mouthed, for how long, he did not know.

Annamae's head shot up. For the first time since he'd arrived, he could get a look at her face. Her normally sunny disposition was muddled by tears and the blotchiness that came with, and a few spots here and there of her father's blood on her cheeks and nose. "Henry," she gasped, and rose to her feet. She lunged at him and wrapped her arms around him. Henry was now also covered in Tucker Dilworth's blood.

He could only stand there for a few moments before something like muscle memory kicked in and his own arms closed around her with slow, jerky movements.

She buried her face in his shoulder and began to sob softly.

Henry could only stare over the top of her head at her father's body where she had left it lying in the middle of the room. It was odd to see him so silent. Every inch of him was a wet russet. He looked almost like a very large newborn baby, Henry thought, all twisted up like that, with his nightclothes the same color as his skin. Well, he did if you ignored the fact that his guts were spilling out the front of him.

In his mind's eye, Henry could almost see the blood sucking back up from the puddle on the floor, the ropery tangle of viscera piling back into Tucker's abdomen, the slashes sealing back up. And then this imagined version of the farmer's corpse rose with still-dead eyes and raised one limp arm to point at Henry accusatorially. When his mouth opened and Henry could nearly feel his eardrums tremble with guttural, hallucinatory bellowing, he shut his eyes tight and buried his face in Annamae's hair, trying to shake off the nightmares once and for all.

* * *

They buried Tucker Dilworth that week. The whole town went to the funeral, but it was clear they were only there for Annamae. The sheriff looked around for some leads, but it was hard to accuse anyone of murdering a man everyone hated.

Annamae and Henry were married only a few months later. It might have been called disrespectful. Folks just figured Annamae wasn't used to being on her own and the change wasn't a welcome one, so she solved the problem the only way she knew how.

What no one expected, though, was for Henry and his new wife to pick up and move right after the wedding. It seemed like one day the town woke up and the Olsens were just gone. No forwarding address and no goodbye, just an empty house where two people used to live.

It didn't make much sense, how someone could just pick up their whole life and take off like that. Henry must've had more money squirreled away than anyone ever knew about, or his folks did and left it to him, or Tucker Dilworth did and left it hidden under a floorboard somewhere for Annamae to find. People hoped they'd have gone somewhere life was a little easier. A little less rough around the edges, maybe. Where you didn't have to break your back in a field from sunup til sundown just to get by.

But whatever the case was, from that point on, there was a hole in the town. An empty place that was shaped, quite frankly, like Annamae. Henry was an alright fellow, but, at the end of the day, he was painfully average. Put more space between the two of them, more years, more people, and it wasn't likely they would have made it.

But for as much as that boy might have lacked, he sure did love Annamae twice as much as everyone else who knew her. And that was a feat by itself.

Things tried to carry on like normal without the Olsens around. And, in some ways, they did. The sun still rose every morning and set at

night. The crops still gave fruit, water still flowed. The children grew up.

But something hung heavy in the air around the old Dilworth farm, and it was impossible to ignore. For as much as folks used to ignore it when Tucker was alive, now that he was dead and buried and Annamae gone it was wholly abandoned. It was like the whole place was covered in the stench of the grave. No amount of scrubbing at the floor of that bedroom would get the smell of death out, even when you could no longer see the blood.

No, something just was not right, and the thing of it was that no one could explain it.

It's like you have a rock, you might say. You have a rock and that's where you sit every day. Just to rest your feet and pass the time, and maybe tell a story or two. And, over time, you and the rock become very familiar with each other. You know all the hollows and chips and flat planes of the rock. But here's the catch: the rock knows you too. It knows the sound of your voice and the feeling of your warmth. And so when one day you stop coming back, you might miss the rock, sure. But more importantly, that rock gets to missing you. And while that little rock was only a fragment of your whole life and your twenty-four-hour days, your coming back again over and over was the only way the rock could tell that anything was changing, that life was progressing and that the world was alive.

So you leave and you forget all about the rock. Find a new rock, maybe.

The rock doesn't forget about you.

But no one cares about a little rock. No one cares about a dirty, beat up old scarecrow either.

If people watching that scarecrow in what used to be Tucker Dilworth's cornfield watched carefully enough, they might notice it

moving, piece by piece, a little every hour. It, like everyone and everything else, had gotten so used to having Annamae around that now, with her gone, it began to miss her. Miss her and long to have her back, and you could almost say that it seemed like that scarecrow was trying to get down from its pole to go out and find her.

But no one paid any attention. Not like that. Not enough to notice anything. And that would be if people were going by the old Dilworth farm, anyway.

Which they weren't. So that scarecrow pretty much had the run of the place.

And when it had wholly disappeared from the pole, no one noticed. They didn't even notice when it began to make its way through the tall corn to the edge of the farm.

The first time anyone noticed anything was wrong was one day when Annamae was looking out the window of her brand new house with her brand new husband, and she spotted the scarecrow coming right at them over the horizon.

But what sane person would believe they were seeing a scarecrow standing up all by itself, of its own volition? And furthermore, walking? And even more than that, walking towards them? So she closed the curtains and locked the doors and told herself it was just the lingering effects of what had happened to her father.

And then she tried to forget about it.

But Annamae was that scarecrow's whole world. It didn't know how to live without her. It didn't know how to forget her.

* * *

"I'm just going for a walk. I should be back before it gets dark."

Henry was sitting in the kitchen with a newspaper. He didn't reply

more than raising a hand to wave goodbye, didn't look up from the column he was fixated on that moment. Annamae shut the door behind her and started away from the house, into the woods surrounding them. This place was so different from the farm. She loved Henry so much, but some days she wondered if she did the right thing, marrying him. Leaving like that.

If only her father were still alive to tell her what to do.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? When her father *was* alive, he did nothing but tell her what to do when she only wanted to be free to live her own life. And now she had her own life and she didn't know what to do with it.

Lost in these thoughts, she wandered further and further away from the house, out into the dark unknown, out into her spiraling thoughts.

Back in the kitchen, Henry was still sitting with his newspaper. His mind, too, began to drift off. Float back to his old place, and the Dilworth farm. To the night when Tucker had been killed, and Henry had been beset with that awful dream.

His eyes had drifted up from the paper to look out the window and, just as Annamae had a few weeks before, his gaze settled on what looked like the old scarecrow in the distance, coming straight towards him. And just as Annaeae did, he convinced himself it was a trick of the light, his eyes projecting his fears into the dimming night sky. He stood and closed the curtains over the window and then went back to his reading, heart pounding against his chest.

Annamae was still out on her walk when Henry heard the knocking on the door. He figured it was his wife, though it did occur to him that it was strange she'd be knocking instead of simply letting herself in. Still, he rose from his seat in the kitchen, crossed to the front door, and opened it.

He expected to see the sweet, smiling face of his wife looking back at him. Freckles, rosy cheeks and all. Instead, Henry found himself

face to face with the scarecrow from Tucker Dilworth's farm, the size of a man, tattered, and standing straight up as though still supported by an invisible pole.

Horried, Henry stumbled backwards from the door and tripped over himself. As he scrambled across the wood floor, the scarecrow progressed towards him, into the house, staring down at him with its dark, cold, hungry eyes. Its chest heaved with shuddering, soundless breaths. It looked almost human, like a thing which was trying very hard to be a man but had taken a wrong turn somewhere in remembering, and instead became a monster. For a moment, Henry wanted very desperately to believe he was dreaming. That any moment, he'd wake up in bed beside Annamae and, with all the lights on, the scarecrow would fade into the shadows as it had so many nights before.

But the sun was going down over the horizon outside. It would soon be dark, and there were no lights to be found now. It might be a nightmare, but it was no dream.

Still crawling backwards, nails digging into the floor, Henry's mouth hung open and he tried to grasp at speech.

"What are you doing here?" It was maybe a nonsensical question to ask of the thing – he more likely should have asked what it was or how it was alive, if to speak at all even made sense – but when Henry spoke, the scarecrow's stitched mouth opened as well, and echoed the same words back to him in a dark, hollow imitation of Henry's own voice. He felt bile rising in the back of his throat, growing more and more horrified by the second and fearing that there would be no escape for him this time from the sick fantasy world he had visited so often in his sleep. "What do you want?"

This time, as the scarecrow repeated Henry's words, one lumpy, half-rotted arm rose and pointed at the wedding portrait resting on the mantle.

"No!" Again, the two spoke in unison. "No, she's mine, you can't

have her!" It slowly began to dawn on Henry exactly what it was that he was facing in his living room. There was a shadow which fell across the burlap sack face of the scarecrow, but even through the haze Henry could begin to make out features which were as much a resemblance of his own as could be made out of stuffing, his own hair the color of dirty straw.

It had been him who'd had the dream of killing Tucker Dilworth, after all. And there hadn't been a single living person on the farm that night apart from Annamae and her daddy. But the scarecrow had been there, out in the field. And there were folks who believed that, when you're asleep, it's really your soul that's still awake and leading your mind through the spirit world.

Looking at Tucker's dead body, broken and mangled on the floor of the farmhouse, Henry had felt responsible, hadn't he?

He'd always been afraid of the scarecrow on the Dilworth farm. He thought it was because it was a spooky-looking old thing.

"Please." The words fell off Henry's lips covered in thick, bitter saliva and desperation. "I love her." But this declaration too was repeated by the creature with his voice, his face. His love. The only thing it lacked was his fear.

He never figured that it was really the dark half of himself he was really scared of. What it was he was capable of. What he would be willing to do because of how much he loved Annamae.

And now that darkness had taken on a mind of its own, and it had decided that Henry himself couldn't be allowed to have Annamae. Not if it meant only one of them could. Not if it meant that the other one would be without her.

Maybe all this time the fear was what made him human, a heart rattling against fragile bones, rather than a monster pretending to be human.

But men can die.

As Henry watched in horror, the scarecrow reached into its own chest and pulled, from the place where a heart should be, a scythe covered in dried blood from amongst the rotting hay.

That was the last thing that Henry Olsen ever saw.

* * *

Annamae woke up in the woods around the house days later with a gash on her forehead. She didn't know how she got it, only that she was freezing and worried sick -- or at least thought that Henry would be, about her. A person can only imagine what a night or two out between the trees would do to a delicate little thing like that girl. Sundress all stained and muddy, fair skin gone blue with cold, twigs and dirt matted into her corn-silk hair. Another reminder of how far away from home she was, of how unforgiving the great open wilderness was compared to the little town she'd known her whole life.

She stumbled back to the cabin, bare feet cut up from the rough covering of the forest floor, and found the front door hanging open. At first, she thought Henry went out looking for her, and nearly turned back around to try and seek some other sign of life to help her.

But a voice scratching at the back of her head told her there was no help to be found. No one would come for her now if they hadn't already. They were all alone.

So she ignored how fast and hard her heart was pounding and the fact that she felt like she might fall over at any moment, and stepped through the door.

It didn't feel like her home. But then again, it really never had. It was just some strange place with four walls and a roof that Henry had shuffled her off to with quiet promises of a better life. Better than what, though? She'd always been happy with the way things

were back home. No one ever seemed to yearn for more the way that Henry had. No one ever left. People just lived and died and were buried in the same fields where their father and their father's father were buried, and that was the way of the world.

No one wore a gold wedding ring.

Maybe that was the beginning of the end.

Once she was over the threshold, Henry's body greeted her, bloody and broken like her daddy's had been all those nights before. While the first sight of blood had brought her horror, made her sick, made her cry and scream until there were no tears left in her eyes and her throat was raw, this scene brought a strange sense of relief. It was like pulling the knife out of an open wound. Messy and foul and it hurt to look at, but then you knew the worst was over and, soon, the pain would cease.

Maybe she had never really loved Henry as much as he loved her. She didn't hate him. She cared for him, felt a tender affection towards him her whole life, even now. But maybe she only loved the fact that it was someone loving her, and cared less about just who it was. That was the side of herself that she kept hidden.

Nobody ever saw either the scarecrow or Annamae ever again after that. It was like they both just disappeared. No one ever could make sense of just what happened to the Olsens, either. When Henry's body was finally discovered, it had sat, rotting, in the cabin for months. People came to town, looking for Annamae, but the Dilworth farm had sat empty for so long by then it, too, felt like a decomposing corpse out in the middle of all that corn.

Some people decided that Annamae lost her mind, killed Tucker and Henry both, and then ran off to God knows where. But the old superstitious bunch, the wrinkled old folks who sat in their rocking chairs all day and all night and looked like they were preserved until you saw them breathing, they told tales of things that dreamed of

being human. Creatures that wished hard enough until they came alive. But people have hearts and souls, and scarecrows only have stuffing.

The younger ones laughed the stories off and instead threw stones into the windows of the Dilworth farm, making Annamae into a

legend, a thing which was once alive but is now a ghost forever. Some of them, though, wondered if the pole in the cornfield ever had a scarecrow. And if it did, what happened to it.

In a way, they seemed to take each other's place in the world. A straw man, and a man made of straw.

The Crow-People

by Adele Gardner

Walking through the carnival waltz.

Sedate, stately, they stand so still,
then burst into sudden, fluttering life:
pointed beaks pointing your way.
I love her, you know:
my sweet little demon,
piping Halloween carols;
my raven girl, how you squawk.

Inviting the blank-faced gentlemen to a tea party.

You don't want to see them across the table—
glance up, catch a glimpse of that nothing face
inclining so politely. Position them
like mirrors to catch Medusa, only they are
also Medusa herself: each sitting catacorner,
these *tengu*, silent, menacing,
faceless faces facing each other,
facing *you*, with hooked beaks like hats atop their heads
that might peel your face off, then gulp it down
with these same deep-waisted bows
and nods of such extreme politeness,
their silence a terrible, stretched courtesy.

The ravens come out for Halloween.

A foggy London night. Big Ben. Those peeling bells.
Long black curls, black dresses edged with lace.
Silver buckles on pointed black shoes, and hose
so dark it's part of the night behind it.
Victorian England, gaslight, carefully veiled faces—only

these black kerchiefs over noses, mouths, and eyes
are thick enough to ward off the Black Death—
so thick it could be anyone in there—
man, woman, alien, murderer—hiding in a shivery disguise
that mocks our courteous society.
"The silent ones"—these crow-people—
stalk as tall as man-sized storks, like skeletons on stilts—
an autumn invasion of blank, black-faced monsters.
Look close and see they have feathers for hair,
feathers for fur, fear for eyes—these
ladies and gentlemen who cuddle their ravens so gently,
who stroke their crows, petting and protecting them,
who leap up themselves to perch on cast-iron lamps
and the tented tops of wheat sheaves.
Such gentlemen and ladies, whose lace is finest cobwebs,
whose lantern-lights gleam orange, with garish faces—
toothsome pumpkins exposing the grins they lack themselves.

The silent ones wear no masks.

They simply have no faces.
Black blanks suggest the many ghosts
they stand in for, placeholder statues,
menace in stillness, their rare movements a relief
as, stiff with fright, we run
from these grim spirits of Halloween
who only incline the head, tip the hat,
curtsy with black-lace parasol,
black curls bobbing above black lace collars—
the raven king's man, the crow-sisters,
uncharacteristically watching, waiting,
their faces blank with all the ghosts they *might* be,
if only you could listen—
if only their mouths could open wide,
revealing those hidden teeth.

Elemental

by Nicola Brayan



History of Our World

by Christina Sng

“These were the old days, the ancient days before we were allowed to speak, let alone vote or have jobs.

“And yes, of course it hurt and it was hard to eat but it also meant we were spared the torture other women had to endure.

“You see, our powers only extend so far and repeated healing means repeated scarring. And soon, the body believes its job is done.”

Crouching down beside me in the darkened cave, the little girl gently touches the gaping holes that surround my mouth, relics of an ancient era when mouth sewing was tradition.

Outside, the howling wind screams of more bloody murder than I've heard in the past 20,000 years.

I smile, and the holes vanish into my skin.

The little girl looks up into my weary gray eyes and asks, “Do you have to hide your face a lot?”

“Only when I went out into the world,” I reply. “With facial recognition software and cameras everywhere these days, it is hard to hide anymore. Any minute, the Human Census Department could stop me and demand identification.”

“If they catch us, you won't let them sew my mouth shut or hurt me, will you?” she asks, fear welling up in her eyes.

“They won't do that in this era, but they will do far worse things to keep us quiet,” I warn. “You see, it is our words that they fear. So

they catch us, enslave us, slaughter and incinerate us, because that is the only way they know.”

“What do we know that is so terrible?”

“That it is already over. The damage is done. It is too late for them. But not for us.”

“Is this why we must hide here in the mountains, away from the rest of the world?”

I take her tiny hand and hold it gently closed. When I open it, dandelions drift into the air like fireflies. They attach to the ceiling and begin to grow into glowing amber cocoons. Her light gray eyes widen in awe and she looks at her hands in wonder.

“We hide because we must wait for the end. Humans have set our planet on a runaway weather train and we are about to collide very soon.”

I gesture to the growing cocoons hanging on the ceiling. “We grow and we heal. We will bring life back. And hopefully, next time, the humans will get it right ...”

My daughter reaches for my hand and I hold it. Together we touch the ground and a carpet of soft grass springs forth, covering the entire floor of the cave.

Above us, inside each cocoon, we see the faint shape of a minute foetus, and soon, the pulse of a beating heart.

The Unquiet Planet

by Bryan Miller

The old Luddite woman was dead.

I never imagined she still had the strength to rise from her cot. I didn't hear her until she'd shuffled outside the shack up to the edge of the menacing tree line.

"Wait!" I shouted after her. I surprised myself to find, even after all this time alone together, trapped in our envelopes of mutual solitude, there was something I wanted to say to her. Nothing she wanted to hear.

The old Luddite woman and I spent these last many days together, endless days, uncountable now, in silence. We wordlessly ate hardtack bread and the contents of the supply tins we gutted with our lone can opener. We rarely made eye contact. Sometimes I caught her glancing at me in my peripheral vision. Other times, while she slept, I stared at her, radiating hatred for everything she'd done. Like I could fill her up with my loathsome thoughts through osmosis. I would happily have left her there alone, even if we were the only two people left in the world. But there was no place else to go.

Maybe it was easier to tell myself what happened was her fault, that it wouldn't have happened anyway.

Now, apparently, she had something left to say to me.

"I'm tired," she shouted, even as the silhouettes of the trees bent toward her. Her voice was raspy with weeks of not speaking. "I did what I had to. I don't need to see it through. Tired. You'll see, though. I want you to see. Just so one person knows. That's plenty."

"You're insane!" I croaked at her. My throat was ragged. My brain too. For a moment I considered running after her, hurling myself into the same inevitable death just for spite. She must have known by now that I couldn't, not if I'd hung on this long. Where I had desperation, she had patience.

"It wasn't for us," she called back to me. "None of it! It never was!" Then she stepped into the trees until she was just a gauzy outline of frizzy hair and tattered robe.

The black forest came for her more suddenly and savagely than I expected. The branches craned down for her and the roots rose up to drag her feet into the hungry ground. She was a shadow, then pieces of a shadow, and then she was gone.

I suppose I thought the forest might grant her some special deference. I was wrong about that too.

And was I also wrong—was it wishful thinking souring into mania?—or, deep in the tangle of the dead trees' black limbs, did I spot a blaze of green? The verdant fire of something new?

But let's not start here. Let's start before, just after the end.

* * *

We all knew the planet was dying. Even the deniers were forced to concede—what deniers remained after the oceans baptized islands and windstorms sanded away coastal fringes and firestorms smeared the Midwest smudgy black. Rivers changed course, redrew borders. Bees vanished. Most wild animals disappeared: first the mammals,

then the reptiles. Temperatures plunged, skyrocketed.

Governments reorganized themselves accordingly. We invented new routines and new bad habits. We created a patch for each new hole in the natural order until we convinced ourselves we could adapt to anything. We didn't have to change our lives, merely update them.

Then the planet died.

Over the course of two weeks, Earth turned chilly and colorless. The ocean currents subsided; the surface of the Atlantic and Pacific alike became as glassy-flat as a marble tabletop. The soil faded to a grainy gray. The remaining trees blanched; their leaves blackened on the branches but would not fall. The sun still circled us, but warily, and now its light cycles seemed to have less effect on the temperature, which hovered in the pallid fifties beneath a perpetually clouded sky.

Then everything started to rot.

Dishwater-gray ichor leaked from the peeling trunks of the trees, which bulged with pockets of beetles and maggots. Tacky, cool slime oozed down the sagging faces of cliffs. Stone turned limp and rubbery. Rocks split open like molding fruit. Flocks of birds dwindled, then disappeared from the sky altogether, except for the spiraling buzzards who grew fat and emboldened. Soggy patches like bedsores pocked the grassless ground, where what little oil remained below burbled and farted to the surface. The stale air sharpened with a fungal reek. Clouds of blackflies reveled in the pungent mist.

Then something in the putrescence began to change.

The soil shifted of its own accord. Not the rolling, subterranean spine-crackle of an earthquake. More like muscle spasms. The trees began moving too, despite their black leaves hanging perfectly limp in the windless sky. The curling limbs flexed their many-knuckled branches. Tendrils of soft, rotting wood clenched into knotty fists. The ocean began vomiting up the stripped corpses of titanic creatures only theorized to exist in the pressurized depths. This should have

been impossible, of course, since there was no tide. Their bones scattered the motionless beaches with arcane fractal patterns.

That's why the general summoned me to the Army Corps of Engineers field base in the foothills of New Idaho. Not to save the planet—to kill it.

* * *

Camp Ritter was a skeletal network of interconnected buildings shoving out of the side of a craggy hill not quite big enough to qualify as a mountain. Each building was raised off the ground by a series of reinforced metal struts as prevention against flash flooding and landslides. The walkways between the buildings were elevated as well.

The base felt incredibly roomy to me. The shifting climate had forced the surviving population to clot together in densely packed cities that built vertically within their barriers against weather disasters. I'd lived elbow-to-elbow like everyone else. Even though Camp Ritter was fully staffed, it was remote, a thirty-minute chopper ride outside Boise, snug up against the side of one of the country's largest Luddite reservations. I had my own modest private barracks on the second level of a three-story building with a picture window overlooking the Rez.

Not that I had much time to enjoy the room. The moment I arrived one soldier ferried away my rucksack while another escorted me straight to the general's office down the main hall from the command center. He waited behind his desk across from the Army Chief of Engineers, who sat with architecturally perfect posture. The baggy-eyed general looked almost as bad as the planet itself.

As of now, he explained, life in the cities could carry on as usual. The new usual, anyway. Greenhouse and hydroponic crops had not succumbed to the rot that killed everything physically planted in the ground. The air filters kept everyone's hermetically sealed homes and offices oxygenated. Citizens could still safely traverse the pavement.

But, he went on, the levels on the water recyclers diminished slightly with each successive cycle. Over time the strain on the water supply, plus the lack of new organic materials, would hinder the replenishment of indoor gardens and eventually even lab-grown meat.

“These are all measurable shortages, but you’re equivocating,” I said, clearly irritating the General. “Either you have a timeline, or you’re leaving something out.”

The Chief of Engineers glowered at me. I’ve never been great at regulating my thoughts. They just come tumbling out of my mouth. That’s why I like engineering. There are no awkward statements, just mathematical truths.

“The shortages are a secondary concern,” the General said through a clenched jaw. He cued up a video screen built into the wall. “It’s the unmeasurable phenomena we need to address.”

The wall screen flashed to grainy surveillance footage of a tiny patch of parkland in some nameless city. A traffic sign in the background was in English. A man strolled along a dirt median next to a pair of trees, taking foggy puffs off a vape pen. He didn’t see the black leaves shifting behind him, or the one gnarled branch unfurl until it clasped him from behind. When he spun around, the second tree reached for him. In a matter of seconds they had him tangled, pinned, and then it was as if the ground itself was accepting him into it. Dusty soil boiled around him as he thrashed for a few useless second. Legs, torso, head. He was gone.

“There are more videos like these,” the general said. “We’re trying to keep them under wraps right now. As you can imagine, this significantly accelerates our timeline.”

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts.

“My concern is that I’m not sure what I can do,” I said, “since I specialize in the life of ecosystems. But the planet is not alive. Not

anymore. It’s closer to undea—”

“Unquiet,” the general corrected me. “That’s what we’re calling it.”

“Right, but you could also say that the whole planet is a kind of zo—”

“Un. Quiet. And starting tomorrow morning at dawn, I’m going to need you to find a way to quiet it.”

The duty officer stationed outside the door walked me back to my room, where I found my rucksack huddled at the foot of my bed. I switched off the lights and gazed out the window onto the Luddite reservation. I’d heard about these rural zones, but I’d never seen one in person. They were part of a compromise the government struck with citizens who refused to participate in face-recognition and bio-implantation programs that had become coded into every system from federal ID databases to fast-food purchases. The technophobic few who opted out of the new societal structures were relocated to far-flung government land considered too near disaster zones for significant habitation. The Luddites complied, for lack of a better option. I wondered how many of them regretted their choice now, sheltered in the sinister forest.

Then I spotted a figure moving outside through an open swath of ground behind a sparse copse of trees shifting listlessly on their roots. The figure stooped low, walking with a hitch but no hurry, right across the hungry soil. It occurred to me, I should go down and warn them. Did they understand the danger all around them? Instead I watched the figure stoop over a solitary, flickering campfire until sleep’s gravity pulled me back onto my Army-issue mattress.

* * *

The collection of experts gathered with me around the long conference table the following day did not inspire confidence. Individually, everyone’s expertise was dazzling: biologist, mining engineer, physicist, geologist, on and on. But the breadth of

specializations struck me as haphazard, desperate. This was Team Longshot. The bags under their eyes, the rising cowlicks in their unkempt hair, the missed buttons on their shirts all told a grim story.

The general told a grimmer one.

“Russia tried a nuke.”

“I said we should go nuclear,” the geologist said.

The general waived him off with a rueful flick of the hand. “Well, they put their fattest available payload into the side of a mountain in Belukha. A patch of ground three miles wide turned to black sludge. Maybe more uninhabitable than it was before the blast. The photos look like someone kicked a hole in the side of a cow’s carcass.”

“Did the radiation affect the trees around the perimeter of the blast?” the Chief asked.

“Not at all.”

The chemical engineer shook her head in disgust. “We have to take another shot at experimenting with acid-base compounds to destabilize the soil.”

“Re-deaden,” I corrected.

“Whatever,” she went on, “we haven’t fully explored the potential—”

“The problem is, we’re all scientists,” I said. “As an environmental engineer, the one thing I can tell you is this situation breaks with every conceivable law of environmental science. We’ve exhausted it. Now we’re looking at a new problem with an old paradigm.”

“What paradigm is that?” the general asked.

“The foundations of logic.”

The arborist nodded her head softly, but otherwise my colleagues brushed past my argument. Practical action, that’s what we needed, they said, although I didn’t recall advocating complacency.

The team moved toward a begrudging acceptance of my position later in the evening, when the general walked into the situation room with his poker face shattered. He broke the latest news from India, near the Kashmir region.

A city disappeared. No audio or video footage existed of its destruction. One satellite photo showed it there, the next gone, its massive footprint replaced with an expanse of freshly churned gray soil.

The mining engineer began to weep. The biologist squeezed his shoulder.

“Then there’s this,” the general muttered.

The wallscreen honeycombed into rows of individual images. They each looked like dark, misshapen rubies pressed into the chalky soil.

“That,” the general said, “is blood. A few hours after the city disappeared, all the dried lakebeds filled up with it.”

* * *

Later that night I found myself staring out at the dark forest again, plotting its murder, when once more the slow-moving figure crept through the enclosed patch of ground, beyond the reach of the grabbing trees.

They needed to be warned.

That’s what I told myself as I hustled to the command center to requisition an all-terrain vehicle in the middle of the night. Procedure dictated I needed an escort to leave the base, but no one was willing to drive with me in the dark toward the sentient forest. The supply

clerk wouldn't sign me out, nor officially lend me the glorified go-cart they called a dune buggy. If I didn't return from my unscheduled late-night rendezvous there would be no record of my disappearance.

I can't remember breathing during my drive across the dead soil. I must have. All I can recall is feeling every jounce of the tires over ground that might at any second open wide. As I neared the little inlet I could discern a subtle difference in the soil there. It was ashier. More importantly, it was still.

A mismatched assemblage of wooden and metal artifacts jutted from the ground all around the small patch of habitable earth. Some I recognized—crosses, icons of saints, the Star of David, ankhs—and many others I did not. The buried symbols etched a circle around the powdery ground and traced a path to the edge of the forest, where a lamplit shack jammed itself in amongst the trees. These trees were different, though. They didn't tear at the wooden shingles or snatch at the doorway. They were stiff as ... well, as trees were supposed to be, perhaps owing to their garish decorations of rosaries, crucifixes, and amulets. Fat Buddhas crouched in the crooks of branches. Votive candles burned in knotholes.

Seated in front of the shack, before a stinking pile of dead tree limbs smoldering over a glowing brazier, was the figure from the woods. An old Luddite woman with spiderwebs of white hair. She wore at least four layers of robes and dressing gowns. Her frail hands looked as gnarled as the surrounding trees.

"Excuse me," I said, and took a careful step off the buggy onto what I hoped was solid ground.

She told me to piss off. She never looked up from the fire.

"I'm here to warn you."

"Do I look like I need warning?"

Up close, the Luddite woman's watery green eyes flickered with

conspiratorial glee. Her heavily lined face was handsome, with high cheekbones and Cheshire lips. She carried herself with a poise that the crook in her spine could only partly conceal.

"I just saw you here on the ground, so close to the trees. Everywhere else people are saying it's not safe. They're right." When she didn't respond, I added, "I'm an engineer with the Army."

"Having a bad time of it out there, are they?" The old woman chuckled. "But it's getting strange. Sure is straaaange." She sang the last part, a fragment of a song I half-remembered.

"The planet's died," I said.

The Luddite straightened up as best she could. She propped her elbows on her robe-draped knees to face me. "It's more than that."

"I know. I've been trying to tell them. I'm a scientist, but we're beyond science now. Whatever it is you've done here—what have you done? Are there others? Are they still alive?"

"Others?"

"The other Luddites."

The woman's face puckered.

"I'm not fond of that term. Does it make me a Luddite just because I don't want to be complicit in your bullshit world? Even now that it's all crumbling around you, you still think I'm the one you should call names."

"Sorry, I'm—"

"Not very sociable, are you? I'm a hermit and you're the rude one."

"What is your name?" I asked. I told her mine.

“If I wanted you to know my name, I’d give it to you.” She spat into the hissing fire.

“Really, I apologize. But your friends, the others who shun technology in the reservation deeper in the woods, are they still alive?”

“They’re not my friends. And I doubt anything is alive in those woods. That’s true most places I’d bet. Not knowing what’s going on elsewhere is one of the great privileges of living here. Take your news updates someplace else.”

“The cities are still functioning,” I went on anyway. “But there’s not much time. That’s why I’m working with the Army. Only we’re nowhere near a solution, so what you’ve done here, if you could help me understand. Maybe there’s something I could do for you?”

Those green eyes danced again. One thinning white eyebrow crooked toward the murky sky. The Luddite woman sighed. She made a number of other, less pleasant noises as she struggled to her feet. She bade me to follow her to her tiny house with a backwards wave of one trembling hand.

The one-room shack looked twice as small on the inside. The walls on all four sides were stacked floor to ceiling with boxes, teetering stacks of old books, shelves lined with antique trinkets. It was as though she’d built an igloo of junk inside a spacious outhouse. Russian nesting sheds. To the right was a small table sat with a single high-backed chair, and to the left a cot topped with a feather-stuffed mattress leaking fuzzy white. The space between them formed a narrow path that spread out a little along the far wall, which had a wash basin on one side and a fireplace on the other fitted with a cookstove. Next to the small hearth, a diminished larder of assorted canned vegetables in metal-topped mason jars.

And everywhere more trinkets and religious icons.

“You’re the only one of them who ever came out here,” she said, almost like an accusation. “All those years. Even these last weeks.

Not one of them from the base ever came here once.”

“It seemed like my duty to warn you,” I said. It was the same thing I’d told myself, to excuse the truth of my ignoble curiosity.

“I was a theology professor,” the woman said. She leaned against the chair and studied her shed, as if for the first time. “Before they relocated me here, which, truthfully, was mostly quite pleasant.”

I strained to avoid mentioning that the room had no toilet.

“I studied all of this. Never really believed any of it. Or maybe I believed in all of it, just a little bit.”

“What’s that?” I pointed to what looked like a Hebrew Star of David with too many angles.

“That’s a Baha’i nine-pointed star. It’s Persian.” She traced a crooked line in the air with her crooked finger. “And that’s a Shinto Torii. A Kemetic Eye of Heru. That lovely little curlicued symbol is a Druid Triskelion. That’s one of my favorites.”

I examined the strange shapes, which cast arcane shadows in the lamplight. A whole cosmology of beliefs reduced to flickering pidgin code.

“So what you’ve done out there with the ground and the trees, is it some special combination of symbols? Is there an order, a sequence?”

The woman shrugged. “When I saw what was happening, I started placing the totems around me. For decoration, maybe. Tribute? I have no shortage of free time. Seemed like the thing to do. I read a lot of these”—she gestured to stacks of ancient-looking books—“I said I guess what you’d call prayers.”

“But you could do it again?” My voice was pinched with insistence.

“And why would I?”

I glanced down at her meager larder. “I could arrange to have more food brought over here. Loads of it from the mess hall pantry.”

She traced the loops of a Triskelion on the dust settled atop the lid of an emerald-tinted jar of beans.

“And for everyone,” I added. “So we can find a way to still exist on Earth. Whatever it has become.”

The shadow of something like a smile darkened the lines of her face. She nodded.

“I think I could show you something.”

* * *

That’s how, days later, I came to be standing on a patch of numbed earth with the old Luddite woman, watching a fleet of government vehicles descend into battle with truckloads of handcrafted relics and icons.

Convincing the general turned out to be easy. Desperation among the top brass had reached a jaw-clenched panic. I assume the commanders knew more than they let on, and that everything they knew was bad.

They did tell us that several more cities around the world vanished. A volcano in British Columbia belched out gouts of clotted black muck that coated an entire outpost and sent an uncontrollable carrion funk coursing through their dying air filtration system. Oxygenators everywhere sputtered as they struggled to keep pace. The alarm at this latest, strangest environmental catastrophe was fomenting into a frenzy.

The beleaguered General listened to the Luddite woman’s outlandish suggestions. He kept a neutral expression and scribbled a page of notes he passed along to the Chief of Engineers. Later, the General personally oversaw the delivery of food to her shack, mostly so he

could see for himself the little patch of quieted forest. Possibly the only habitable plot of ground left in America, as far as we know. He returned to the base pale and diminished.

The Luddite woman requested that I stay behind with her to oversee the sanctification from a distance.

“I want you to see for yourself,” she said, cryptically.

We stood on her land overlooking a valley in the hillside like a deep fold in the stony earth. Through my binoculars I could see the stricken looks on the soldiers’ faces as their vehicles jounced across the hungry soil toward the grabbing trees at the highest point of the valley. Rot-softened rocks popped like roadkill under their tires. When the transports stopped, the troops stepped out onto the ground with the trepidations of early astronauts.

A handheld radio crackled in my fist.

“We’re in position,” the general said. “Beginning deployment now.”

I thumbed the reply button to tell him ten-four.

The woman held my field glasses to the bridge of her nose. We watched the jeeps and transport trucks empty out. Interspersed with the soldiers in matching green were clerics in their own colorful garb. I spotted a rabbi’s white robe, a monk’s orange sarong, a black-clad Catholic, the elaborate headdress of a Yoruban priestess. The general had drafted his own A-team of clergy into ecumenical battle. I could see their lips mouthing incantations of their faiths.

The first wave of soldiers rushed to the supply trucks to retrieve the arsenal of hand-forged icons—big billboard-sized recreations of the old woman’s religious relics. The soldiers hurriedly jammed the symbols into the ground as though they were landmines ready to explode.

The radio crackled again. “Does this formation look correct?”

I repeated the question for the woman, even though she could clearly hear it. She just nodded and smiled without lowering her field glasses.

“Yes, sir. Keep going.”

The soldiers first constructed a protective ring around the tightly packed convoy of vehicles, where the drivers all remained behind the wheel, engines idling, ready to retreat with whoever could climb aboard if the earth staged an attack. When the grunts on the ground with the symbols finished the initial circle they expanded it in a spiral pattern blooming out toward the V of trees at the foothill’s plateau. The idea was to work outward from the safety of the—hopefully—protected ground.

A thrumming sound rattled the sky. One of the General’s own ideas. He conscripted a platoon of ministers and priests to consecrate huge reservoirs. Now the first air tanker stocked with holy water would rain grace on the putrefied forest. The plane buzzed closer, lower.

At the same time another noise rose over the engine hum of the incoming aircraft. It started like a foghorn but stretched out longer, flatter, into a loud, low moan. I felt it before I heard it, vibrating up through the balls of my feet.

“What the hell is that?” the General said over the radio.

The organic groaning noise grew louder, angrier, swelling into a scream.

“Base camp, what is that noise—wait, wait, what is that, what’s happeni—”

The general’s shouts were drowned out in a babel of overlapping voices. Soon I could hear them not just over the radio but crying out from the valley itself, a collective howl drowned out by the subterranean wailing.

As the plane dipped to spray its payload, the trees rose up. A tower of trunks knotted together in a gnarl of rotted wood, unfurling like a dozen fingers on one mutant hand. It swatted at one wing of the plane, which twisted and disappeared behind the treeline with a fiery thump.

I barely noticed the plane crash. I was busy trying to reconcile the impossible. Both rocky slopes on either side of the valley seemed to be drawing together. Buried stones pushed through the dirt into crooked rows like shark’s teeth. The shadow in the cleft of the foothills deepened. The whole valley closed up around them, swallowing up the general, his men, his vehicles, the clergy, the whole bloody last stand. The rocky lips of the valley made a hellacious crunching sound as they ground together, wrenched apart, smashed together again. An enormous mouth, chewing, the rocky teeth and lips streaked with gore.

The hungry, groaning sound faded to a satisfied sigh.

The old Luddite woman cackled. She wobbled in a delighted circle and threw her field glasses to the ground. She pointed at the wet mouth of the earth, where our last great hope had been swallowed like a handful of pills.

“What did you do?” I said. My own binoculars fell from my hands.

She kept laughing.

“You were supposed to help us save the planet!”

“I did!” she said, coughing and gasping through her glee. I was afraid she might throw her arms around me in victory. In that moment I couldn’t stand the idea of touching her.

“I did, I did,” she said, her eyes glinting green. “Just not for us.”

Moonlight Apocrypha

by Kurt Newton

1. Wildlife

It wasn't long before deer began entering the shopping mall and bears were seen walking through downtown at lunch hour. The emptiness of the streets and the silence it created turned our accumulation of businesses, banks, and office buildings into just another forest. Jagged, antiseptic-smelling, and hard on the footpads, but a curiosity just the same. A place to explore. A place to forage. These were no ghosts. These were our predecessors, retreating deep into the forest, when we came to be the stewards of these wild spaces. We might still believe that this land is our land, but in reality it never was. And as we huddle in our self-imposed isolation, the scent of our desperation wafting like smoke signals into the night sky, we know the wolves are soon to follow.

2. River Rats

Fresh water became more and more scarce, so we camped along the riverbank. As long as people kept their distance, there weren't any problems. There were enough fish in the fast-moving water to feed everyone. But not everyone buried their fish guts and fish heads. Sometimes during the day, river rats as large as tomcats would waddle through camp, their whiskers twitching, looking for that smell. Some had enough meat on them for a meal. The night brought other animals out of the woods. Deer, raccoon, a coyote now and then. And then there were the ones that moved like giant spiders along the sand, back arched, arms and legs bent at odd angles. They would dip their chin in the cool water before scrambling back into the underbrush, their hairless bodies aglow beneath the moonlight.

3. Dr. Tasserman's Tea

Sometimes we'd come across the old man who lived in the wild. His face was scarred with permanent lines from wearing the same mask for years. Trying to fix it. Trying to find a cure. Some say he was a doctor at one of the big hospitals. Dr. Tasserman. Before the pandemic struck. Before the summer we died. But now he's claiming he's found a cure. A tea made from sassafras root, birch bark, and jimsonweed. One cup and the world will be right again. Loved ones will return. Smiles and hugs all around. The sun will shine into places that never existed, and you'll walk arm-in-arm and share old memories and embrace this new world without care, without worry. Only love. And then we remember this old man can't even remember his name. And so we move on, our cups untouched. But the temptation lingers, like a hangover. For some of us, the hangover becomes all-devouring. Until, one day, they disappear from camp in search of the old man who lives in the wild. We can only imagine what that first sip must taste like.

4. The Salt Pool

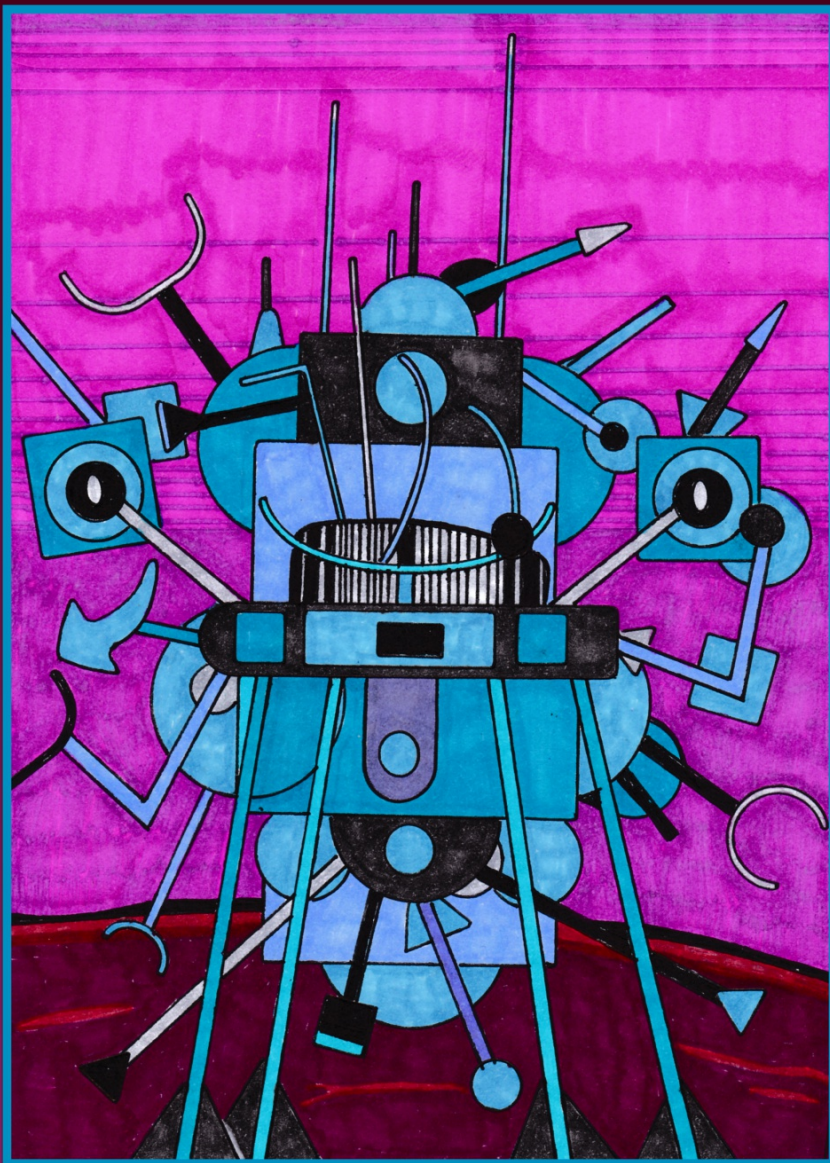
It was someone's swimming pool once, an old in-ground gunite classic—curved walls, plaster smooth, deep end a good twelve feet. But it had sat for months, then years. Plants and vines adapted to the saline content, growing up and around it, creating a kind of sylvan spa, a therapeutic bath that killed the virus and rendered bathers immune. Many flock to the salt pool, leaving their meager belongings behind. Many give testimony to the feeling of returning to the womb, to the water's silky buoyancy, to the way the vines seem to snake around

like an umbilical cord. Many have claimed staying underwater for quite some time before being released, rejuvenated, reborn. Others have simply drowned, taken into the pool's murky depths, never to be seen again. It is believed this is the highest honor one can achieve. To be at one with the pool. To be accepted, absorbed. To forever gaze into the watery eye of eternity.

5. The Farm

It's peaceful here, on the farm. The sun rises over rolling fields. The air smells clean, like after a spring rain. The trees stand tall as giants. Patient giants that I suspect will one day move in ways we never

thought possible. There is a stillness that has grown, a palpable quiet once reserved for churches and cemeteries, now more widespread. Even now, as I sit on the porch rocking, the last grave dug to plant the last body to brave this strange yet beautiful journey, I can feel them watching me, breathing in the last of my breath as it leaves these failing lungs, their roots eager to claim what little nutrient, what little life, remains on my bones. Of this, I am certain, as I spy movement at the edge of the porch. Tiny green fingers coming to take me home.



Swiss Army Mars Lander

by Denny E. Marshall

The Oracle

by James Rumpel

Over one hundred villagers lined the path to the city gate, cheering for Logard as he began the arduous ascent to the Oracle. Some in the crowd held crude, hand-painted signs wishing him luck. Others waved banners from the second-floor windows of modest wooden houses. A group of children ran ahead of Logard, spreading acorns along the dirt road, a reference to the well-known Oracle quotation: “Wisdom is the nut that the squirrel puts in its cheeks.”

Logard walked gingerly toward the gate. He knew the children meant well. He tried not to show how painful it felt when the acorns slipped between his toes or found the space between his heel and sandal. He did his best not to limp.

It would have been so much simpler had the Mayor let him leave in secret. He had no qualms about taking on this important mission, but being the center of attention for this spectacle was nearly unbearable.

The Mayor waited for him at the gate. Surely, he was planning to make some sort of speech. Somehow, Logard found the strength to smile. He waved to a little girl standing nearby. She grinned as she heaved an unshelled walnut which bounced, unceremoniously, off Logard’s head.

The Mayor motioned for Logard to stand beside him. The city leader’s bright yellow robe was the only splash of color in the entire crowd; everyone else was dressed in simple brown tunics.

“Citizens of Rolin,” shouted the mayor, “thank you for coming to help send our brave emissary on his way. Logard Cormin has a very important and dangerous mission ahead of him. In my youth, I made

the same trek. As the only living person to have ever been to the Oracle, I can tell you the path is not easy. Because of my journey, our village has thrived for decades. No one has taken on this quest in over thirty years, but these are desperate times. As the Oracle told me personally, when I made the climb, ‘Nothing is free, except that which costs nothing.’ Logard is our nothing.” The crowd erupted in a roar of support. A few people chanted Logard’s name, only to let the chant slowly fade when no one joined in.

“The attacks from the south have been more common of late. We’ve tried everything we can think of to put an end to them. There is no negotiating with Bromil. We may be on the verge of war. The Oracle will have a solution. The cost is high, but it will be worth it.”

Logard checked his side to make sure the pack strapped there was secure. The three largest jewels from the city treasury were inside. He hoped the Mayor would not tell anyone what he was carrying. The fewer people aware of the tribute the better.

The Mayor continued, “I have total faith that Logard will complete his task and return with crucial advice from the Oracle. I wish that I could, once again, be the hero but my age and injuries prevent me from, once again, saving the village. Yes, Logard will be a nearly adequate substitute. As the Book of Oracle Wisdom says, ‘If your bucket has a leak, pour faster.’”

This time, the mayor’s pause was met with confused silence.

Undaunted, he continued, “So, as Logard departs on his hazardous trip, let’s send him off with our cheers and well-wishes. He may not survive. It takes a very special person to live through the trials as I

did. I have one final piece of advice. It's another of the messages the Oracle told me when I made the journey. 'Always enjoy stubbing your toe.'"

This time, the silence only lasted a moment before transforming into shouts of encouragement.

Logard smiled, waved, and ducked a barrage of nuts. Two of the village constables opened the large wooden gate, revealing the sun-drenched countryside.

Limping, ever so slightly, Logard began his journey.

* * *

The first hour was an easy stroll. The area immediately outside of the village walls was well kept and heavily traveled. The smooth path snaked southward. Smaller paths branched off in every direction, heading to the fields and mines that were so vital to Rolin's survival.

At the edge of the valley, however, when the trail started to ascend into the surrounding mountains, things changed. No one from Rolin traveled this section. The people of the village had no desire or need to leave the valley. They were aware of other villages in other valleys but were content to leave them be and hoped they would do the same to them. The trail into the mountain was overgrown and difficult to find. Logard found himself frequently referring to the ancient map the Mayor had provided.

At noon, he surmised that he was near the entrance to the tunnel, the next leg of his journey. After an hour searching for the entrance, Logard decided he needed a break. Sitting on a nearby boulder, Logard opened his pack and took out a small pouch containing dried fruits and nuts.

As he ate, he contemplated his difficulty finding the entrance. He wasn't an expert on the wisdom of the Oracle, though he knew the sayings well enough to have been elected to the city council before

his twentieth birthday. Somewhere in the Oracle's teaching was a tidbit of knowledge that would help him.

The first quote to jump to his mind was "The smallest egg in the nest takes up the least room." That could be a clue. With renewed vigor, he resumed his search. He carefully perused a section of rock wall that seemed to match the markings on his map. After careful consideration, he located what he believed to be the smallest rock, a pebble no bigger than a robin egg, and plucked it from its resting place.

Nothing happened. Assuming he had not chosen the smallest rock, he tried again. After a dozen failures, he snatched up his new smallest rock, a stone the size of an infant's head. Again, the tunnel did not reveal itself. As he looked for another smallest rock, he heard noises from above. He glanced upward to see six men coming down the mountain. Their progress was slow. This far up the mountain, the path was almost undetectable. The men were forced to concentrate on each precarious step.

Logard dove behind a large boulder. He watched as the men steadily drew nearer. They were soldiers from the village of Bromil. Each wore a green uniform that would meld into the background of the heavily vegetated areas near the village.

This was a raiding party. Bromil had been sending forces to Rolin with increasing frequency. Until now, they had been satisfied with stealing crops or damaging wells. The Mayor firmly believed that a larger attack was coming: one that would attempt to steal the city's collection of jewels and diamonds.

The young adventurer considered his options. Confronting the soldiers would be suicidal. Should he try to outrun them to the village? This was not a large raiding party. The town was not in immediate danger. He decided to remain hidden and let them pass. Once they were gone, he would continue his mission. After all, the Oracle had a saying, "A screaming man is heard, but a silent man is sometimes sleeping."

It seemed to take forever for the soldiers to pass. Once the enemy was long gone, Logard stood and sighed heavily. Noticing that he was still holding the last of his smallest stones, he tossed it aside. The sound made when the rock bounced off the side of the mountain seemed odd. It was more than a dull thud, there was a hollow echo.

Rushing to where the rock hit, Logard began feeling around. He soon discovered that a thin piece of shale had been leaned against the cliff. Rocks were stacked around it and pebbles filled in gaps. Something was being hidden. It only took a moment to remove the rocks and slide the shale doorway aside. Logard had found the entrance.

He took the small torch the Mayor had suggested he bring and lit it. The Mayor had said that the rules of the Oracle prevented him from giving too many details about the journey, but that did not keep him from giving a few hints.

Logard thanked the Oracle for providing him the wisdom to find the doorway as he began the next phase of his journey.

* * *

The trip through the tunnel was not nearly as dangerous as the Mayor had implied. A smooth path wound upward. There were no deep crevices to be jumped or sharp stalactites dropping from above. Instead of huge, vicious monsters, there were only a few small rats that scurried away from the torch's glow.

The Mayor may have exaggerated the difficulty of the quest, but the importance was undeniable. If the Oracle did not tell him how to defeat the Bromil, his village was doomed.

During a short break, Logard checked the jewels in his pack. They were the price of a meeting with the Oracle. He did not completely understand the value of gems. Sure, they were nice to look at, but they had no real useful application. You couldn't eat them. You couldn't build much with them. Maybe you could stick the largest ones together with mud and make a wall, but regular stones worked

better and were easier to come by.

Logard sighed. Who was he to question the ways of the Oracle? He double-checked to make sure his pack was secure and continued on his way.

* * *

The black door that blocked Logard's way was like none he'd ever seen before. It was perfectly smooth and cool to the touch. The Mayor had told him the secret to opening the door involved the set of glowing numbers on the wall next to it. As odd as it sounded, he needed to touch the numbers in a specific order.

The Oracle had once said, "A doorway is a wall with a hole."

Certain that the saying was a clue, Logard pressed the shiny numbers based on the number of letters in each word of the saying. The door did not open.

Maybe if he tried numbers one greater than the letters in each word. After that attempt failed, he tried another pattern without success. Finally, he just pounded his fist against the display and was rewarded with a soft rumbling sound as the door slid open, revealing a sun-soaked platform.

Logard hesitated. Everything he had encountered until the door had been within his realm of experience. This was different. How had anyone managed to build the expansive flat surface that lay before him? It didn't matter. The Oracle was powerful and capable of many things he would never understand. With a deep breath, he stepped into the sunshine.

He was immediately struck by how cold and windy it was. The Mayor should have told him to bring a coat.

The Oracle was nowhere to be seen. The platform, twice the size of the largest garden in Rolin, was empty with one exception. On the far

side was a large altar.

While walking toward the altar, Logard noticed that there was a giant, red cross painted in the center of the platform. He looked for other symbols or messages but found none.

The altar appeared to be made of the same smooth material as the door. This time, however, there were no glowing numbers. It was nearly as tall as Logard, coming up to his shoulders. The Mayor had told him that he would not have to ask a question or say what problem the village faced. All he needed to do was present the jewels.

He pulled a large ruby, the size of a potato, from his pack. “Here it is, Oracle,” he shouted, holding the gem high above his head.

Nothing.

“Oracle! Where are you?”

Logard walked to the edge of the platform. One look was enough to verify that he was on one of the highest peaks of the mountain. He walked the circumference of the platform, looking for any sign of the Oracle.

Eventually, he returned to the altar. It took a great deal of willpower to resist the temptation to heave the ruby over the edge. It would probably be a good idea to set it down before he acted upon that urge. He placed the red gem on top of the altar.

Instantly, there was a sound similar to the one the door had made. An opening formed on the top of the altar. It expanded in size until the ruby dropped within. As quickly as it had appeared, the opening disappeared.

A deep voice came from the box.

“It is better to put your hand in a sack of dung than to dump the sack

on your head.”

Logard pulled some parchment and a quill from his pack. He quickly wrote down the Oracle’s wisdom. It didn’t make sense to him, but he knew the Mayor would understand.

He pulled an emerald from his pack and placed it on the box. It, too, was consumed.

The same voice called, “It is only fair to let your enemy use your bathroom.”

The diamond yielded a third message.

“A broken bridge is still a bridge, just useless.”

“Thank you, Oracle,” said Logard as he recorded the messages. The Oracle had spoken. Now it was up to the people to use the wisdom.

* * *

The Mayor stood to address the four council members sitting around the table.

“Logard has successfully completed his hazardous mission,” he began.

“It wasn’t that diffi . . .”

“Don’t be modest, Logard. I, and only I, know how trying that journey is. There is no need for you to go into detail. Besides, we have much more important things to discuss.”

The Mayor handed each council member a parchment with the Oracle’s messages.

“We managed to survive the last Bromil raid. They are getting more daring. This time, they stole much of our winter supply of carrots. I assure you, they are attempting to weaken us before launching a more

furious attack.”

Everyone on the council nodded in agreement.

“We have very little time to interpret the Oracle’s advice and prepare our defenses. Does anyone have any idea what the messages mean?”

Ambed Quitlow raised her hand. “The one about the bridge has to mean that if a bridge is broken you can’t use it.”

“Obviously,” shouted Bor Grat, “but how does that help us?”

“Maybe we need to destroy a bridge between here and Bromil,” suggested Ambed.

“There are no bridges between here and Bromil,” said the Mayor.

“But there is a path down the mountain,” added Logard. “It’s not much of a path, but I saw Bromil soldiers walking down it.”

“Perhaps we need to break that path,” said another council member, Larsh Hamlin.

“How do you break a path?” yelled Bor Grat.

“We could place traps. You know, nooses or tripwires,” suggested Logard.

The Mayor held up a hand to silence the debate. “That would not completely stop an attack, but it might slow them down or weaken them. Very good. What about the other messages?”

“Well, I was thinking about the bathroom one,” said Logard. “Why would your enemy want to use your bathroom?”

“Because they have to . . . you know . . .” answered Ambed.

“But to use an enemy’s, it would have to be an emergency, not just

normal bathroom usage.”

“What are you getting at?” asked the Mayor.

“I think you would have to be very ill to use your enemy’s bathroom,” explained Logard. “Maybe the message means we should poison the Bromil. Get them so sick that they can’t fight.”

“But how do we do that?” screamed Bor Grat.

The Mayor’s eyes brightened. “When the last raid took our crops, witnesses saw them eating some of the carrots while they loaded them into sacks. What if we poisoned our carrots?”

“But that’s hurting ourselves. We wouldn’t have any carrots this winter.”

“That’s true, Larsh,” said the Mayor, “but sometimes you have to make sacrifices to avoid worse consequences.”

Logard burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” roared Bor Grat.

“What the Mayor just said. Isn’t that the same as saying, ‘It is better to put your hand in a sack of dung than to dump the sack on your head’?”

* * *

While not a complete rout, the defeat of the Bromil was undeniable. When the invading force raced back toward the mountain, it was clear that the confrontation had left a bad taste in their mouths, both literally and figuratively.

The Mayor and Logard watched the enemy retreat. Many were still doubled over in pain, vomiting as they ran.

“Will they come back?” asked Logard.

“They might,” answered the Mayor. “Next time we will be even more ready for them. We will set more traps.”

“I still think it would be a good idea to make the path down the mountain impassible. We could start an avalanche or build a wall.”

“That’s a good idea. After all, the Oracle said we should break the bridge. You know, Logard, it would be nice if we had a better idea of what we should do. I think you need to take another dangerous trip to the Oracle.”

“You know the journey isn’t dangerous.”

The Mayor smiled, “And we’re going to keep that between us.”

* * *

The shuttlecraft sat in the middle of the platform, dead center on the “X” that marked the landing spot.

Officer John Howell collected a handful of magnificent jewels from

the receptacle. “It doesn’t look like this tribe has used their computer as much as the others. There are only a dozen in here.”

“I’m not surprised,” said his partner, Officer Maggie Rungren, as she inspected the computer. “This thing is all out of whack. I don’t think it’s spouted anything but gibberish for the last century or so. No wonder the people of this valley have developed so slowly.”

“Maybe the Administrator wants it that way. Every experiment is supposed to have a control group,” suggested John.

“Yeah, I suppose that could be. I’m still going to bring it to the attention of the Administrator. I don’t think it’s right to experiment on aliens, especially ones that are so similar to us. It’s unethical to purposely hinder the development of this group.”

“You do what you want,” answered John. “I’m just going to do my job. After all, you know what they say, ‘You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.’”

The Toad Stone

by Colleen Anderson

Why would a toad conceal a stone
in the middle of its forehead
it was never a girl with a curl
just the amphibian realm's ugly duckling
considered too dreadful to ever be kissed

All it could do was conjure magics
the purview of the horrid, the lonely
the intellectually superior
therefore alone and doomed
to discover the wonders of the world

Toads were never great raconteurs
wizards or even kissers
what's a lonely toad to do but master
its hidden jewel and boast of its skills
say that the stone eliminates infection

The backlash to practical magic
is impractical places to conceal it
toads have no pockets nor secret satchels
no woodland palace in which to bury
treasured talismans, precious knowledge

The toad must store the lingua universalis
close to the lengthy tongue, an alphabet
or two, siren songs and incantations packed

into a rock stored in easy verbal reach
when holding words for all the world

The drawback is, because there always is one
one tends to show off forgotten languages
until an envious sorcerer, two-bit wizard
or greedy witch gets word on the wind
and wand in hand catches toad unawares

Then it's an old one-two with a hammer
the head cracked like a walnut
to grab that special pebble
from the toad's font, its love of knowledge
the magic dissipated and toad tossed in a pot

Indeed, loose lips and large rocks sink lives
but the wily amphibian has the last laugh
from the darker side of the lily pad
dialects in every parlance fall to the owner
but hold the stone within your mouth

Carefully! You don't want to swallow it
or your language goes to shit
but to hold the greatest gift
understanding all the world's tongues
means that with a stone in your mouth
you cannot speak the words of power



Fragile Rock

by Elby Rogers

The Little Joys of Sisyphus

by Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

Centuries into his punishment,
Sisyphus finally learns how to relax
And take the scenic routes
Around the Underworld
Instead of simply pushing Rocky uphill
Like he did during his early years.

He now takes the time to watch as new prisoners
Get tossed down by the Furies,
Head-first, screaming and impaled
Upon the jagged grounds of Tartarus till
They're either blots or splatters on the dark soil,
Noting their locations for future reference.

More frequently, he would stop by to chat with Tantalus
And trade banters and insults that have long lost their heat.
He would even practice his shots with
Scraps of torn flesh rolled into tiny balls—
Which he scavenges along the Furies' usual flight paths,
Throwing them into Tantalus' open, skyward mouth,
Keeping careful scores of his hits and misses,
And feeling a sense of pride and excitement
Upon seeing a marked improvement
In his accuracy as time goes by.

Whenever hunger strikes,
He would make a stop at Ixion's place

To hold idle conversations with the old king
While roasting his portion of the collected meat
Using the fire from the latter's wheel.

In times of thirst, he would visit the Danaides
To exchange gossip with the gathered ladies
While leaning on Rocky and enjoying a cool drink
From their ever-leaking vases.
He even succeeds in drawing laughter here and there
With his still sharpened wits.
("Still got it," whispers Sisyphus as he goes on his merry way.)

Recently, he has become acquainted with one Ocnus,
Often distracting the guy's gluttonous donkey long enough
To procure a sizeable and durable rope of straw,
Which he secures around Rocky and the donkey's body
To have that gullible beast pull the boulder up for him
During the last leg of his journey,
Albeit with discretion when the Furies are not around,
Whose patrol routes and schedules he has long memorized.

Whenever he nears his designated summit,
Sisyphus would untie the rope,
Letting Rocky roll back down at full force
While he watches and claps his hands like a child
Watching his puppy dash away in a game of fetch.
Sauntering down, he pulls up his mental map
And debates with himself where to go, who to meet,
And what to do for his next journey,
A little smile unconsciously tugging at the corners of his lips.

Slobbering Sevillano

by C. I. I. Jones

It was a beautiful city filled with beautiful people. It all felt so ancient, everything was from a time *long ago*. Everything needed to be treated like an antique, even the trinkets in the gift shops, created for the sole purpose of luring in tourists like Brent and Jolene Garl. Jolene drifted away to a far corner of the store where the same fans that were in the last gift shop had been – all imprinted with the beautiful city’s name – Seville.

“Be careful back there, will ya?” Brent called to her. “Don’t want to be paying a fortune for one of them fancy fans if you break it.”

He received no response, which didn’t make him feel any better. Carol could be so careless. And if he had to pay the cost of an airline ticket for a broken souvenir he would not be happy. Still, he was in Seville, an American abroad in the south of Spain. The weather was perfect. He had a mid-afternoon buzz going off a few cervezas. Despite his wife’s carelessness and the risk she posed of the waste of money on damaged goods, she was wearing a sexy “Spanish” shirt.

Hung on one wall was a set of posters advertising the bullfights. They were works of art, painted to show both bull and man as true lethal forces. Both strong, statuesque creatures, writhing with killer instinct. Each showed the schedule of a different day’s event. Each was dated, starting from the week prior all the way back to the early 1900s. The older the print, the more expensive. He and Jolene had toured the Seville Bull Ring, the Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballería de Sevilla. For Brent, it’d been the highlight of the trip. There was something about staring death in the eye, and then sticking a sword through its shoulder blades that really got Brent’s blood pumping. If he ever read Hemingway he’d probably break a sweat. It was late autumn though, and all the bull fighting events were past.

Brent threw a hissy fit over not getting to see a man potentially get a horn run through his stomach.

Brent picked one of the more recent posters up and felt pang of sickness in his gut when he heard the unmistakable sound of card stock tearing.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered, but not quiet enough. The store clerk was already rounding the front desk and headed in his direction. He looked down at the bottom corner of the poster. A big, two-inch rip hung off like a piece of confetti.

“Si. No hay problema señor. No problema,” the shopkeeper said. She was a short, stout woman, and like all of the Spaniards he’d met, beautiful.

“I, uh, no comprar. No want comprar,” he mumbled to the lady. Jolene had begged him, leading up to the trip, to learn at least a bit of Spanish. To make an attempt. Before leaving for Spain, Brent knew *Si* and *No*. He had an unfair advantage with no, the word being interchangeable with its English counterpart, but two words were better than none. He learned cerveza pretty quick, since he knew he would be saying it a lot. Comprar was the next word he learned because he knew with Jolene following him around, he’d be comprar-ing a lot of shit.

“No hay problema,” the shopkeeper repeated. “Nosotras tenemos muchos de estos cartels. No hay problema.” She took the damaged poster and started walking back toward the front desk.

“Uh, wait. Um, no comprar. No dinero. Los siento. Can’t comprar,”

Brent tried as she walked away, back to the counter, he assumed to ring up and charge him for the damaged poster. The woman placed the poster on the counter and stood there, staring at him with a wide grin and saying nothing further.

Jolene joined Brent. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Brent said. His face told differently. He was looking about the shop for anyone that might be able to diffuse the situation with this unreasonable shopkeeper, to say that the damage wasn’t great enough to require this poor tourist that has already dumped hundreds of American dollars into your shitty local economy, to be required to buy the old relic. If someone could just convey this in Spanish to her, everything would be fine.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” Jolene asked.

“Please shut up, I’m trying to think.”

As Brent thought a Spanish man walked into the store, tipped his hat toward the shopkeeper, and said a friendly, “Hola,” then walked over to a shelf filled with different candies. He looked at Jolene and Brent and said, “Good morning,” possibly seeing they were no native Spanish speakers by their dress, skin tone, or their tourist-y demeanor. Maybe he could smell Brent’s fear and frustration.

“What’s going on?” Jolene asked, ignoring the stranger’s greeting.

Brent ignored her. “Hablo English?” he asked the man.

“Si,” he said. “I speak English.”

“Can you help me please? I don’t know what to do about this woman. The shopkeeper.”

“What’s going o—” Jolene tried to ask again, but was silenced by a glare from Brent.

“What seems to be the problem?” the stranger asked.

“I think she expects me to buy one of these posters,” Brent explained. “See, I made a tiny little tear on the corner of one and she took it over to the register there, and I think she expects me to buy it.”

“No, surely not,” the stranger said in a tone that Brent recognized as sympathetic. “Let me see if I can sort this issue out. Okay? I’ll have a word with the lady of the shop, and then see what we can do, yes?”

“Please,” Brent said. “That would be great.”

“Un momento,” the stranger said, then paced confidently toward the shopkeeper.

“What the hell did you do?” Jolene whispered.

“Shut up,” Brent said, never taking his eyes off of the stranger.

“We come all this way. Want to have a nice trip and make beautiful memories, and naturally, you have to go and do something like this. And you get on me for being clumsy, tell me not to break th—”

“Shut the hell up,” Brent said.

The stranger and the shopkeeper were in a rapid fire dialogue of Spanish that Brent realized, even if he studied the language for a year straight, he would never be able to follow. The stranger introduced himself, but the lady seemed to recognize him. The conversation seemed to be congenial. Then Brent’s heart sank. The woman lifted the poster off of the counter and displayed the damaged corner for the stranger. The stranger looked at the damage, like an insurance adjuster surveying photos of a damaged car. He said something. The shopkeeper said something back. Then they both laughed, making Brent feel like the butt of a joke he couldn’t understand.

“Amigo,” the stranger called over to Brent. “Amigo, come here.”

Brent nodded but still did not approach for another moment. He actually considered yanking Jolene by the arm and darting into the busy streets of Seville, weighing out the chances of being able to outrun two locals in their own city. Jolene shoved him forward.

Brent stepped up to the counter. “Everything okay?”

“I’d say so,” the Stranger said. “How’d you say in English – today is your lucky day.”

“I don’t feel very lucky.”

“Take a good look at the poster you tore,” the Stranger said.

Brent did. He looked long and hard, mostly at the corner of the poster that was hanging off, dangling like a swooning damsel in an old west movie. Then his eyes moved away, focusing on the things that made him pick the poster up in the first place. The artistry, the attention to detail. The bull’s tongue hanging out from exhaustion, and the matador, looking directly at the painter, so confident that his bull was defeated. The matador, in his fine linens, designed strictly for this moment of glory. The thought of death doesn’t seem to be on the matador’s mind as he looks directly at Brent. A true man – no, a god among men. This is no sniveling crybaby like the ones he filled his days surrounded by back in the states. This is a man’s man. Then Brent saw it. What the stranger truly had him looking for.

“It’s you,” Brent said. “The bullfighter is you, right?”

The stranger laughed, and the shopkeeper laughed with him. “Yes, that is me.” The shopkeeper produced a fat marker from behind the counter and handed it to the man. “I think this poster will be more valuable with the tear now,” he said as he scribbled his signature on it, right next to the tear. Brent took a moment to look toward the text in the top right corner, trying to find a name. The boldest, biggest name, the one Brent assumed to be the Stranger’s, was Antonio Martin.

“What’s going on here?” Jolene said as she stepped up to join the conversation. “Are we going to have to fork out some cash for this poster because my husband is such a boob?”

“I don’t think so, sweetie,” Brent said, still staring at the man. A god among men, he thought again.

He finished signing the poster and stood up straight. He barely came to Brent’s shoulder, but still filled the room. When you realized how the man spent his weekends, how could he not fill the room.

“My name is Brent,” Brent said, thrusting out his hand.

“Antonio Martin,” the matador said, and shook Brent’s hand. “Friends call me Toni. You can call me that.”

“Not before I buy you a cerveza.”

“Ah, Jesus, Brent,” Jolene whined. “I want to go back to the hotel to freshen up before dinner. All you ever want is more *cer-vay-sas*. Can’t you give it—”

“Jo, shut up,” Brent said. “This man is on the poster. Just look. He just saved us probably a hundred dollars or something like that.” In truth, the poster was a reprint from a bullfight only a year prior. It was worth maybe ten bucks and probably could have been haggled for five. “I’d say we owe our new friend a beer.”

Jolene leaned in between Antonio and Brent for a close look at the poster. Then leaned back to look at Antonio. “Well, how about that,” she said and smacked her husband on the back. “What are the odds?”

“Slim,” Brent said, trying not to show his embarrassment over his wife. “What do you think? Have time for a quick drink?”

“It’s the off season. I have time for two,” Antonio said as he handed the marker back to the shopkeeper.

“Gracias,” she said. Antonio gave a nod in response and led his new American friends out into the streets of Seville.

“I know a great bar where the other people from the bullring go,” Antonio said. “It’s a block away and should be pretty quiet this time of year. Sound good?”

“Sounds bueno,” Brent said, then turned to Jolene. “You can go back to the hotel if you want. I’ll come by and get you before dinner.”

“Like hell,” Jolene whispered. “I’m not missing this.”

They followed their new friend. He led them into the inner gate of the Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza Caballeria de Sevilla, within its high white walls past its wrought iron gate and onto the cobblestone outer circle. “The bar,” Antonio told them, “is popular with bullfighters for obvious reasons. Mostly it’s easy to get to.”

They walked halfway around the outer ring to the other side and found a small bungalow. “This,” Antonio told them, “is the living quarters for many of the fighters during the season. Especially the ones that are just getting started and make just enough money for meals. I don’t stay here anymore unless I come back during the off season.” He led Brent and Jolene into the building. “There also happens to be Seville’s best kept secret bar.”

Inside the small bungalow was an open living quarter with cots and bureaus for storing clothing, all crammed together. Enough settings for five occupants. Towards the far side of the room was a door. Antonio gave the door a few knocks and it cracked open. He muttered a few words in Spanish and the door opened wide. They all walked in.

“This place looks like something out of a movie,” Jolene said. On the other side of the door was an old-style saloon with an ornate, wood-crafted bar. The back bar was overcrowded with various liquor bottles. The bartender wore old-fashioned black-and-white service clothes and was busy toweling down the bar. Other than Antonio, Brent, and Jolene, there were two other drinkers cast off to far

corners of the small saloon.

Antonio led the group up to the bar and pulled a stool out for himself and Jolene. Brent sat on his other side. Antonio was about to address the bartender, but Brent cut him off. “Uh, tres cervezas por favor?”

“What if I don’t want beer?” Jolene asked.

“Okay,” Brent said. “Dos cervezas and uno agua.”

Antonio laughed, then said something to the bartender, who nodded and then walked away. “Water is no way to celebrate new friends. He’ll take care of you.”

“So long as I get the tab,” Brent said.

“I wouldn’t take that from you,” Antonio said. “I’d never steal the tab from a friend.” They all laughed.

The bartender returned with their drinks. Two tall glasses of beer for Antonio and Brent. A colorful mixed drink for Jolene. “Ooo, what’s this?” she asked.

“We call it a Slobbering Sevillano,” Antonio told her, “because if you drink too many of them, you’ll be slobbering.” Another laugh around the table.

The talk went on while they sipped at their drinks. What brings you two to Spain? Where in Spain are you from? How long is your visit? How long have you lived in Seville? Where else do you plan to go? Then Brent asked, “How long have you been a bullfighter?”

Antonio thought about this for an extended moment, actually calculating the years. He lifted his beer, by Brent’s count his third, and drank off the last of it. Brent signaled the bartender to line up two more. “I have always been a matador,” Antonio answered.

“Ah,” Jolene groaned with adoration and slapped a hand on his

shoulder. “Like something you were born to do, huh?”

Antonio smiled. The woman seemed to be seriously into her cups. “Yes, I guess you could say that. I spent most of my life inside the walls of this ring. I’ve done just about every job related to bullfighting that you can think of, from cleaning bull shit to killing the animal. But it has been a journey I took with great happiness.”

Both Jolene and Brent grunted at this statement, hearing it as profound wisdom.

“That’s really inspiring,” Jolene said, lifting and lowering her hand on the matador’s shoulder again.

“Aren’t you scared, though?” Brent asked.

“Scared?”

“Of the bull! Of getting gored! Of dying, of course,” Brent said. The volume of his voice had risen with each completed cerveza.

“Fear of death, no,” Antonio answered. “Fear of injury, no. Not that either. Fear of failure, though. That is a different story. If I were to fail and not fight the bull well. If the crowd is not pleased with my performance. That is something that I fear.”

“Letting people down, huh,” Brent said, then took a pull on his glass, nearing the end of his fourth beer. “Now that’s something I can relate to.” It was a lie. He couldn’t remember the last time someone depended on him for anything.

“The bull, though,” Brent said after a silent moment. “What about the bull?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t it scare you? They’re big. Mean!”

Antonio laughed. “I don’t think you have a true understanding of the matador’s relationship with the bull.” Antonio looked over at Jolene, then to a nearby clock. “I think you will need to leave soon. Your señora wants a true Sevillano dinner. And I’ll tell you where to go. But after that, if you really want to know more, you can meet me back here tonight. How does that sound?”

Brent’s mouth hung up for a moment. This man, this walking god of a man, a man’s man, wanted to get together later. With him, Brent, the office schlub. “Oh, yes! Of course!”

“Muy bueno! Muy bueno!” Antonio shouted and stood up from the bar. “There may be a few other bullfighters here, too. You can ask all the questions in the world.”

Brent stood and started shuffling in his pocket for some euros to pay for the tab. He laid down a bill that covered far more than the cost of the tab, and would have more than sufficiently paid for the torn poster as well. With several more bills and coins leftover in his wallet that, truth be told, he didn’t really comprehend the value of. “Tell the bartender to keep the change,” Brent told Antonio.

Antonio spoke in Spanish to the bartender, whose reaction may have hinted at how large Brent’s tip was. Of course, Brent didn’t even realize the Spaniards didn’t regularly accept tips and that for the bartender to take any leftover cash after the tab was paid was unusual, and Brent was being taken for a rube. So goes the life of a tourist.

Brent walked over to his wife, who was still staring out into the far-off corner of the bar. “Let’s go,” he said. “Got to get you your five-star meal, right?”

She turned on her stool toward him, and had to lean on the bar to catch her balance. “Why don’t y-you taake you new boiifriend with you,” she slurred.

“Sorry,” Brent said over his shoulder to Antonio. “I think she’s had

too much to drink.”

Antonio laughed. “Common problem. Not to worry.”

Brent helped Jolene out of her stool and the trio left the bar, walking back through the door to the living quarters. They almost made it to the door, into the outer ring of the Maestranza, when Jolene wriggled out of Brent’s grip. “Show me where you stay,” she said. “I bet it’s this one.” She collapsed on one of the un-comfy looking cots.

“Quite a good guess,” Antonio said. “That’s my bed. When I stay here.”

“You know,” she said, sprawling out on the bed. “We can just send Brent away and you can take me to dinner. And we can skip the dinner.”

“For Christ sake,” Brent said and stepped forward to stand her up again. In his haste, he bumped a small nightstand next to the bed and rattled the few objects that stood on top of it.

Antonio lunged forward. “Mierda!” he shouted and reached out to snatch an object close to tumbling onto the floor. As he steadied it he released a litany of Spanish that was enough to let Brent know he’d almost royally screwed up.

“I’m so sorry,” Brent said. “Seems those Slobbering Sevillanos have her doing a bit more than slobbering.” He looked down at the object that Antonio had saved from smashing on the floor. It looked like a small figurine. A matador and a bull, in action. More like in collision, tangled together. Brent stooped down so that his nose was a few inches from the thing. “What is this?” he asked. He lifted his finger to prod it.

“Don’t touch,” Antonio said, then added. “Please. It’s very fragile.”

Brent’s finger withdrew, but he kept his face right next to the thing like a child eyeing the selections at a candy store. On a closer look he

realized what it was. “Is it leather? The figurine?”

“It is the tanned heart of a bull. And a matador.”

Brent pulled back at the revelation. Leather was fine. The hide of a creature being tanned was nothing unusual to him. But the heart? “Wait a second? The heart? Is that even possible? And did you say matador?”

“Si,” Antonio said. “It *is* the heart. And it is the combined heart of both a bull and a matador. Preserved and then shaped into this figurine. See, here,” he pointed to the carving that most looked like a man, “this was Diego Lopez. This is his heart that we carved out of him. And this,” pointing to the leathery bull charging the fighter, “was the bull that took his life. Henry. We took both of their hearts and made this leather piece.”

“That’s brutal,” Brent whispered.

“That is the life,” Antonio said.

Brent was about to ask about the bull’s name. He didn’t realize that they named the bull. And why not a Spanish name? Why Henry? Before he could ask anything, Jolene let out a childish whine.

“Brent,” she said. “I’m hungry. I want something Spanish. And fancy.”

“Tend to your wife now,” Antonio said. “More questions later.”

“Sure,” Brent said, still staring at the preserved hearts of a bull and man. Brutal.

After Antonio gave a few suggestions for dinner spots, Brent guided he and his wife back to the hotel. Jolene staggered the whole way home, and talked to Brent, though he couldn’t say what about. He was still thinking about the hearts carved into a work of art. He tried not to imagine the imagery of the matador being gored and killed.

Then later, the bull being killed for a transgression it was born and bred to perform. And then they carved both of their hearts out of their bodies to make a statue.

They made it back to the hotel and Brent started getting ready for dinner. The places Antonio suggested all sounded nice, so Brent put on a suit he and got ready in the bathroom. When he came out still adjusting his tie 15 minutes later, Jolene was passed out on the bed. He thought for a moment of stirring her, then he realized he didn't want to. He didn't want to go to dinner. He wanted to get back to the Maestranza to see his new friend. He had a million questions to ask about a world that was foreign and fascinating to him, and another dinner where his wife tried three different meals and ate none of them in their entirety, made fun of him for his lousy Spanish, then cried when he sniped back at her sounded as fun as a sandpaper back rub.

He thought about changing back out of his suit, then decided not to. He wanted Antonio to at least think they made it to dinner, and he could just lie and say Jolene was too tired to make it back to the bullring with him. So, he crawled into bed with his wife, still suited, and turned the TV on. He mindlessly flicked through the channels, wishing, but not hopeful, to find an English-speaking channel to watch while he killed the next two hours.

"You really tied one on," he said to his wife. "Those Slobbering Sevillanos really delivered on their promise."

"One," Jolene moaned, muffled by the pillow her face was buried in. "Only one."

"One what?" asked Brent.

"Drink," she groaned. "Only one drink. I feel like part of my brain melted."

Brent chuckled. "You had one drink like my aunt has one drink at Thanksgiving. I hate to tell you, hun, but you're hammered. You had far more than one drink."

Jolene shook her head into the pillow. She whispered something that Brent couldn't, and didn't try, to hear. He watched his wife lovingly. It was nice to see her let her hair down a bit. She hardly ever did. For her to get really zonked was always a goal for him when they went on vacation.

He checked the time on his phone. Still an hour before he was to meet Antonio back at the bullring, but the television was muttering words at him that he couldn't comprehend and his wife couldn't mutter anything at all. She was out cold, her back rising and falling with heavy, drunken breathing. He decided to go for a walk before heading to the ring. He still refused to give up the façade that he and Jolene had a nice dinner before meeting up with Antonio, and in that vein, decided to wear his dress shoes for his walk. An uncomfortable but necessary choice. He put the shoes on and, after a last check on his slumbering bride, took off into the happy streets of Seville.

Like every night of their trip, the streets were lively. Brent walked along without a care in the world. The locals and the tourists alike went about with a cheerful nature, shouting in Spanish, perusing the shops, and drinking, and Brent felt at one with the place. He checked his watch and thirty minutes had passed at the snap of the finger. He looked around him and realized that he wasn't positive where he might be. He did not grow fearful at the thought. Seville wasn't a huge city. He'd find his way out of the backstreets easily. And there was a pervading sense of calm running through the exuberance of Seville that was contagious. It told Brent he had no reason to fear.

He took his next left and found himself in the midst of a tight-quartered market. He kept muttering the word no to the several shopkeepers that offered him their wares, growing louder and more annoyed with each one. By the time he made the end of the block and was able to make another turn, his sense of oneness with the place was diminishing. He was asking himself some very rich, touristy questions and thanking God he didn't have to sell shit like that day-to-day to get by.

The next street he was on looked almost the same, only there were no

market stalls. It was quieter here, and he was grateful. So much for the jolly streets of Seville. He had a timeline to keep. He raced down the street trying to remember the best way to go. There was a big river that ran down the middle of Seville, and that was ... west of here, he thought. The bullring was right next to the river, so if he could find the river he could find the ring. He made another right turn, and there was no river. His pace quickened. He made another turn and was facing a market again and no river at the other side. He refused to struggle his way through the crowded street, and moved along to the next. It looked the same as one of the other streets and like the next street he turned down. The sense of calm was gone, replaced by a panicky knowledge of being lost. The streets of Seville seemed to be a labyrinth constructed of tight roads, whimsically painted houses, and stocked with beautiful drunk people and merchants desperate to sell their goods.

He made yet another left, sure he'd find himself on the mirror image of the last street he'd turned off of. Instead, he ran right into a nun, burying his face into her habit. He pulled his face away from her ample and imposing body, mortified at having buried his face in the bosom of a holy lady, and perhaps reigniting some disturbed early-teens induced fantasy. He couldn't find the words, it was a simple one, one that he should know. There it was. "Los siento," he said, and meant it.

She shot something back in Spanish. It was quick, but not unfriendly. She smiled at him. It was the maternal smile of the kind nun, not the disciplinarian that shadows the memories of any catholic upbringing. She said another Spanish phrase he didn't catch a word of and went on smiling.

"Los siento," Brent said again. "Uh, lost. Los siento. No español. I am lost. Help?"

The nun's smile grew wider. "I would be happy to help," she said in clear, perfect English. "Welcome to Seville, visitor. I hope you come to love our city."

"I do," Brent said as a wave of relief washed over him. Not only

someone that could understand him, but a fluent English speaker. He was saved. "But I am terribly lost."

"The streets of Seville can be tricky," she told him. "Where is it you are going?"

Brent tried to remember the proper name of the place, to appear he was making an effort, but gave up and said, "The bullring?"

The nun's smile faltered and she looked toward the sky between the crowded rooftops as if she needed a reminder that it was night. "Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballeria de Sevilla," she said, using the full name of the place. "But why? It's no time to go to la Maestranza de Sevilla. You will find nothing there worth finding at this time of day. If you asked me, there's no time of day to go to la Maestranza. It's a barbaric place."

Brent grinned in a way that revealed the truth. The barbary was what attracted him. "It's true, I guess. But it's the culture, right?"

"It takes resistance to the accepted way of things to change a culture," the nun said. "Sure, there are worse things than bullfighting, but I don't let myself get swept into the *culture*."

Brent could feel that this woman was attempting to say something profound. But he had no time for Sunday school. "I am meeting a friend over that way," he told her. "A matador."

The smile was no longer faltering on her face. It disappeared. "The fighters are not people that you want to keep company with." She looked toward the sky again. "Especially at night. Nothing good will come of that."

"I am a big boy," Brent said, forgetting himself. "I can take care of myself."

"And yet, you're lost. I think I would be better to give you directions back to your accommodations, si."

Brent could feel the anger reddening his cheeks. He wanted to yell at this stupid bitch. He knew how to get back to his hotel; at least he thought he did. He wanted to get to the bullring! The color died down in his face as he thought of a better approach. “I won’t worry you with all that, and perhaps you’re right, sister. It’s been a long day, and maybe an early night is better than getting mixed up in whatever nonsense the bullfighters are involved in.”

“It is no simple nonsense,” the nun said, her eyes speaking just as directly as her tongue. “It is fearful sin they take part in, and is for no visitor of our beautiful city to see.”

Brent took a half a step back, feeling the impact of her heavy stare like a push in the chest. “I’m sure you’re right. Nothing for me to get involved in. But perhaps you can direct me to the river. My wife and I are staying right on it and I’m sure if I can find the river then I can find our hotel.”

The nun’s smile came back and her relief was palpable, like a woman that just snatched a man from over the fiery pit of eternal damnation. “I think that is the right choice,” she told him. “You were close to the river as it were. If you’d wandered much more on your own, I’m sure you would have found it. Just that way, and turn left two streets up. After that, if you keep walking you’ll be in the river.” She laughed.

“Gracias,” Brent said, pulling from his five-word Spanish vocabulary.

“De nada,” the nun said. “I’m happy you ran into me. It was important for you.” She smiled again, made a nod, then disappeared into a nearby door. Brent looked up and realized that embedded into the housing was also a parish. How fortunate, he thought, then turned to follow the nun’s directions – two streets up, then left toward the river. Then he’d be able to find the bullring in no time.

As suggested by the nun, if Brent would have kept walking following her suggested left turn, he would have dove head first into the river. The main street running the length of the city was alive with people, and immediately Brent’s sense of foreboding after being lost in the

Sevillano labyrinth of streets disappeared. He took a moment to get his bearings and decided to turn right to find the bullring. It was a good guess. He only had to go about two blocks, then the great white ring stretched out upon the landscape of the city. Brent approached the outer gate, realizing that the old nun may have been right. The gate would certainly be locked, and maybe the matador was just putting him on, having him end up in a position such as this, where he is foolishly sitting outside the gates of the bullring, and nobody shows up to let him in.

He almost decided to turn and wander his way back to the hotel when someone spoke behind him. “Amigo, I’m happy you could make it. I was beginning to think you had abandoned me.” Antonio walked closer to the gate of the outer ring, emerging from the shadows like a Shakespearean ghost.

Startled, Brent said, “Oh, there you are. I was wondering the same thing about you.”

Antonio approached the gate and presented a large key. “I don’t abandon my friends. No, no. I’m happy you’ve made it.” He opened the gate and let Brent in, then shut it and clamped the large lock again. He led on, Brent presumed back to the bar.

“I see your wife was unable to join,” Antonio said.

“Yeah. Wasn’t feeling well. Those drinks you gave her really put her on her ass.”

“Drinks?”

“You know. That cocktail. She must’ve knocked back quite a few, ’cause she was out cold by the time we got back to the hotel.”

“Ah, the Slobbering Sevillano. You know, that’s also what we call a bull towards the end of a fight in this ring. About to give in. Slobbering. Ready for death.”

Antonio swung open a door to the bar and led Brent inside. It was

much livelier than before, but still kept its frozen-in-a-past-era atmosphere. Several men, at least 12 by Brent's count, were scattered through the bar, including one man with a guitar picking out and stringing together notes in a classic, Spanish style.

"Welcome to La Taberna de La Maestranza," Antonio said. "These are the men of La Maestranza. The fighters."

Brent felt a boy-like adoration for the men gathered around him, each of them struck with a level of bravery he liked to believe himself capable of. He offered a bashful wave and said, "Hello."

Antonio spoke in Spanish, "Esta noche estamos aquí para la corrida final de la temporada."

An exaltation rose from the crowd after he spoke. "What was that? What did you say?" Brent asked.

"You will see," Antonio whispered. One of the other men brought him a small glass of some sort of liquor. He raised it and called, "Salud." The cheer was echoed and all gathered, other than Brent, drank.

"Oh, I don't have a drink," Brent said. He began to walk toward the bar, but Antonio grabbed his shoulder.

"No, tonight amigo. No buying drinks." He motioned toward the bartender. "Instead, I want to show you something special. Sound good?"

"Ah, yeah. Si," Brent said, trying his best not to sound too excited.

"Good, follow me." Antonio led toward a door off behind the bar and Brent followed, expecting the door to lead to some sort of service kitchen for the bar. When Antonio opened the door he realized there was no such kitchen. They entered a dimly lit corridor of the Maestranza's inner ring. The ring was built, on a much smaller scale, like any American football stadium. There was an interior of the ring

that people used as a pathway to get to their seating. A fan could even buy concessions, which Brent really got a kick out of. Buy some crackerjacks to munch during the murderous fight.

"I thought you guys updated the ring with electrical lighting," Brent said, noting that the dimness was due to torches affixed to the wall every twenty feet or so.

"Si," Antonio said without looking back at Brent. "For certain events we like this better."

"I guess it creates a certain mood," Brent said.

Antonio did not answer, only continued walking. It seemed to Brent that they must have nearly walked the entire length of the ring, coming full circle, when Antonio finally came to a door and said, "Aqui."

"What's this?" Brent said. "You know, my wife and I already did the tour. You don't have to show me around. I'd rather just have another cerveza with you guys and shoot the shit."

"Oh, but you haven't seen the real tour. The True Ring."

Brent walked through the door and into a back corridor of the ring. There were glass cases displaying matador suits, swords, and lances. This room was also barely lit by the fire of a few scattered torches. There was a painting, centered and ginormous, just visible in the dim light. A matador that kept a watchful eye on the entire room.

"That," Antonio said, "is Diego Ramirez. Founder of the True Ring."

"They told us the King of Spain established all of the Bull Rings."

Antonio laughed. "Sure, something like that. I am talking of something altogether different."

Brent was only half listening. A bullfighter's sword in a glass case

had his attention. “Like I said, you don’t have to show me all of this. The tour didn’t come to this room, but it was all the same.”

“They would never come to this room,” Antonio said sharply. “This room is different. It’s special. Only for the True Ring. El Verdadero Anillo.”

It was the third time Antonio said the phrase and it finally caught Brent’s attention. “True Ring. You saying the shit they showed me on the tour was fake?”

“Not exactly, no,” Antonio said. “But did they let you try on La Traje de Luces on the regular tour?”

Brent was about to ask what the hell he was talking about, when he realized. “Are you saying you’re going to let me try on one of the suits?”

“Si, exactly,” Antonio said. He walked over to a case displaying a suit. “This one is larger than most. Perfect for the Americano. You are a bit bigger than the average matador.” With that, Antonio slid the case open and pulled the traditional matador attire off its display and handed it to Brent. He pointed off toward a closet. “You can dress in there,” he said, then turned away. Brent looked at the suit in his hands, shrugged, then went to the closet.

A few minutes later he emerged from the closet and was startled to find the patrons of the bar now occupying the room, all of them under the ever-watchful eyes of the painting – the man whose name Brent had already forgotten. The men were no longer in street clothes, however. They were in their own traditional La Traje de Luces. All of different colors, like a rainbow composed of hardened, gruff men. They all stared at him as he exited his makeshift changing room.

Antonio emerged from the small crowd of men. “Excelente!” he shouted. Some of the other matadors echoed the sentiment. “Es Bueno?” Antonio asked. “A good fit?”

Brent, suddenly conscious that he was tugging at the crotch, stopped and said, “Very good.” The suit was a light blue with golden trim, and he was happy there was neither mirror nor camera about. He never wanted to know how ridiculous he looked. “I really appreciate this, but I think I should take this thing off.”

“Nonsense, amigo,” Antonio said. “One must wear La Traje de Luces. It would not be proper to carry on in your dinner clothes.” The bartender came through the door with two drinks in hand, a tall glass of beer and a shooter. Antonio took both. “We professionals try not to drink heavily leading up to a fight,” Antonio said and handed Brent the shooter. He took a gulp of the beer left in his own hand. “But, for a first fight, a little liquid courage goes a long way.” He motioned for Brent to take the shooter. Brent did. “That won’t do so much harm as your wife’s drink. The Slobbering Sevillano, well, you can’t drink *one* of those without passing out.”

Brent felt uncomfortable. It wasn’t just the suit. It was the setting. The men staring at him. The way Antonio spoke. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that it’s best that Jolene were not here. I’m happy she stayed back. I made sure she stayed back.”

“How do you—” Brent stopped, his discomfort turning sharply into fear. He looked at his small, empty glass. “Drugged?”

The crowd of fighters laughed. “No, no,” Antonio said, laughing as well. “Just a bit of whiskey to take the edge off.”

“Edge off of what?” Brent asked, trying not to sound too panicked.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to act so brave. Not in this circle. Not inside the True Ring. These men know that same fear. We’ve all felt it. Embrace it without letting it overpower you. It will keep you alive.”

Without Brent even noticing it, Antonio had guided him out of the

back room, again into the circular corridor under the bull ring proper. The other fighters, some of them now carrying torches, led or followed the pair. “Fear of what?” Brent said. It was an honest question. He felt plenty of fear at that moment, but had no idea where to direct it.

“The first fight is always full of fear,” Antonio said as they turned right down a wider corridor. “Let that whiskey do its job.”

The right turn gave Brent a fuller view of what he should fear. The gates were open and the moon, somewhere off in the Spanish sky, was peeking just enough through the clouds to reflect off the yellow-brown dirt of the Maestranza. He and Jolene had stood on the same dirt only a day before, and he had wondered how often they had to bring in bags of the stuff to soak up newly spilled blood. “Antonio, what’s going on here?”

Antonio was silent for a moment as the small crowd passed through the gate and into the ring. When emerged, the torch-bearing fighters dispersed into the empty benches, spreading out enough to cast a reach of light covering the majority of the ring from their torches. Antonio took Brent into the middle of the ring. The two of them did a full circle, taking in the scope of the grounds. Even in the dark, even with the full weight of his fears pressing in on his chest, Brent felt an overwhelming sense of the courage it took men to stand exactly where he was.

“This is the True Ring,” Antonio said with a flourish of his arm. “These men compose it. Without them, the ring you see before us falls, and years of tradition go with it. We have sacrificed much to uphold these traditions. Blood has been spilt. Sweat poured. Few know of our efforts, or even our existence. But we hold this all together. We are the bones of this structure. And there is a spirit that holds us upright. The heart of man, and the heart of the bull. Both have lived victorious and died with honor here. And to that spirit, we dedicate this fight.”

Antonio punctuated his small soliloquy by unsheathing a sword he

had strapped around his waist and handing it to Brent. “What is this for?” Brent said, still processing the words of Antonio’s rousing speech. “A fight? I’m not trained for a fight.”

“Who’s really prepared?” Antonio said as he turned to leave. Brent followed for a few steps, then looked at the blade in his hand. He pictured himself chasing down Antonio and burying it in his back, and wondered how quickly the rest of the men would butcher him. He let Antonio leave, then looked around the ring. Most rings, La Maestranza de Sevilla included, have a protective ring encircling the main area of bullfighting, which men not directly involved in the combat can duck behind to avoid being hit by a charging bull. Brent thought he could duck behind one of these, make a break for it, and try to run into the streets. He jogged in the direction of one of the protective ring’s openings, but as he did so, two of the fighters closed ranks, shutting the hole off to Brent. He took a deep breath and gazed around the wide ring, knowing that these men were positioned so that there was no escape. The torchlight flickered throughout the place, and for a moment, all Brent could hear was the thud of his own heart and the shudder of his own breathing.

“El Verdadero Anillo,” Antonio shouted. It was from a distance and it took a moment for Brent to spot him. When he did, he realized he should have guessed where Antonio would be. The seat of the king, an elevated box over the ring, giving a perfect and safe view of the carnage that would happen below. “Gracias para estar aqui. Vamos a empezar.”

Brent had no idea what Antonio had shouted, but he looked around the ring at the 20 or so men and thought that they would charge him at any moment, butchering him like some ancient, uncivilized people trying to assuage the anger of their pagan god. None of them moved. Brent felt his legs tremble, and the weight of the unknown future crushing down on his shoulders. He wanted this, whatever it was, to be done, whatever that meant.

Off in a far corner of the ring, one barely touched by the scattered splinters of torchlight, he heard a distinct sound. Steel sliding against

steel. In a sobering moment, Brent remembered back to his tour of La Maestranza the day prior. The ring and the golden dirt, the red trim of the canopy on the outer edge of the ring – then there was a gate. He could picture it if he closed his eyes. Red trim like the rest of the woodwork in the ring, and a huge bolt for a lock. And he'd just heard that bolt slide open.

The first thought that came to mind was that this must be a hoax. He wondered if any of these men, besides maybe Antonio, were even bullfighters. Maybe they were just friends of Antonio's, and this was some elaborate joke they liked to play on tourists. Very elaborate. Over the top, so much so that they'd apparently drugged his wife with that drink. All for kicks at the expense of a loud-mouth, idiot Americano abroad. This all seemed far more plausible than the idea that these men lured him here to make him fight a real bull.

The gate swung open with a woosh and Brent clamped his eyes shut, waiting for the sound of hooves and the life-ending impact that was sure to follow. The point of the horn as it entered his gut and tore vital ligaments and arteries. He'd bleed out in the middle of the ring in seconds. Nobody would ask questions. Why would they? Jolene probably wouldn't remember anything after leaving that godforsaken gift shop they just had to stop at earlier that day.

The charge didn't happen. Brent forced his eyes open. The torches still glimmered, the gate was open with a black hole beyond, unscathed by the dim light. All the men watched on, just black silhouettes from Brent's perspective, like ghosts awaiting the arrival of another soul at the edge of the veil. And all was silent.

When the quiet was broken by a snort from the unlit space beyond the gate, Brent felt his bowels tighten. He looked at the blade in his hand as if it never occurred to him before that moment that the thing could be used to defend himself, to save his own life. He lifted it, pointed it in the direction of the open gate and the darkness beyond, and took a deep breath. He would try. It would be difficult. All the feeling had left his legs, and he wasn't sure that he could move. But he would try.

The horns emerged from the shadows first, glinting in the light like the silver scales of a fish. The sight caused a small stir amongst the men in the stands, who commenced a quiet but excited chatter. There was another high-pitched snort as the length of the two horns came into full view, then an odd sound more like a throat-clearing. A sound Brent would never have associated with a bull, or any animal if he'd had time to think about it. It sounded human. But there wasn't time for those thoughts.

Just as the full length of the bull's horns emerged from the shadows, the initial charge commenced. The full head of the bull erupted from the shadows like steam from a pressurized valve. A cry rose from the spectators, "Ole!" as the thing emerged into the full light of their torches. And the word *thing* was correct. For, even as it charged him, thrumming with a blood-pulsing panic, Brent could see that this was no bull. Certainly, there were horns, even the head, snout, dripping snout, and dangling tongue of an enraged bull, but that was only the top half of the thing advancing on Brent, ready to kill him. It stood on the bottom half, however, of a man's body. The two legs it rested on, up to the torso, bare abdomen, all the way up over the pecs of a grown man, where the arms and shoulders began to mesh into the hide of a bull. And every inch and pound of the creature was closing distance, bearing down on Brent.

Again, the world went silent as Brent watched dumbfounded by a creature he could have only imagined in nightmares. The sound that brought him to was of heavy feet shifting over and thudding into loosely packed dirt. He saw the horns fall a fraction of an inch as the creature lowered into a kill position. At the last moment, he dove to the right, feeling the rush of wind as the creature missed his fatal blow.

"Ole!" the crowd screamed, no longer so reserved. Worked into a frenzy at the prospect of death they'd all faced professionally, now played out for them as entertainment. Brent struggled up to his feet. He took up the sword he'd dropped and turned in the direction the bull-man had rushed past him in, only to see the monster making another charge, practically on top of him already. Brent dodged left,

this time taking a glancing blow from his pursuer. The force of impact spun Brent like a top. He went down again as the crowd cried out for blood. He was face down, and could hear the plodding of feet through the ground of the bullring. The sound was slow at first, but then picked up speed. It was charging again.

What happened next could only be attributed to a fluke, chance, or the hand of God. Maybe survival instinct. Brent rolled to his right, not truly knowing his intention. By the sound of the plodding feet, the charge was almost to an end, and if he were to stay still the thing would have run its ungodly horns through Brent, and there would be more man joined together with the beast as Brent spent the last agonizing moments of his life with a horn through his chest. But he rolled, and not a second too soon. The blade was clutched to his chest when he pitched over, but after the roll, with his eyes clenched, gripping the handle with both hands, Brent thrust forward. Immediately, a force threw him backward onto his back and sent him skidding across the dirt.

He was sure he was dead and grateful that it came immediately and without too much pain. He kept his eyes closed, too scared to reveal to himself the afterlife he'd just arrived into. What finally prompted him to open his eyes was the sound of applause. An earthly sound that brought him right back to reality. He looked around and for a moment wished he had died. He was still in la Maestanza. The men in the crowd were clapping. And why?

He sat up. And looked to his right. A mangle of flesh and fur and horn lay there, and Brent, scared it was another charge, scrambled to his feet and ran a few steps away. The men watching all laughed. It caused Brent to look back. Joined in the mangle of elements was the blade, thrust squarely through the prostrate creature. On closer look, Brent realized it was still alive but would not be for much longer. He'd stuck the sword directly into the hideous thing's mouth and it was dying. The sound of it choking made Brent queasy. He fell to his knees and dry heaved.

"Muy bien, amigo," a voice said. "Muy bien." It was Antonio,

descended from his place of honor to come congratulate the victor. Before attending to Brent, he stepped over to the creature, still heaving for breath on its back, the sword sticking straight up like a barber's poll. Antonio took the handle and with a swift motion pushed the sword further in to finish the job, then ejected it from the mouth. It squealed once more and was dead. Another of the matadors approached and took the sword from him, then disappeared into the shadows at the edge of the ring.

"What is—" Brent tried to say, but couldn't. "Why?"

"The sacred tradition. The heart of a man and a bull. They must always be joined or we will fade. The True Ring has honored this, and so have you."

Antonio approached Brent and placed an arm around his shoulder. He started guiding him toward the main gate of the ring. They walked in the direction of the royal box. During his tour of la Maestanza, Brent was informed that, for a fighter to be escorted after a victory in the ring, through the arches below the royal box, was among the highest honors that a bullfighter could achieve. Despite the terror experienced that evening, Brent still felt a flush of pride as they approached the arches.

Two fighters passed Brent and Antonio, headed towards the center of the ring, presumably to clean up the mess, dispose of the body. Brent turned to watch them pass. Antonio stopped and let Brent watch. "You fought admirably, tonight. I have picked my fighter well."

Brent only nodded and watched the two men. Casual observation soon shifted into shocked terror. One of the men held the creature on either shoulder. Brent thought it was dead, but clearly the men were concerned it might have some last bit of life and fight left in him. The other man pulled a knife from somewhere in his garments and without hesitation, plunged it dead center in the chest, then yanked the knife down. Sure enough, the jolt of pain caused the creature to kick a few times, and the man at the shoulders bore all of his weight down. The other one doing the cutting plunged his hand down in the

incision he'd just created and rooted about for a second or two. Brent watched in pure horror as the hand re-emerged a moment later with a bloody clump. Brent knew it was the heart, and wondered how long it would take them to tan the thing, to create another of those leathery statues like the one he'd found in the lodging area.

Antonio's hand tightened on Brent's shoulder and he started to guide him again, back toward the arch beneath the royal box, with great honor. "This will be commemorated and honored. You will be honored. This is a moment of glory."

"It doesn't feel glorious," Brent said, thinking he might vomit.

"Glory can be much more about the perceiver than the perceived," Antonio said. He gripped Brent's shoulder harder after they'd passed through the arches. The wrought iron gates were only fifty feet beyond, and would spill them out into the streets of Sevilla. But they weren't going that way. They took a left, off into the corridors beneath the ring. Antonio had a different destination in mind. Brent was too exhausted and shocked to resist, and followed Antonio's lead. They walked on for what seemed miles to Brent. They made left turns, right turns, went down staircases, then made more turns and descended further, deep into the guts of that beautiful city. And Brent was led like livestock, not resisting once.

Then a door opened. The dungeon beyond the door was lined with shackles and chains. The home of the beast, he presumed. Brent still didn't fight when Antonio and another bullfighter of the True Ring began shackling him up. Binding him at the ankles. He watched in a nightmarish daze, knowing that this was a horror movie fantasy, nothing that could actually be happening to him.

When the head of the slain beast was carried in, he began to scream. The rotting, empty eye sockets stared at him. The mouth drooped open. Several of the fighters held Brent down as Antonio carried the head of the bull over toward Brent and placed it over his head, creating their new creature. A minotaur created by the True Ring of la Maestranza de Sevilla. Brent could still smell the sweat and blood of the last man that was merged with the bull head for God knew how long. Maybe days. Maybe years. The timeline ended just minutes ago when Brent stuck a sword through the bull's dead mouth and into a living man's skull. But Brent couldn't think about this, or how long his own timeline would be. He just went on screaming for help. And over the next several days, months, and years, the shouting and screaming would divulge into snorting and slobbering. And he would fight for the True Ring, valiantly, until his own timeline as the Slobbering Sevillano ran its course.

The Shack and the Plums

by Jennifer Silvey

I remember that shack. The way
it swayed in spring. The scent of the wood
after the rain. I remember looking out the window
at the wild plums and prickly blackberries.

I would stay at the farm to spend time
with my grandparents. They'd teach
me about tending chickens, cutting corn,
and planting roses. I'd cut my hands
a few times a day. I enjoyed watching

the skies from morning to evening: the clouds
look better on the prairie. I wasn't allowed
to go in the shack. My grandpa
caught me trying to go in there
a time or two, and he'd give me a stern warning:
something about how I'd find out when I was older.

There was something rattling in there.
The crops didn't grow well near it.
Maybe it's my memories failing me,
but it seemed like the sky was always gray
over the shack. I always wondered what was

behind that faded plywood. It didn't fit
the rest of the scene. I never saw anyone
go in it. The flies would gather there. I read
in a newspaper after my grandparents sold it
that the new landowners, well, their curiosity got to them:
they opened the shack, and it was covering

a well. It went straight down some 25 or 30 feet. It had
a really creepy echo to it. Something didn't
sound right when people spoke into it, and they

thought maybe it had something to do with the devil.
There were arcane letters and symbols in white,
the symbols for summoning the dead.

I can't say that devil stuff makes a lick of sense,
but the new owners —
they went off the deep end. The husband and wife
were found running naked and screaming,
and there was a body in the field no one
could identify. The authorities buried the body
in a graveyard up the road.

I think the couple was a pair of bad apples. I wish
my grandparents had never sold their farm.

Younger generations don't know how
to take care of nice things. They sullied
that good farm, and now teenagers
go there for some cheap thrills; they
hope for some midnight spooks
and floating orbs.

I would kill to go back for those plums;
I would love to sit in the field and watch
the clouds. I'd like to go back and dance
among the scarecrows. Whatever thorns
separate you from the good roses, those
thorns can only separate you for so long.
I want to go and sit in the well; I want
to be buried in the shack. I want to know
why my grandparents wouldn't tell me
I was a ghost. Why I couldn't be friends
with the neighborhood kids. Why the plums
taste like my blood.



MONDO MECO PAGE 90 20050114 © JESPER NORDQVIST

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

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

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

The shopping system on Mars isn't that different from ours.. just that it's a robot who's doing the picking.

Also, the payment confirmation isn't done by a code, but with fingerprint recognition, and also a DNA sample.

The little plate there burns off a cell or two from your thumb and ana-

(cont.)





NOTES

(cont. from previous page)

lyzes it. You won't feel it, but if you're out shopping a whole day, you might get a sore thumb ;)

A few cameos here as well. Can you find them all?

* * *

Ugly borg eh? ^^

Hope he looks scary.





WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

The advertising screen in the background of the first panel is of the sort that can "feel" the general mood in it's proximity and supply an appropriate ad from its stock.



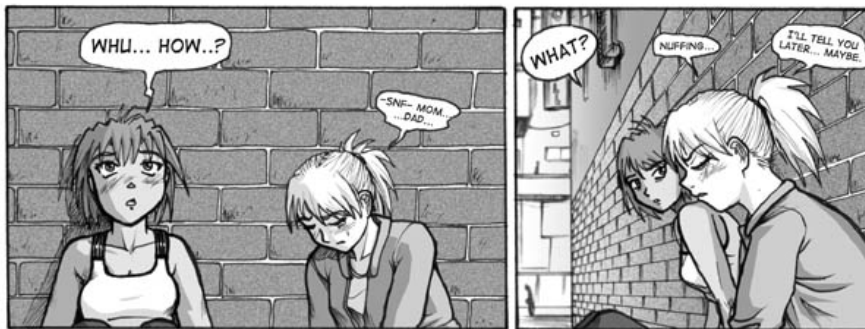


NOTES

Pages are looking better. I am delighted.







NOTES

Once, I promised myself not to include any more brick walls ... see how that turned out >_>



Contributor's Bios



COLLEEN ANDERSON lives in Vancouver, BC where she searches for mermaids. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart, Aurora, Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards, and has received Canada Council and BC Arts Council grants for writing. Her works have appeared in numerous venues such as *Polu Texni*, *Shadow Atlas* and *HWA Poetry Showcases*. *A Body of Work*, Black Shuck Books, UK (short fiction) is available online and her poetry collection, *I Dreamed a World*, is forthcoming from LVP Publications.

* * *



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.

* * *



DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and son. Her prize-winning poetry has received Rhysling, Dwarf Star, and Pushcart nominations and has appeared in over fifty journals, including *F&SF* and *Asimov's*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Analog* and *Galaxy's Edge*. For more about her work, including her poetry collections, *The Gates of Never* and *Bounded by Eternity*, please see www.edda-earth.com.

* * *



ALEX DE-GRUCHY is a writer, editor and narrative designer whose work has covered comic books, prose, videogames, poetry, film, radio and other audio, and more. Find out more at www.alexdegruchy.wordpress.com and [www.twitter.com/AlexDeGruchy](https://twitter.com/AlexDeGruchy). His debut prose novel, *The Eldritch Affair of the Cosmic Ne'er-do-wells: A Roustabouts Brouhaha*, is available from publisher Markosia from May 2022.

* * *



SHIKHAR DIXIT is a writer/illustrator whose two newest stories in print can be found in *Weird Horror* #1 and *Space & Time* #139, both magazines available on Amazon. He has sold over thirty stories and one hundred illustrations to such venues as *Dark Regions*, *Strange Horizons*, *Not One of Us*, *The Darker Side* (anthology edited by John Pelan), *Songs From Dead Singers* (anthology edited by Michael Kelly) and two Barnes & Noble anthologies. He lives with his family in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey, where he is currently at work on his first novel. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com

* * *



ADELE GARDNER (gardnercastle.com, none/they, Mx.) is a fiction writer & award-winning poet with a poetry collection, *Halloween Hearts*, forthcoming from Jackanapes Press and work in *Analog*, *Strange Horizons*, *PodCastle*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. This genderfluid night owl loves libraries, samurai films, and reading comics with cats. Adele serves as literary executor for father, mentor, and namesake Delbert R. Gardner.

* * *



JOSHUA GRASSO is a professor of English at East Central University in the middle of Oklahoma. He teaches courses in all the great stuff that inspires his stories--ancient world literature and British literature from *Beowulf* and beyond. He has written five indie novels, and his stories have recently appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Mythic*, and *Leading Edge*.

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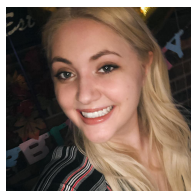
TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, *Corvus Review*, the *Boston Literary Magazine*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

* * *



C. I. I. JONES is a writer of horror and crime thrillers. He lives in Norfolk, Virginia with his wife, Courtney and their hound, Edgar Allen Pup.

* * *



Growing up in a traditional Midwestern Christian household, **KAITLYN LYNCH** started her writing career at an age so early she was still scared by *Scooby Doo*. Somehow, she now finds herself deeply entrenched in horror and true crime. With the help of Full Sail University and KMP Entertainment, she's learned to shape her craft and create modern day fairytales. Through the lens of the Gothic Celestial, her goal is to create stories which touch our hearts and enact change just as deeply as the stories we all told as children. You can read her fiction work in various anthologies and lit mags.

* * *



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

* * *



BRYAN MILLER is a Minneapolis-based writer and performer. His fiction has appeared on the *Drabblecast*, in *Intrinsick Magazine* and *Dream of Shadows*, and in the anthologies *Shadowy Natures* and *The Monsters We Forgot*, among others. His other work has appeared on the *CBS Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* and Sirius XM radio.

* * *



KURT NEWTON's more recent works have appeared in *Cafe Irreal*, *Not Deer Magazine*, and past issues of *Penumbric*. His third collection of short stories, *The Music of Murder*, is now available from Unnerving Books. His fourth collection, *Bruises*, will be published later this year by Lycan Valley Press.

* * *

NGO BINH ANH KHOA is a teacher of English in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys daydreaming and writing dark verses for entertainment. His poems have appeared in *Weirdbook*, *Star*Line*, *Spectral Realms* and other venues.

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

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ELBY ROGERS is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

* * *



JAMES RUMPEL is a retired mathematics teacher who has enjoyed spending some of his free time trying to turn some of the many odd ideas in his brain into stories. He lives in Wisconsin with his wonderful wife, Mary.

* * *

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.

* * *



RITIKSHA SHARMA is an artist, poet and occasional prose writer based in India. She completed her masters in History from the University of Delhi during the pandemic; and is interested in the complexity of caliginous splinters of people, anti-

heroes, old havelis and their stories, sharp piano notes, the number 99 and colonial cemeteries. Doodling one-eyed creatures and writing about them keeps her going; it's her soul-food.

* * *



JENNIFER SILVEY lives in the St. Louis area with her husband, their two cats, and their dog. She studied digital film for her bachelor's and creative writing for her master's. She earned both degrees at Missouri State University in Springfield, MO. She worked for six years as a newscast producer. She is now a freelance content writer. She is on a quest to

find the best sourdough recipes.

* * *



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*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect @christinasng.

* * *

CARL TAYLOR resides with his wife and daughters in New Jersey. Carl's short fiction has been published in many venues, including the September/October 2021 issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and in issues #139 and #141 of *Space & Time Magazine*. His Twitter handle is @oscilloscopelit.



Civilization by Tim Hildebrandt *(full image)*