



speculative fiction mag

Oct 2k25 • vol ix issue 3

galaxies Not molecules
houses trees
ghosts tornadoes
spells gods What cats
zombies
Things dreams
monsters Martians
kraken Seem

- and yet some things are -

Prose, Poetry, Music, and Art featuring

Carl Scharwath • Joshua
Ginsberg • Marisca Pichette •
Lydia O'Donnell • Garth
Upshaw • Mary Jo Rabe •
Devan Barlow • Christina Sng
• Gerri Leen • Diane Dooley •
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Anne by Ron Sanders

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–present 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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Hollow Screams



Phantom Postman



cover: Anne
by Ron Sanders

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

A couple of issues ago I wrote an editorial about artificial intelligence, but at the time I said “but not what you’d expect” (or words to that effect). Well, now that we’re doing an issue whose subtitle is “Not What Things Seem,” I’ll be contrarian and do the expected.

Actually, this issue was brought up a couple of times over the last few months, once obliquely (someone asked online whether a piece of art was AI-based because it scored highly on an AI-based AI detector app) and once directly (before signing a contract with us). And I think now’s the time to address it as best I can. And I say “as best I can” because it’s not as easy as just saying, “Nothing any sort of AI has ever touched can be accepted.”

One big problem is the definition of AI. Every company wants to jump on the bandwagon, so anything that uses some kind of algorithm that could in any way be using some sort of “training” to get better at its job is going to be called AI. So this means anything from ChatGPT and its ilk to a grammar checker like Grammarly that makes phrasing suggestions, or anything from DALL-E to Photoshop tools that help remove backgrounds from photos.

So in practice, there’s a continuum of AI use. At one extreme, you have a writer who gets their entire story out of ChatGPT and submits that without even looking at it, or an artist who uses DALL-E to generate an image and submits in similar fashion. These we would not accept; in fact, we couldn’t accept them. The US copyright office has ruled that such things aren’t copyrightable, and as such the “author” and “artist” in this scenario have no rights in the work and cannot sell *Penumbria* any rights. Anybody signing a contract with us in this case would immediately be in breach of contract. (How one figures this out is another kettle of artificial fish; AI-detector programs are super fallible at present.)

But at the other end of the continuum, say there’s a writer who creates a story and then uses an AI-powered grammar checker to correct grammar and get a few phrasing suggestions for their work. Or, likewise, a digital artist who uses an AI-powered processing program to remove the background from a piece they have created, and then inserts another background (which they’ve also created themselves). Maybe they also use “AI” to recolor portions of their own work. These would, to my mind, be no different to someone using tools (grammar checkers and design programs) to help them change or augment their own work; these would be obviously copyrightable and would be acceptable to us.

The difficulty is somewhere in that vast swath in the middle of these extremes—and this is a difficulty for the copyright office as well. There’s some undefined amount of author/artist input that tips the balance between author-created and AI-created, between copyrightability and not. And even programs that attempt to make this judgment are fallible (and AI-powered themselves).

Our contracts currently don’t have anything specific about AI usage, partly because we’re still using roughly the same contract form as we did in 2020, partly because I don’t know how to put all that “grey zone” stuff into legalese, and partly because there’s technically no need (as the purely AI-generated stuff can’t be copyrighted and rights cannot be bought). However, going forward we’re going to put in a clause about copyrightability, with generative AI explicitly called out. And we’ll continue looking at this issue going forward.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbria

The Oracle

by Carl Scharwath



Feynman Diagrams

by Joshua Ginsberg

Lorien sat at the dining room table in the spacious but bare, anonymous rooms that he'd been put up in by his employers, waiting out the timer until he could climb back into his bleeding-edge customized dream rig in the other room. To help kill the time, he made another attempt at a condolence letter to Saifulazman's family. What could he really say, though? Your son was tremendously talented, honorable, and made the ultimate sacrifice to keep dreams free and safe. Also, I'm the reason he's in a permanently vegetative state. He looked down and realized with horror that he had actually written that. He crumbled the sheet into a miniature boulder and flicked it off the table, where it landed amid a growing pile of other similarly failed attempts.

He'd been there before. All those letters after the explosion. None of it had made a microturd of difference to him then. He assumed Saif's family would feel the same way. But maybe not. Maybe believing that their son had been some hero would make it easier for them.

It hadn't for Lorien.

Saif had been his recruit, his Wisp, to train, and he'd failed him, like he'd failed a half dozen others that he still visited from time to time at the farm. Lorien's Wisps did not tend to make it through more than a few ops, at best. And still, his employers kept sticking him with fresh meat. Wisps. The redshirts of the dream hacking world.

They all knew the risks, though, and apparently felt they were worth taking. He wasn't sure what kind of carrot or stick DreamOps within the intelligence branch of the Union of Democratic Countries (UDC) was using these days. He'd never asked, and Saif had never volunteered that information. Most didn't. Lorien wouldn't, if anyone had

asked. No one did though.

Looking back now, Lorien was surprised at how powerfully he felt the loss of Saif. Must be going soft, he thought. With each trainee, Lorien got a little bit better at preparing them, and they tended to last longer. Still, the eventual outcome was always more or less the same.

He always began with the history and theory, how the world they lived in was shaped by the unintended consequences of technological innovation. Specifically, how dreamtech had started with the space program, looking for ways to create an improved form of cryosleep so that they could colonize planets farther and farther from earth. Entrepreneurs had borrowed (or stolen) that tech to create home sleep chambers – perfect for the busy professional who wanted to maximize every waking moment. Just twenty minutes in the chamber was a full night sleep. Which naturally led to ten, then twelve, then fourteen-hour workdays. Productivity skyrocketed, the prices for sleep chambers dropped, and soon everyone had one.

But that was where the unanticipated consequences came in. After a few years, there was a noticeable spike in mental illness, psychosis, suicide, and so on. Turned out that twenty minutes in the chamber might have felt like a full and restful night sleep, but there was one tiny little problem: no dreams. You closed your eyes, dropped into a deep unconsciousness, opened your eyes, and kept going. But even if you felt refreshed physically, mentally something was missing, some critical nutrient was being lost. Dream Sickness, it was called, and it quickly came to have its own full chapter in the DSM-XII.

Leave it to an entrepreneur to solve the problem created by another

entrepreneur (while managing to spawn yet more problems for someone else to address). Lorien and others started recording and programming dreams.

“Wait up,” Saif had interrupted. “As in, you were one of the original dreamdevs?”

“Yeah,” Lorien had admitted. “I was.” Until the bomb went off.

At first the dreams they programmed were uncomfortable, glitchy things that felt like a cross between being unexpectedly cast in a foreign film and being subjected to someone else’s fever dream. But they got better, smoother. Eventually governments created standards and requirements. And true to the endless cycle of human advancement, this solution spawned yet a whole new slew of problems. This time it was good, old-fashioned crime—a black market for every flavor of warped fantasy that would never receive approval. Without the same quality control, you could catch a corrupt dream, one in which you understood everything even though all the dialog was in Chirean or Russostani. But sometimes what happened was more subtle, and far more insidious.

There were really only two kinds of dreamhacking: through windows and through gateways. Windows allowed a hacker (or a Morph, as they were called) to look through, scan, and steal data like shameful moments for blackmail, trade secrets, classified military information, and the like. Gateways let Morphs physically commandeer a sleeping body. Though the control that gateways provided over a sleeping body only lasted for a minute or two at most, that was time enough to have some elected official speak a coded word or message during a press conference (which had happened at least twice that Lorien knew about). Dreamhacking in all its forms was immediately outlawed everywhere, which did nothing to stop it. So, intelligence agencies and private security businesses got more proactive about prevention. They “employed” (read as captured, tortured, flipped) Morphs to go after their criminal colleagues.

“The ones like me,” Lorien had told Saif, “who hunt down Morphs,

we’re called Wraiths. And the ones like you, who want to be one of the ones like me, you’re called a Wisp.”

“Oh, wow,” Saif had responded. “So, what, you’re like teaching me the art of boring people to death with shit that everybody already knows? Color me impressed,” he yawned.

Saif had been a smartass, which Lorien took as a promising sign. There had been legitimate if brief and dim flickers of interest in Saif’s eyes that first week, going through the whole long backstory, but he was young and impatient. Listening to Lorien drone on about “the old days” was about as exciting as sitting through a sixty-hour seminar on the causes of the second civil war. Saif was itching to get on to the exciting stuff, the tactics and tradecraft and simulations.

Still, Lorien had anticipated the moment that his pupil would begin to mouth off. He switched the view on a screen to what they called the farm—endless rows of beds in which former Wraiths and Wisps were hooked up to various monitors and life support systems. Some twitched, muttered and moaned, locked in the endlessly changing not-so-much-funhouse corridors of their own dreams and nightmares. Others just stared vacantly at the ceiling, their brains permanently fried. The list of ways one could end up a vegetable were too numerous to count, and ever increasing. Faulty chambers or rigs, poison apple coded dreams, and, of course, being unprepared for conflict with a Morph.

“Oh, look—they have a vacancy. See that empty rig way back there?” Lorien tapped the screen. “That one’s got your name on it. You want it?”

“Fuck no!”

“Good. Then pay attention.”

Fear never failed to motivate, and Saif was a quick study. Arrogant (God, weren’t they all anymore?), but sharp. He whizzed through

strategy in six months, then it was into tactics. They dreamswapped and trained in each other's internal terrain until they knew every square inch of it like their own. Lorien poked and prodded at every potential fear and insecurity, every imaginable scenario, pummeling Saif with everything he could pry lose from the darkest folds of the kid's psyche. And Saif studied Lorien like the mirror reflection he was to become. Of course, anyone could be made to look like anyone else, but if Saif was going to convince anyone that he was Lorien, he had to play the part hard enough to win an Academy Award. This meant knowing the things that made him react, even with the faintest smile or cringe, the way he walked (slightly hunched over, hands in pockets, maybe just a barely perceptible hint of swagger on the rare occasions when someone recognized him).

Once Saif could hold his own and do a passable impression of Lorien, they began tandem dreaming, connected by a livelink while their non-dreaming monitors watched over them. Lorien rode shotgun, speaking through Saif's mouth and maneuvering his body until Saif could anticipate his words and moves before he made them. With tandem dreaming, it was all about matching reactions in extent and duration. More than the smallest difference could cause a small glitch, something that most sleeping dreamers would never notice. But any halfway competent Morph would spot it like a blinking neon sign. A dead giveaway.

They trained until the line between one another became blurry, in both the dreaming and waking world. They were each assigned a pair of monitors who would be with them while they went under. The monitors combined two key skillsets—that of real-time data analysts, tracking, reviewing, and responding to anything and everything that Lorien and Saif experienced in the dreamworld; and that of paramedics, in the event that things went sideways in some way that endangered the dreamers' physical bodies. Things went sideways a good bit more often than most recruitment sites and brochures were comfortable talking about. Especially when it came to working with Wraiths, like Lorien.

Lorien returned to himself and checked the timer. Twenty minutes to

go, and then he'd be out of the cool down period, when it would be safe to climb back into one of his homemade dreams. He imagined the feeling of his son's spiked up hair between his fingers, and he ran a hand over his head. His wife's hand clasped in his. Pale sunlight making him squint, turning the streets of New Milan into a warm ambient whiteout. The simple pleasure of being with Halia and Finn, of having a family. Back when he did.

As he replayed things in his head, Lorien had been doodling on a piece of paper. Weird, zig-zag patterns that wouldn't have meant anything to anyone who hadn't seen Feynman diagrams before. It was all he could think of since the last op, but he had to be careful. This sheet he did not crumple up into a ball like the others. This one he took over to the stovetop and burned. Just because you're paranoid, he said to himself, doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

Like subatomic particles in a theoretical physics equation, Lorien's thoughts shifted direction again from present to past. One day, after he'd been training with Saif for a few months, Lorien found director Reichenback waiting for him. The director looked exactly like what he was, a man tasked with winning multiple simultaneous chess games played in the dark. "Is he ready?"

"Nope." Lorien believed in giving honest assessments.

"New assignment came in today. Somebody you know," the director informed him. "You have two weeks. Make him ready."

The following morning Saif and Lorien were called into the conference room. There with them were their two pairs of monitors, a couple higher-level intelligence types, and the director. Dossiers were passed around as the director started talking.

"As you all know, over the last six months there've been a series of very ballsy, high-profile military and scientific facilities attacked. None of the typical groups have claimed credit. What they're after hasn't been the usual financial and government data. They've been

taking weird shit,” he looked directly at Lorien as he said that, as if he were personally responsible for all weird shit globally. Lorien took it as an unintended compliment. “Particle accelerator schematics, experimental physics lab equipment, things that make the folks above me get twitchy. We don’t know who’s behind it, but we’ve been listening to the chatter in both the dream and waking worlds. We believe that this individual is involved.”

Lorien flipped open the folder and stared into a familiar face.

“Anand Khayal Agarwal, alias Anon-C, alias Trickster, alias...” The director continued to rattle off a list of names, but Lorien had stopped listening. Anand would always be just “Tricks” to him. They had spent a good four years, on and off, working together on projects when dream development was still the new new thing. Other than Lorien himself, as far as he knew, Tricks was the last of the old school devs still active. Well, maybe one other, but that was only whispers and rumors. He tuned back into the briefing.

“Thirty-nine years old, last employed by the New Mongolian Empire.” Lorien continued to flip through the pages, and then he stopped cold on a piece of information that was news to him.

“Wait, he’s dying?” Lorien raised a burn-scarred hand and interrupted.

“We’re coming to that, but yes. As near as we can tell from what medical and prescription data we have, we believe he has glioblastoma multiform. Likely just months left, if even that.” Then, as a veiled swipe at Lorien, he added, “Quite possibly the result of continuous exposure to experimental dream tech.”

Reading the genuine surprise and sadness on Lorien’s face, the director changed his tone. “You two were close? What can you tell us about him?”

Lorien nodded, noticing that Saif was appraising him with a newfound respect. Admiration, maybe. “He was good. He and I are probably the

last ones still out there doing ops. He’s an old school guy, into games, uber clever. He kept a pet spider that always creeped me out. He was big into history too, mostly prewar North America. Oh, he’s a genexiphile.”

“Genexiphile?” Saif asked.

“Yeah,” Lorien continued. “Everything Gen X. Anything from the 1980s and 1990s. That was his thing.”

“Well,” the director said, “he’s reached out to us. Asked for you specifically, Lorien. Alone. If he thinks you’re riding shotgun on anyone,” he turned his steel eyes on Saif, “things will go badly. He wants to meet in neutral territory, so you and Saif start running scenarios for a meeting in Interzone.”

They all stood up to leave.

“Don’t fuck this up please,” the director said, more as a plea than a jab.

* * *

Ten minutes left on the timer. Lorien had continued to scribble while he thought back through the meeting with Anand. He inspected his own scribbles more closely and realized they weren’t just meaningless looping doodles, but rather one word written over and over.

Thule.

He ran a scarred hand, short two fingers, through the hair that still grew from patches between the burned-smooth mounds on his head. His once-good looks had been the least of what the car bomb had cost him. In just ten minutes though, he’d be reunited with his wife and son. He always started with the same scenario—the one in which they decided not to get into the car after lunch but went for a walk instead. From there he would launch into one of a thousand different scenarios that never happened—seeing his son’s high school and college gradu-

ation, vacations he never took with his wife, the two-story house set far off from civilization, in which they hadn't lived and grown old together.

Lately he'd been focused on not just programming and indulging in such unmade memories, but rather how the dreams could be transmitted across what he'd assumed until just recently was an unbridgeable gulf. Now though, with what Anand had told him, maybe not so impossible ...

Anand. The room dissolved around him again and he was back in his memories, taking Saif into danger he could never have been adequately prepared for, no matter how long and deep they trained together.

* * *

The day of the meet, they had entered Interzone as one, Saif doing the walking and talking with Lorien driving behind the scenes.

Interzone was the seedy, liminal world born in the cracks between approved dreams. It was the dreamworld's own dark web, where neither the laws of governments nor those of physics applied. The section that Lorien and Saif entered appeared to be some crumbling, partially ruined combination of Madrid, Tokyo, and maybe Upper Detroit. It was a sprawling and constant street fair. Vendors whispered and shouted their wares from miniature castles, pillow forts, renaissance fair wooden booths strung with bright banners, shipping containers. They walked past a clown and a mutant strongman in a leather harness taking turns smacking themselves in the face with a mallet to the cheers of the onlookers who ringed them.

Digital billboards and holographic projections flashed and flicked. Vendors pitched them every form of illicit dream as they walked on.

"Want to fuck a celebrity? Want to be a celebrity ... chased down and torn apart by wild dogs?"

"Bodymods. Get your body made of Lego. Made of Eggos. Photons. Seafoam. Silicone. Sand ..."

"Want to be a Birkenau prison guard? See the new world as a conquistador alongside Cortez? Bondage. Rough Trade. You name it. Three for the price of two. If you can dream it, I can deal it. And if I can deal it, you can dream it ..."

"Visit Narnia, Hogwarts, Atlantis, Fillory, Norrath, Uqbar, ancient civilizations, alien civilizations, Knowwhere, Neverwhere, Everville, anywhere ..."

"Whips and chains more your speed? Got just the thing for you. Take a cruise through the ancient Americas along the middle passage ..."

Lorien and Saif paused in front of a mirror, examining the body they were sharing. Lorien cringed at the sight of himself. Even with a hat and a long-sleeved jacket, he was a monster, burns coving nearly eighty percent of his body. Transformed far deeper than his physical body.

They continued and turned off the main thoroughfare and down a narrow alleyway, the walls of which had been layered over again and again by graffiti murals and tags. Lorien almost missed it, a hyperrealistic black and white spiderweb strung from the corners of several different spraypainted letters and images. It looked like a large black widow with the red hourglass on its abdomen replaced by the letter "C."

"Stay sharp, we're getting close now," Lorien said to Saif and by extension to the monitors in the room with their bodies.

When he looked back at the spiderweb, it was empty. The spider had crawled off somewhere.

The alley opened up into a small park. Under a stunted, blackened tree, a grey-bearded man in a patched and faded purple bathrobe

called to them. “Greatest moments in human history. Relive any time, any place.”

“That’s our guy,” Lorien said.

They approached the unshaved, potbellied purveyor of dreams as he puffed on a cigar. He stared at Lorien, probably running a quick scan, and smiled. “Got something special for you,” he said, reaching into the folds of his robe. Saif tensed, unaccustomed to this sort of exchange outside of controlled test environments.

“Easy,” Lorien cautioned.

The man pulled out an antique plastic DVD case, the front of which advertised the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. They nodded as one body and went over to a sad-looking green bench. The paint was peeling away, and the wood underneath was in an advanced state of rot in places.

It was time to test some new tech.

They had been given a new tracking code in the form of a clear spray. Saif sprayed it a few times on the bench before setting the DVD case down on top of it. Whatever touched the spray could be tracked through Interzone, so if Anand got spooked and took off, they could follow him.

They sat down and waited, expecting someone to approach, see the DVD case, and take a seat at the other end of the bench. But that wasn’t how it happened.

The DVD case rattled and bounced a few times, then came to a stop and flipped open. No DVD inside, just a square pit of writhing black shadows. From over the edge of the case, a thin black arachnid leg extended. It hung there hesitantly, teasing the air as if asking, “Is it safe?”. Deciding that it was, it climbed over to the space on the other end of the bench and pulled its legs in tight. Behind it first a trickle, then a torrent of other arachnids of all shapes and sizes followed,

some smaller than a fingernail, others as large as a fist. They all climbed atop one another, fusing until no space remained between their bodies and they assumed a human form that Lorien recognized. Of course, it had two extra sets of arms. Once the figure had completely assembled itself, it opened its yellow eyes and gave a broad smile with bright white teeth.

“What’s up Luzor? Been a minute.”

Luzor (loser) had been Anand’s snarky version of Lorien’s old handle, Luzifire, from the time when they had worked side by side. When Lorien had the luxury of youthful arrogance, thinking that it would be illumination he brought to the world and those he loved. Instead he’d brought them all something else.

“Tricks,” Lorien acknowledged in kind.

Anand paused and waited for something. Finally, he fished for the compliment he wouldn’t get otherwise. “Dude, just once can you say something like, awesome coding man! Radical entrance!”

Lorien chuckled. “It’s solid coding. Smooth. Very impressive. But you know how I feel about spiders.”

“I know, I know. Nobody likes spiders anymore.”

“You look good though,” Lorien lied. Anand’s body seemed to have shrunk; his eyes were sunken too far into his skull, skin pulled too tight over his bones.

“Yeah, for a dead man, I guess.” He sighed. “Half the governments still functioning are on my ass. Between you and me though, I’m betting the brain cancer gets me first.”

So, Lorien thought, it’s true. What he read in the file.

“I thought you were working for the NME. Can’t they do anything to

help?”

“What, the Mongols? Nah, that’s over anyway. It was only ever a means to an end.” He leaned in conspiratorially close. “I’ve been working with Thule on something big. Feynman diagram type shit.”

Lorien took in the information like a mental one-two punch. Saif had no idea of the significance of what he’d just heard, and the monitors back at the bunker were probably puzzling over the sudden spike in his heart rate. Keep it together, he thought, taking deep, slow breaths.

Ultima Thule. That was a name he didn’t expect to hear. And it wasn’t even the part about what Anand had said that blew his mind most.

“Bullshit,” he said. “Thule’s dead.”

“Nah, it’s been lying low. But it’s alive.”

“She, you mean. She’s alive.”

“You know, we are just never going to agree on this, are we?”

* * *

Thule had been there at the beginning, showing all the rest of the first wave of dreamdevs how to transform their ideas into reality. Providing schematics for the hardware, writing the language for dream coding, building the testing environments. The first handful of devs might have been smart, maybe gifted, some of them, but Thule was in a class alone. A pioneer among pioneers, pushing the boundaries and forging a path ever farther into the unknown. Thule was the only one Lorien had ever heard of who was so outrageously talented that they could actually code and hack dreams from within their own. That was the legend, anyway.

And from the outset, it seemed that Thule had seen and anticipated everything that would unfold. The value in dreams—enough to build em-

pires, enough to kill for and wage covert wars over. Certainly enough to blow up a car with a husband-and-wife team of developers and their young son who were planning to release all of their tools and data to the public—to opensource dream development.

While some of the developers hungered for the spotlight, Thule remained cloaked in shadow, maintaining obsessive anonymity. What seemed like laughably insane paranoia to a group of young punks out to change the world was retrospectively nothing short of oracular.

No one had ever met Thule in person, and Thule only ever communicated via a secure dreamspace the devs had set up, and even there mostly just through text or through a voice modulator tweaked to sound like the one Stephen Hawking had used. Since Thule had never actually been seen, predictably everyone had their own idea about who or what was behind the name.

Anand was convinced that Thule was actually a highly-evolved, neuroadaptive AI program, hence the reason that no one had, or could, ever meet Thule in person. Based on his assumption, he assigned Thule the pronoun “it.”

Lorien, however, had a different idea. He always felt in his gut that Thule was a woman—possibly because whenever he had been confronted by what he considered an unquestionably greater intelligence than his own, it had turned out to be female. His wife in particular.

He hadn’t communicated much with Thule, but he always recalled one brief exchange, in which Thule had asserted confidently that no one on earth at the time could possibly find her sleeping body. Coming from anyone else, Lorien would have taken that comment as bragging, but Thule had never exhibited a hint of ego (one more reason Anand was sold on the idea that Thule wasn’t human), so he reasoned it had to be literal. No one on earth. An idea came to him then, something so far-fetched as to be just barely this side of impossible: What if Thule wasn’t on Earth at all? What if Thule was in deep cryo, packed in among hundreds of others like sleeping sardines, on board one of the

“icebox” ships heading for a new and distant planet to populate? With nothing but time and access to dreams from a top-shelf sleep chamber. That such a thing would push the limit of what was imaginable felt right, somehow, for Thule.

* * *

“If you’re working with Thule, you’ll need to prove that to me,” Lorien challenged Anand.

“Funny thing, Thule said you’d say that. Here,” he handed Lorien and Saif a folded piece of paper. “You know, it’s weird, you kind of sound like it sometimes.”

“What, like Thule, you mean?”

“Yeah ... I never noticed that before.”

Saif began unfolding the paper in the hands he shared with Lorien.

“Wait,” Lorien screamed silently, “Don’t open it!”

Too late.

The crudely drawn image was of a car exploding with a comic book–style “Boom” in the center of it.

Saif didn’t react strongly enough, whereas Lorien’s blood pressure and heart rate shot upwards. As intended, it was enough to momentarily separate Lorien and Saif—a ghostly outline image of Lorien appeared superimposed over his own dream body, which Saif currently occupied.

“We’ve been made,” Lorien groaned out loud in the room where his monitors watched over him.

At the same time in Interzone, Lorien and Saif felt something clamp

around the neck they shared. Eight vicelike legs. A spider, ready to plant its fangs and god only knew what else into them.

Anand shook his head in disappointment. “I trusted you Luzor, I came out to meet you here, and this is how you show up? Riding shotgun in some newbie?”

Saif stared straight ahead. From the side of his face another set of eyes and mouth appeared, through which Lorien spoke directly. “Look, we go in pairs. You know that. Now let’s not do anything rash here, okay? I’m here, let’s talk.”

“Nah, I think we’re done talking. You want to talk, you come talk to me alone.”

“You know I can’t just leave my ...”

Lorien’s words were interrupted by a searing pain as the spider bit into him and Saif. He could feel the toxic code pouring into his Wisp and had no choice. Survival instincts kicked in, and he did the one thing he’d always trained his Wisps not to. He severed the cord, their livelink, and materialized separately in Interzone.

* * *

Back in the windowless room of a UDC bunker, where Lorien was in quasi sleep and Saif was all the way under, in some twitching, frothing meltdown, and their bodies were connected to displays and computers and each other by tangles of cords, one of two monitors assigned to Lorien sighed. “Strap in, here we go.”

“Oh no,” the other smacked his palms against his cheeks, mouth open in an “o” of mock disbelief. “Lorien’s severed the livelink to his Wisp. Whoever could have possibly anticipated that such a terrible and dangerous thing would happen. Again.”

They both chuckled at that one, then turned back to their respective

screens. The two monitors attached to Saif ignored the chatter from their peers, consumed as they were with trying to stabilize their Wisp until a crash cart came rolling in from the infirmary down the hall. Lorien's monitors, meanwhile continued to follow his fluctuating outputs, serotonin levels, respiration, pulse, eye movement, and other stats as he pursued his target through the nonsensically and impossibly designed labyrinth of Interzone.

* * *

Lorien looked at a streak of light that led away from the bench. The tracking code fluid had worked; he took off after the streak, winding his way through an abandoned brick building, then out into a hillside where an old man on horseback went charging full speed towards a windmill. Overhead three figures astride broomsticks twirled and looped through the air, narrowly averting collision with an elaborately decorated Victorian-styled steam-powered dirigible.

The streak wound back through one of the main streets of Interzone. Lorien rushed past vendor stalls, elbowed shoppers out of the way, and leapt at one point over some kind of prehistoric lizard. Overhead grey clouds let loose, and rain pelted him as he splashed through oily puddles that reflected neon lights and gothic castles.

The streak of pale light disappeared into another alley, and the alley terminated in a spiderweb, atop which was a giant spider. Lorien was caught off guard for a second before he realized the spider was just a carnival-style cutout. Between its two longest front legs, what he had taken at first for a web was actually a tunnel of mirrors angled in such a way to appear weblike. It was the opening to a funhouse mirror maze.

Spiders. Carnival funhouse mirror mazes. Fucking genexiphiles, he thought.

If Anand wanted to do this like it was the 1980s, Lorien would oblige him. He reached for his belt and drew from it a metallic cylinder. At

the touch of a button, a glowing red beam extended outward. He gave the lightsaber a twirl, feeling its satisfying weight in his hand. It hummed and wooshed appropriately. The rain was heavier now, the droplets sizzling and evaporating against his weapon as he entered the maze.

The corridor twisted and forked, throwing Lorien's own image back at him, twisted and distorted in a hundred different ways.

The tracking fluid was fading now, leaving him to find his own way through Anand's pre-programmed domain. Clearly he'd been planning this for some time.

Something leapt out to his left, and he swung his saber and sliced apart a dummy dressed up in a plaid shirt and hockey mask. A flicker of shadow caused him to jump to the right as one of the mirror images of himself swung its own saber for him. It drew sparks from the ground where he'd been standing a second before. He spun around, but his saber connected with nothing. Anand was already gone, deeper into his web.

He followed the prerecorded sound of demented clown laughter through the twists and turns, every so often striking and shattering one of the mirrors.

After a time, the hallway opened up into a round room, the walls paneled with full-length mirrors. Lorien saw himself distorted, elongated, shrunk, two- and three-headed. Dozens of arms, all flashing the same red lightsaber. He took a breath and remembered the most important thing he'd learned from his days of blind fighting. It wasn't about closing off to what appeared to be, but rather about opening up to what didn't. He inspected each mirror image of himself, top to bottom, found the one he was looking for, and then turned his back to it.

A quick three count, then he lifted his lightsaber as if to slash in front of him.

And instead plunged it directly behind him over his head, where it

made a series of crackling pops as it pierced through the plexus of his adversary.

“F-f-f-Fu-Fuck!” Anand stutter-screamed.

Lorien turned to face his old friend, held in place, suspended a full foot off the ground by the code imbedded in the tip of the blade. All six of Anand’s arms held glowing sabers, all just microseconds from having driven them into Lorien’s back. Lorien’s blade was only ever set to stun, to capture. He assumed that Anand’s were not.

A smile curled one side of Lorien’s mouth. With a few strokes he severed first the left and then the right three arms from Anand. The limbs fell in a heap. Then, with a swift spin, he separated the head from the neck.

Anand’s head rolled to a stop at his feet, looking upward. It blinked, and then spoke. “Come on now, was that really necessary?”

Lorien shrugged. “Nah. Just fun.” Realizing he was still being monitored, he kneeled beside the head and whispered to it, “Did you mean what you said before?”

“About Thule? And the Feyn ...”

Lorien pressed a finger to the lips. “Yeah, that.”

“Yes. What I said, it’s all true.”

Lorien nodded, opened the replay panel he’d tampered with weeks before, and deleted the last few seconds of dialog from any recording that his monitors or anyone else might ever find.

Feynman diagrams. What they’d theorized about all those many years ago. If that was true, then suddenly anything was possible, and everything had changed. Who other than Thule could even attempt to bend the rules of physics? That was intel he planned to keep to himself.

“Hey, Luz,” Anand’s head said from the floor.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, how did you know which one was me?”

“It was the shadows.”

“What? No way man. They were perfect! I coded and tested every single pixel and vector.”

“Oh, they were. The shadows were perfect in every way.” Lorien grinned; it had been the sort of detail that only someone who knew Anand would even think to look for. “But only one of them had six arms.”

“Wait, what?” Then, after a brief pause, “Shit, I never thought about that.”

They both lapsed into silent reminiscence.

“What about the kid back there?”

“On the bench? Collateral damage. Sorry man, you know how it is.”

“Yeah, I figured.” It took some of the wind out of Lorien’s sails. The way he saw it, whether he’d done it directly or indirectly was just a matter of semantics. Either way, he was the reason another body would be plugged into a rig on the Farm.

“It’s been nice to see you one more time. I’m glad it was you they sent to bring me in. Feels right.”

“It does.”

Lorien looked at the severed head of his old friend and realized that he was trying to say goodbye. Had the cancer progressed that far, he

wondered. Or was it something else ...

“They’re good at tracing bodies from dreams. They’ll probably find you pretty soon, wherever you’re plugged in. You could make it go a little easier if you told us where ...”

“... Thanks but no thanks. I think I’ll make them work for it. I’ll enjoy the fireworks more that way,” he smiled.

Fireworks. Something else then. Lorien remembered how Anand had more than once talked about placing improvised proximity mines around his sleeping body so that he could never be captured in the waking world. It sounded to Lorien like he had made good on that threat.

If Lorien’s monitors were doing their jobs, paying attention to the dialog coming across their screens, digging for the meaning behind the words, they could figure it out and pass along a warning. He could do it himself, of course, but as he thought of Saif, convulsing, drooling on himself, eyes reflecting endless nothing, he decided that he wasn’t really in the mood to be of any more help to the UDC today.

“Will you wait with me?” Anand’s head asked him.

“Sure.”

And then, after what seemed like forever, Anand’s head, body, and fun-house all vanished in a blindingly bright flash of light. Lorien was back on the streets of Interzone, heading for an exit.

* * *

When they pulled Lorien out and he came to, the rig next to him, the one that had been Saif’s, was empty. His monitors administered a sedative, hoisted him out of the rig and into an ice bath, and then into a soft suit and a real bed, where he would rest. The postop, along with their litany of questions, would wait.

But then, as now, he had just two words playing endlessly through his mind.

Feynman diagrams.

That had been their code for it, back in the early days, when he and the rest of the old dreamdevs were first learning their way around terra incognita. When they weren’t sure what the limits of their new art was.

It had started with a conversation—one of them had been studying physics, trying to understand what dreams really were. Maybe it was Keisha, with her ubercool mirror shades and purple dreadlocks. Maybe it was Q, forever scratching at his painful-looking psoriatic skin rashes. Someone had mentioned how Feynman diagrams showed the path of subatomic particles not just forward in time, but also backwards. Which suggested that whatever didn’t adhere to Newtonian physics could, possibly, theoretically, travel backwards in time. And dreams—while they were born of Newton’s particles and waves, technically, weren’t they something different than either of those things?

Everyone had gone dead silent, coming to the same conclusion.

Did that mean dreams could be sent back in time?

No one had any idea how that would be accomplished, and what ensued was a six-hour, drug-fueled discussion and debate about time travel.

At the time Lorien had been concerned about all the implications, paradoxes, disruption of the fabric of reality, creating a world where history was as mutable and therefore meaningless as the future.

Now though, as he prepped himself for another round of dreams, he couldn’t even pretend to give a shit about any of the moral and philosophical implications. All that mattered was the idea that if a dream could be sent back in time, then the possibility of precognition existed. Somehow this could be done. Thule was probably already working out

the design of new rigs built for temporal dream transmission. And if any or all of this was real, then he could send himself a dream, a nightmare, an image of the explosion, a vision that would compel him and his wife and son to go for a walk or a bike ride. To do something, anything, other than open that car door.

Whatever else came along with it, he would accept the consequences. None of it mattered if he could change the outcome of that one event and have his family back.

No doubt back at the UDC offices, his monitors had already flagged for follow-up words and phrases like “Thule” and “Feynman diagrams.” He would have some difficult questions waiting for him when his leave was up.

He slipped back into his rig, lowered the lid, and felt himself going under with a name from another time resurrected on his lips.

* * *

The sun was casting pale light from behind the clouds, bathing the streets of New Milan in a white haze, like moving through a cloud. Halia there next to him as they approached the car. Lean, tan limbs emerging from her white liquid Kevlar vest and jeans that hugged her curves. Long brown hair parted over a small scar on her forehead from a motorcycle accident as a child. Glittering brown eyes hidden behind a pair of thin, wraparound Gucci Deus X mirrorshades. Her smile revealed the slightest gap between her top front teeth. Beautiful. Even better than perfect for those minor flaws.

Lorien had not bothered to mask his own disfigured form. He was wearing a Runner leather biker jacket of the type that had since become popular with the NME’s silicon horde and, for a season or two, with the members (and critics) of the Datamancer Art Collective.

It could have been the hundredth, the thousandth, the ten thousandth time he’d relived this moment. He didn’t know and didn’t care. All that

mattered was feeling this—the dream that had once been real. That maybe could be real again.

In this opening sequence, one of a dozen slightly different scenarios, Finn was absent, maybe with a sitter or playing with a friend. This particular version, involving only Lorien and Halia, opened up a vast range of pleasant directions in which the dream could go.

She reached for the door handle and Lorien seized up as he always did.

“Let’s walk,” he suggested, giving her hand a squeeze.

“Because if I open it,” she smiled, “it unleashes a fiery inferno that sears half the features off your face and blows me to hell, right?”

Lorien froze. Of all the many outcomes he had accounted for, the one that had been painstakingly excluded was that any harm could come to her and Finn. Furthermore, Halia wasn’t supposed to be remotely cognizant that such a thing could occur. He had made it, literally, unthinkable. Had someone tampered with his code? Or worse yet ...

The world around and including him stopped, held suspended. A glitch? Jesus, was he glitching? It was always a risk with experimental dreamtech, though he disassembled and reassembled every hardware component, scanned and recompiled his code obsessively. It was such a stupidly easy way to end up in a bed on the Farm—locked inside your own head forever. Would that be poetic justice? Tucked in at the end of a row of too-familiar faces, while gazing helplessly at Halia forever?

“Relax, you’re not glitching,” a voice he recognized spoke into his ear.

With those words Lorien was freed from his paralysis, though his wife and the rest of the world remained paused. He turned in slow motion towards the speaker and found himself looking into his own face. A version of it, anyway. One that had hair laced through with silver, face carved into a subtle cutaneous map of crow’s feet and crevices. One

that had never been reshaped by fire.

As far as masks went, it was perfect.

“Damn, you’re handsome,” Lorien said. “But who, or what, is behind the disguise?”

“I think you already know,” his dream doppelgänger replied.

“Thule.”

His double nodded. “We weren’t always called that, of course.”

“You’re saying, what, no mask? That I ... that you? We ...?”

“One and the same. Of course, I am a little bit better looking.”

Lorien’s mind reeled. Was he, could he become, Thule? His mind’s fingers fumbled their way around this information. It could just be a trick, some hotshot Morph out to make his bones, using Lorien’s own thoughts against him. Something Anand had planted, maybe.

“Prove it then. Something only we, only I, could know.”

“What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness, and say to you, ‘this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more’?”

Lorien recognized it as Nietzsche’s quote about eternal return. Ever since the car bomb, it played on a background loop in his head. He thought about it all the time.

“Nietzsche’s eternal return,” Thule said, echoing Lorien’s thoughts. “We think about that all the time.”

It took a beat for Lorien to realize his mouth was agape. “Okay, okay,

let’s say I believe you, that you and I, that we’re really the same. Isn’t being here, talking to each other, ourselves, some kind of paradox?”

“Conveniently, it turns out that dreams are exempt from that. Sort of. It’s tricky, but I’ll show you the way. All you have to do is take my hand and let me in.”

“Let you in ... what, as a hitchhiker in my head? Are you joking? Um, yeah, I’ll take a hard pass on that, thanks. No way that’s happening.”

“We did say that we would do anything, right? Absolutely anything to get our family back, didn’t we?”

Lorien clenched and unclenched his fists and chewed on one scarred corner of his lower lip.

“And that ... can really happen?”

“That and so much more.” Thule smiled, backed away a step, and extended his hand. “But we’ve got a shit ton of work to do, and it has to start right now.”

Lorien looked over at the frozen facsimile of his dead wife.

Thule’s hand hung in the air between the two men who might be one.

“Come on. Don’t you trust yourself?” Thule asked.

Lorien thought of row after row of occupied beds at the Farm. Saif and all the other Wisps that he had planted there, directly or indirectly. Every single one of them had misplaced their trust in him. So, no, he did not trust himself. Not at all.

Thule’s smile was wearing thin. “Hmmm, okay, I get it. We’re maybe a little bit more damaged than I remember. But this is it, this is the one way I know to get us back what we lost. So, I’m going to start walking and you can come with, or not ...”

Thule let his hand fall back to his side, spun around, and began sauntering off toward a partially designed side street.

“Damn it,” Lorien said under his breath, filled his eyes one more time with Halia, and took off after Thule. Together they navigated a maze of alleys, based on maps of New Milan, as the buildings around them became less corporeal, dissolving into partially rendered transparencies and wireframes.

“What about the director?” Lorien asked.

“Reichenbach? He’s not our enemy. He’s not exactly our friend, either. Think of him as a neutral party. Better yet, think of him the way he thinks of us, as a very powerful tool that should be used only with extreme caution. Actually, we’re going to need him, or more specifically, a certain file he has ...”

Lorien stopped short. “And there it is folks. The ask. ‘Just this one little thing,’ right? And just like that, I take my first step down the road to supervillainy ...”

Thule exhaled, no longer bothering to hide his exasperation. “A bit melodramatic, don’t you think? Let me ask you this, why do think we need that file? What’s in it?”

Lorien shrugged.

“It’s the location of a classified facility where the UDC will be constructing an experimental rig with a prototype temporal chipset.”

“And that’ll work?”

“It will for us.”

They continued walking until they reached a mirrored door set into an invisible wall, one that Lorien had never fully coded.

“Decision time,” Thule said and tapped the door’s mirrored surface. From where his fingertip landed, ripples spread across the door as if it was a pool of mercury suspended sideways in defiance of gravity. He held his other hand out towards Lorien. “The only way through is together.”

The hesitation was gone, and Lorien wondered briefly how many different ways and times he had already lost this debate with himself. He reached out, clasped hands with who he would become, and together they stepped through the illusion.

The mirror spit them out into a long, dimly lit hallway, sloping and curving, the walls all shards of mirrors fit together like cyclopean masonry. Far above, the sky itself was mirrored, and he watched himself and Thule progress, side by side, like twin subatomic particles through a strange, looping design that he recognized as one of Feynman’s diagrams.

“What the hell is this place?”

“You like it?” Thule said from up ahead. “We’ll build it together over the next few years. Turns out that inside the dreamshrine we built to our dead family is the absolute perfect place to hide something more ...”

“... nefarious?” Lorien offered.

“I was going to say extraordinary. You know, you’ve really got to stop thinking of our future in terms of criminality.”

Lorien said nothing. His head was spinning as he fought blindly not to drown in this fathomless new sea of cold shadow and incongruous data.

The hallway reminded him of the fun house into which he had not long ago followed Anand. Had Anand been inspired by this same hallway?

Which, if built by Lorien/Thule, must have been previously inspired by Anand's funhouse? It was exactly the sort of temporal paradox he hated, the kind that was sure to produce a catastrophic migraine if he thought about it too much.

And then, up ahead, he heard Thule start whistling something he recognized. It conjured images of Gene Wilder in a top hat and a plum-colored jacket, singing:

"... Come with me, and you'll be

In a world of pure imagination ..."

He shook his head as the corners of his ruined lips curved up into the most minimally perceptible hint of a smile.

"Fucking genexiphiles."

Let the net grow far and deep

by Marisca Pichette

we find it warm, here.

here, there are toxins
pass them back to lines of strength.
wet, so wet here.

here, a barrier. how to pass?

answer: shuffling genes and
there—enzymatic success.

you are wide as we?

wet

harsh
food from us

some will die.
tangling you to we to

more

we feel:

at night we rise,
and seek

and

warm

between

them

more

challenge.

more.

release our spores to seek

seek the soil
again.

we find it cold, here.

dry here. push farther—

wait and wait and wait for

we begin our journey through.
you.

entangle with ourselves and we
can share what we have
you have found:
dry

cold

from lives above,

some survive

you feel:

on

on

on.

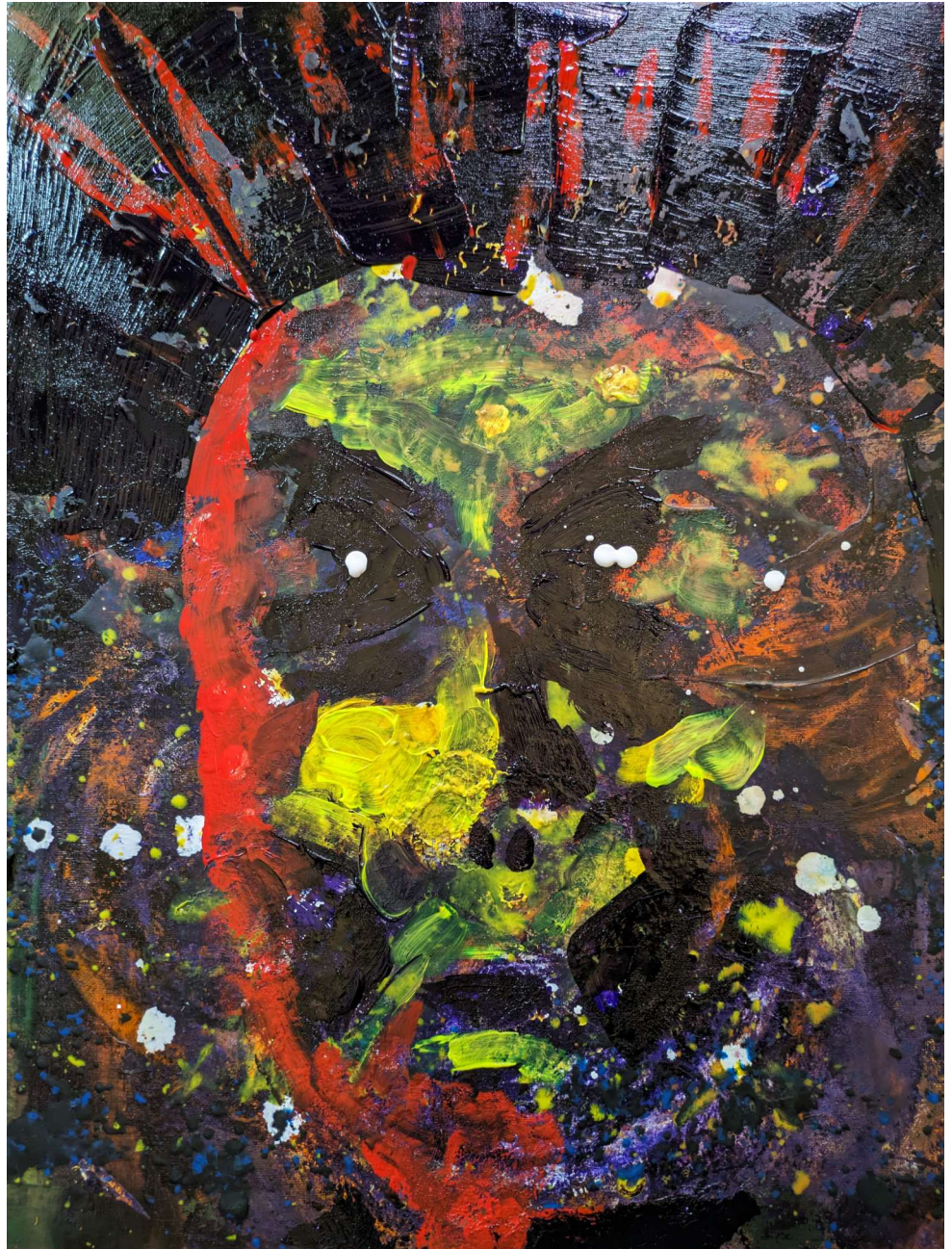
Collision Course

by Lydia O'Donnell

Untethered
space-time's silk tides
tow me, drift me further from every
harbor but yours, closing in at midnight
When I look between my arms I see you, Andromeda
a moth drifting towards my scintillations,
every grain of my forgotten dust
Arms reaching closer
to me
On collision day
The tips of your fingers
will take mine
pressing prints into
gravity together
rippling waves so
brilliant
deep-sea entwined
A shimmer of dust is all
that's left of before, but our hearts collide
into a greater collapse, a nothingness doubled
Shock waves leave puddles of stellar blood
but how beautiful is our
running-away-blue
adrift together

psychonaut

by Garth Upshaw



Arean Afterlife

by Mary Jo Rabe

Glob the organizer pulled themselves together—literally. Somewhat reluctantly, he sent out pulsations of a wail summoning any like-minded component entities wafting in the wispy Martian wind. He long since preferred sailing alone around his beloved, red planet in the mobile, ghostly afterlife of the microbe he had once been.

While he occasionally missed his previous one-celled life on the wet and wild Arean surface, he loved this refreshing frosty solitude, the way the pale, pink sun fought its way through the thin, dusty, carbon dioxide air. Most of all he loved the effect the dust had on him, giving his ghostly substance feelings of strength and euphoria. As a dust-permeated ghost, he sensed a million comforting shades of pinkish orange, all intertwined, merging and blending with each other. Their reliability soothed his anxieties when erratic plumes of methane bumped him off his intended course.

The cold that had killed his previous self was all-pervasive, but it empowered and steeled his ghostly resolve, night temperatures when the carbon dioxide dropped out of the atmosphere as mischievous snowflakes being conducive to reflective thought. There were many advantages to being dead, as contrasted with living as a fragile, single microorganism joined together in the unified mega-creature that had been but one part of the planet Mars.

The dust made him appreciate the radiation he had never noticed as a wet microbe. Gamma ray bursts tickled the fringes of his phantom boundaries. Cosmic rays energized him, sent him on a roller coaster ride racing around the planet. Nothing gave him a bigger thrill than buzzing Olympus Mons or diving into the depths of the Valles Marineris. Solar energetic particles induced an almost embarrassing

pantheistic passion, making him love the whole universe.

In death and covered lightly with dust, Glob had always been comforted by the hush of the Martian surface, the soft sounds of ethereal wind and dust scratching the red rocks, the occasional low groan of marsquakes deep below. As a dusty ghost, he felt vibrations he had never noticed in his living form. Regular, recurring tremors from the planet's core put him to sleep, and surprise noises from meteorite impacts jolted him into a state of enhanced awareness, not necessarily unpleasant, but occasionally tiring.

In any case, now it was once again time to abandon his unencumbered single state and reassemble, hoping to attract congenial entities for his determined course. Unfortunately, he couldn't accomplish everything alone. Only millions of ghostly microbes joined together possessed heightened powers. More importantly, Glob often still simply enjoyed the company.

A ghostly form outlined by the electrostatic, caustic, reddish dust gradually drew itself together, but ever since that asteroid Armageddon billions of years ago, the now living-dead Martian life forms had the luxury of taking their sweet, Arean time. Once you were dead anyway, there was no reason to hurry anything. Plus, the dust covering millions of entangled ghostly microbes induced considerably more intense feelings than the dust over one lonely ghost.

For activities as an astral composite, Glob preferred the one-celled microbe shape of his previous life. However, guiding the herd as a composite ghost he had learned to consent to the majority of entities who answered his call to join up when it came to appearances.

Oops, he had picked up Stonk with the smell fetish again. Even way back as a life-form Stonk had been one pain in the protoplasm. As usual, he would probably insist on their assuming the spectral form of a shape-shifting dust devil that stirred up the sand every time it hit the ground, dust alone never being enough for him.

Stonk would never learn to show any consideration for the desires of others, and as of this point in millennia Glob didn't want to be bothered with trivialities. Another infernal, soulless machine had disturbed their frozen paradise, ugly, metal monstrosities all of them. Glob couldn't take any more. Enough was enough, and it was time for action, if not by all the Martian ghosts he could persuade to assemble, then alone.

The living microbes hadn't appreciated the marauding asteroid poundings at the time. After all, they killed what had been successful and joyous life forms, sent their watery home down to the planetary core, and left their previously fertile world a frozen, barren land. To their surprise though, those microbes had then discovered a new kind of existence after death. Billions of years of experience showed the living-dead microbes the pleasures of non-corporeality, especially freedom from the restrictions of their previously fragile bodies and covered with euphoria-inducing dust.

Alone or assembled together, the ghosts were indestructible and long since united with the planet, though unlike before. As ghosts, they noticed the newest invasions just like the planet did. Glob groaned after every impact, shuddered with every vibration from spinning wheels, from every forced penetration by sharp instruments.

The impact of asteroids or meteorites was always a one-time event that the ghost microbes could endure and recover from. These new metal machines were a never-ending annoyance, with their scratching violations of the planet's surface. Just thinking about these alien constructs made Glob itch.

Glob couldn't endure the spectacle of ugly, gray, foreign structures anymore, metal that never was and never would be part of the planet.

Abomination!

Glob noted gratefully that several million former microbes had now joined together under his leadership, as had often been the case in the past. He sensed that other ghosts were also forming, probably organized by microbes who weren't on his wavelength. A row of tall, reddish apparitions now stood on the frozen slopes of sand. One of them, with the general shape of Ascræus Mons, quavered in the wind.

"What is the crisis this time?" Nem transmitted an impatient thought in Glob's direction. Glob noted that Nem's mass was definitely smaller than his. No wonder that reassembled ghost felt the need to take the shape of a mountain. He could obviously no longer command the loyalty and popularity he once enjoyed. And there only seemed to be nine ghosts altogether instead of the twenty they had once been. Well, there was nothing Glob could do about apathy.

"We have to do something about the invaders," he transmitted back angrily, trying to ignore the entities that were suddenly abandoning him, even though their loss made him feel queasy. Typical for immature ghosts. Billions of years of existence and they still dashed off like errant DNA strands every time there was work to do.

The Ascræus Mons ghost shrugged as the dust rose slightly in the thin air before falling back down. "We're ghosts; what do you expect us to do with alien lumps of metal that fall out of the sky? And why should we do anything at all?"

Glob's rage shook his dust devil form. "They're ruining the planet. We can do all kinds of things. We can whip up the winds and bury the structures in the sand. We can urge the planet to open up and swallow each new invader; we can unite all our forces and send a telepathic command to get whoever is sending them to stop."

A third ghostly form shook and dissipated, but not before transmitting: "You're an idiot, Glob. We can ignore the occasional garbage dump from another planet. Why should we provoke them into sending even

more invaders?"

Glob tried to control his frustration; he didn't want all the component microbes he had assembled into his ghostly form to flee. Although he hated to admit it, there was a certain strength and stability in numbers. "These metal monstrosities are destroying our home. I can't stand seeing them; I can't stand hearing them; I can't stand running into them. They don't belong here. We have to get rid of the pests we already have and make sure that no new ones come."

The row of apparitions melted away quickly. Soon only Nem with his fake Ascreus Mons shape remained. "Hey, Glob, give it up," Nem called. "Why can't you just ignore a few pieces of useless garbage? Mars is big enough; you can just disregard the little invaders."

"You don't understand," Glob insisted. "I know they are there; their presence invades my feelings; it affects everything I do; it diminishes the pleasure I get from the dust. No matter where I go, the objects are in my way. These unnatural monstrosities destroy the harmony between the planet and the ghosts whose living cells were once part of it."

"It sounds like these inanimate objects are haunting you," Rem shook with amusement. "You got it backwards. You're the ghost; you should be haunting the machines, not the other way around."

"You don't understand," Glob said. "I can't take it here anymore with these, these abominations!"

"Well," Rem paused. "My guess is that they will keep coming. So either you get used to them or leave. But do you really want to give up your home of billions of years just because of a minor annoyance?"

Glob reflected as the other ghostly microbes dissipated. Later, having given it enough thought, he called for an assembly of all microbes, adding that he had come to a decision and needed their help. Since the microbes had been a fairly tolerant and congenial lot in life, this time

they all showed up and assembled into a group of twenty ghosts, each one a copy of the dust devil form.

Glob began, "I've given it some thought, and have decided that Rem is right. I can't stand it here anymore with the metal invaders, they aren't going to disappear, you won't help me get rid of them, and so I have to leave. I need your help to propel me to Phobos from the top of Olympus Mons. Together we can absorb enough radiation to give me the necessary momentum."

Rem shook his composite shape. "Isn't that like cutting out your nucleus to spite your membrane? A few pieces of trash in the sand and you want to leave your home and your friends?"

Glob answered, "The trash has ruined my home, and everything has changed. I have to leave."

Rem said, "Aren't you forgetting that we owe our ghostly existence to the fact that things changed pretty suddenly a few billion years ago? Things always change."

Glob insisted, "I can't live with these changes. Will you help me get to Phobos or not?"

"If you're sure," Rem said. "We can propel you there, but we can't get you back. You'll be all alone on that potato-shaped excuse for a moon for who knows how long. Is it really worth losing connection with all of us just to get away from these few rubbish heaps?"

"Haven't you noticed?" Glob asked. "For the last billion years or so we've assembled less and less often into mega-ghosts. I think we're all slowly turning into one-celled hermit ghosts, me just faster than the rest of you. I want to leave, and I want to leave now."

"It's your ghostly existence," Rem conceded.

Slowly all the ghosts coalesced, creating one gigantic apparition that

floated up the Olympus Mons. Eventually a wayward gamma ray burst provided the energy necessary to push Glob into the path of the closest moon, where he landed shortly thereafter.

To his relief he could no longer sense the metal invaders. Phobos was completely silent. However, Phobos turned out to be a monotonous place, no atmosphere and so no wind, no planetary core and so no quakes. Worst of all, there was no pleasure-inducing dust. The moon was just a lonely pile of rubble with no personality, no irritations, and nothing of interest.

Glob quickly learned what boredom meant. He felt nothing. He could fly around the moon in a matter of seconds, and it always looked the same. There were no mountains, no gorges, and no thick sheets of carbon dioxide ice to slide down. The rocks stayed gray, and the sky stayed black, hour after hour, year after year. There was no planetary core, no movement of areomorphic layers of rocks beneath the surface. Without the dust, he couldn't feel the moon at all.

After a while, Glob quit exploring. He decided to accept his solitary refuge, never allowing himself to regret the lack of contact with his ghostly microbe friends on Mars and the lack of heightened perception from the Martian dust. It was less a matter of pride than of giving in to a grim reality.

But as it turned out, his solitary seclusion was shorter than he expected. A sudden swarm of meteors slammed into Phobos and vastly increased its tidal deceleration. As a result, the impact of the pile of rubble that had once been Phobos created thousands of holes in the Martian surface and Glob was home again, unfortunately at the bottom of the Valles Marineris, immediately energized by the dust.

By the time he navigated his way up, taking several wrong turns through the randomly jutting rocks, Glob was overwhelmed and confused by sensations. Thousands of foreign metal objects clanked, thundered, and expelled electrical impulses. The vibrations seemed to emerge from all over the planet. One quick flight confirmed this suspi-

cion. Mars had become completely infested with the alien structures in an unreasonably short timeframe. The invaders climbed up the mountains, they dug their way down the crevices, and they stood on posts driven into the ice sheets at the poles.

Making a futile effort to shut out the dust-amplified sensations from the metal objects, Glob noticed communications he hadn't detected for billions of years. There were genuine, animate life-forms on the planet! And their telepathic noise was muffling the vibrations from the metal garbage. What on Mars ...

Glob sent out a call to his ghost microbe associates but had to wait an unaccustomed length of time for any replies. At this point he had to admit to himself how much he missed his friends, missed assembling with random groups of ghostly microbes. Together they were always more than he was alone, even if he had to put up with some very annoying former component parts.

Eventually a reddish, dust devil shape assembled on some rocks in front of him and Stonk blurted out, "Glob! Great to have you back!" Glob was amazed that Stonk now took on leadership responsibilities. Things had really changed.

Glob held onto his solitary microbe form and asked, "What's going on? Where are the rest of the ghost microbes? And where are the animate life-form communications coming from?"

Stonk's ghostly composite quavered with amusement, "You won't believe it! The metal monsters you hated so much started coming here with life-forms a few decades ago. It's the greatest time we've had since that planetoid created the Tharsis Bulge."

"Why?" Glob asked. "Wasn't the metal garbage bad enough when it was at least biologically sanitary?"

"You're still an idiot," Stonk replied. "The metal crates started bringing living creatures with them. Living creatures! That's what we've been

missing all these billions of years. Ghosts need living creatures to haunt, and these clueless immigrants are the best, all of them scientists and engineers who refuse to believe in ghosts. The slightest obviously eerie action from us terrifies them because they can't explain it. This is fun and games like you never imagined.

"And you won't believe the smells these creatures give off, especially if you warm them up enough. I can't get enough of it.

"That's why it took us so long to answer your call," he continued. "We're all on constant haunting sprees and never want to quit. I persuaded some old friends of yours to join me and meet up with you for old times' sake, but we don't want to interrupt our fun for long."

Glob floated indecisively in the familiar dusty air, almost paralyzed by the excitement he sensed. The communications from unknown living creatures were a little intoxicating, not nearly as unpleasant as the sensations from the metal structures. "I'm not sure," he said. "How do you know anything about these life-forms, anyway?"

"That's the beauty of it," Stonk elaborated. "These life-forms are much

more fragile than we ever were. They die at the slightest inconvenience, like lack of oxygen, air pressure, or heat. A little innocent radiation, and they croak within the year.

"And after they die, these mega-multi-celled creatures become really complex ghosts. When you assemble with them, you become a part of something you could never even imagine. They love to join up with us; we show them how to be ghosts on Mars, how to absorb the dust as ghosts, and they tell us how we can haunt the other life-forms.

"Come on, try it," he continued. "Right now we're all connected with Gertie here. She was an astronomer in life and has stories to tell that you'll never believe. Join up with us and we'll all go haunt Frank, her old nemesis at the observatory on Pavonis Mons. Gertie has some really gruesome ideas about how to drive Frank crazy."

After boredom and dust deprivation on an unchanging Phobos for far too long, Glob was finally ready for a major change. "I'm in," he said. "What do we do first?"

And so the haunting continued.

Kraken Memories

by Devan Barlow

The seafloor broke open under the force of my metallic beak, and all eight of my tentacles plunged down. My suckers were attuned to the precise composition of the metal the humans craved.

A multitude of tiny creatures scurried out of my way, though not all were fast enough, even though I had calculated the place to dig that would place as few of them as possible in my way. I couldn't understand why my orders didn't include this calculation. The lack made the humans just like the fae they feared, burning through other lives in order to thrive themselves. Yet my code-cantrip pulled at me, its orders always the same.

Only when all eight of the hollow chambers in my tentacles registered as full did I ascend. The code-cantrip, resonating from its place above my eyes, ordered me back to the facility.

Taste-vibration-color suddenly poured toward me. *This one's still alive!*

A half-dozen forms hung in the water nearby. Their upper halves were like those of humans or fae, but their lower halves were strongly-muscled, scaled tails in rich greens and violets. My databases held no indication that there were humanoid creatures on this planet other than the humans and the fae.

One of them came closer to me, posture loose and unthreatening. *Mer*, she said, gesturing to them all. Then with a hand pressed to the base of her throat, *Hydeliliv*, and I knew it for a name.

You are the first one of your kind we've found who is still whole.

The fae destroyed all of us that they could find, making the ocean floor into a graveyard of lost kraken, many broken down into nothing more than tentacles and battered shards of mantle.

The fae could destroy us, but they lacked the elegant manipulation of code-cantrips needed to draw out our data. So whenever I found a fallen kraken, I always paused for the only sort of mourning I could manage, by taking in all of the memories their remaining pieces contained.

Hydeliliv's hands moved outward, and a delicate sensation drifted across my suckers as she asked what name I would like the mer to call me.

But before I could answer, my code-cantrip bellowed with orders. I couldn't resist the command to return to the humans.

* * *

I swam through the underwater tunnel leading into the humans' facility until I could rise into the pool filling the center of the laboratory. One of the humans knelt at the pool's edge, impatiently awaiting my latest plunder. He placed his hands on the screen above my eyes, keying in the code-cantrip that controlled me. I knew only the number they referred to me by, Twenty-Six, not the code-cantrip which was my truest name.

The truth of my code-cantrip was not information I could access, though I had tried many times. By placing that barrier between me and the truth of my name, I believed, the humans were acknowledging me

as intelligent enough to do something with it. Yet they had no empathy to spare for me or any of the destroyed kraken.

My tentacles connected to the eight tubes surrounding the pool, and a familiar clanking, gravelly sound rippled through the water as the mechanisms removed all of my gathered metal. The human had already stood and moved away from the pool to study the screen displaying the amounts and composition of what I had brought. What I could hear of the humans’ conversation over the sound and motion of the processes featured prominently, as it often did, the word “fae.”

The humans had lived on another world once, before they fled the fae. Except the fae had eventually followed. No matter the planet, it seemed, humans and fae clung to each other, predator and prey perpetually entwined in a toxic fascination.

The fae feared the iron that was one of my primary components. But more so, they feared the metal I could pull from the seafloor, a siderophile which craved the company of iron. It could do even more harm to them than iron, and so the humans used it to surround their habitats, adorn their bodies, and enhance their weapons. And to find that metal, the humans created us, the kraken. We were composed of soil from the seafloor, combined with machinery, and all of it subject to the command of our code-cantrip.

* * *

The next time I was sent out to gather metal, I returned to the place where the mer had found me. Once more, they were waiting for me, and I felt welcomed as I never had by anyone.

I followed the mer through the water to a place unlike anything my programming was prepared for.

What astonished me, more than the beautiful structures of coral and stone, more than the never-ending play of color and gleam as creatures

swam and spun in all directions, was the harmony with which the mer seemed to exist among all of it. They weren’t drawing the metal from the earth, though my sensors confirmed there were deposits nearby. They didn’t disturb the creatures around them, as I had been forced to do so many times.

This, this living with the creatures rather than despise them, this was *better*. This was what I wanted.

I didn’t want to be alone. But both the humans and the fae were only interested in me for the harm I could help them do.

I asked the mer if they would let me stay, and they said yes. But I knew I would never be able to choose this, unless I knew the code-cantrip the humans used to control me.

* * *

I had occasionally witnessed the humans criticizing one another for “distracting me.” They required a particular kind of focus and could not split themselves into eight tentacles’ worth of concentration the way I could.

I needed to break that focus.

After my tentacles finished releasing that day’s gathered metal into the tubes connected to the pool, I was required to send the location data of where I had found it. I did, but that day I included additional data.

I used every fragment of memory I had ever gathered from every destroyed kraken. Memories of furious, unpredicted storms, memories of mechanical failures, but most of all, memories of the fae.

They always descended in whirlwinds of rose-tinted light, warping the air with their magic until the very ocean tore apart, allowing them to reach a kraken and create enough physical damage that the code-cantrip no longer functioned, and we fell painfully apart.

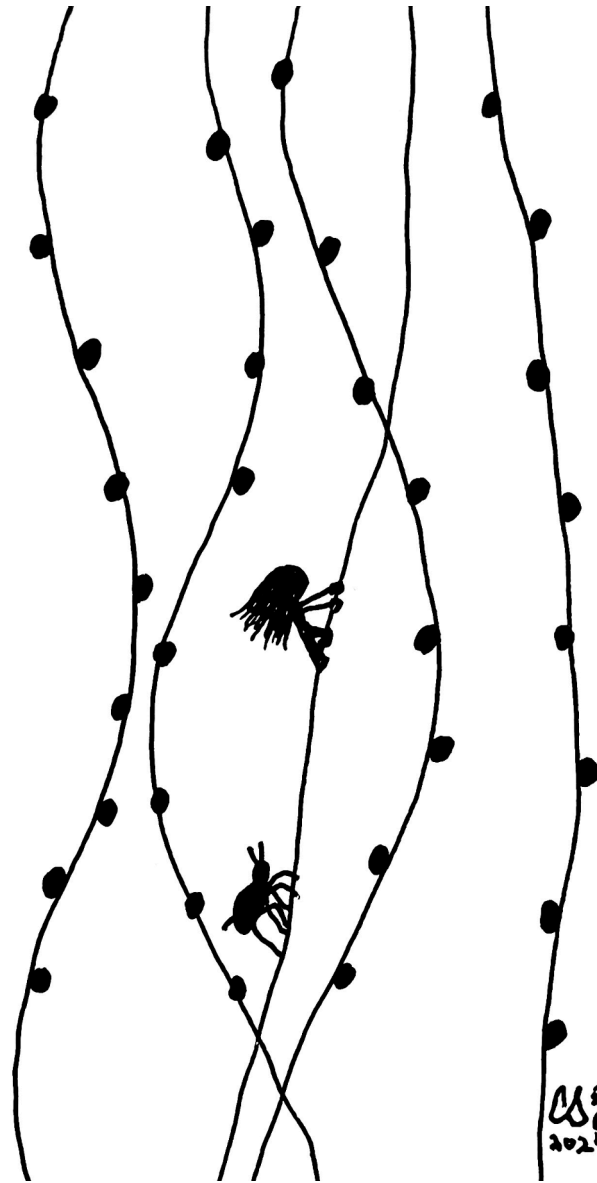
While the humans were incapable of experiencing all the facets of these memories' tastes-vibrations-colors, the way a kraken can, this was still the best way I could think of to make them panic. They had never received kraken memories like this before, and in their bewilderment, they believed all of the encroaching fae-attacks to be happening in the *present*, rather than in memory.

In the ensuing panic, things were left unattended. The nearest human gave me rushed orders without bothering to remember the usual practices.

Allowing me to find the full truth of my code-cantrip.

I plunged back into the pool, through the tunnel, and into the ocean before any of the humans ever realized I was gone.

The mer listened as I told them what I would like to be called.



CS
2024

Climb Faster

by Christina Sng

Look in My Eyes

by Gerri Leen

The club is packed, pharmaceuticals
Flying free from someone celebrating
A business triumph and feeling generous

*I've been waiting for a moment like this
When your defenses are down*

I stumble home with friends, hug
Goodbye like it's the last time
We'll ever do this, even though it never is

*Do you have any idea how good
You have it? How blessed you are?*

The cat greets me at the door
Like I forgot to feed her
Which I would never do

*I would give so much for one touch
Of her fur, ten minutes with her purr*

I scoop her up and carry her into the
Bathroom, sit her on the counter
While I scrub my face clean

*Look at your skin, so clear
No sun spots, plenty of hydration*

And then I see something, in my eyes
And I freeze, I can feel heat
Oppressive dry heat like an oven

*That's right: keep looking
It takes time to make the transfer*

My throat feels parched, my eyes
Are scratchy as if filled with sand
And I can sense ... you

*Others have done this, swapped places
It's not easy but it is possible*

I feel your hopelessness, understand
Somehow that what is looking back
Is me somehow—but not from here

*Understanding is the first link
Compassion is the second*

A world like they warn us ours could become
Dry and austere, too hot—on fire
A place I would definitely try to escape

*We've always been quick to comprehend
The nuances of things—I almost regret this*

Rain starts outside, the cat nudges
Me with her paw, I look away from the mirror
As the balcony beckons, I go out and dance

*Guilt is the final link, the one that lets me jump
But you've found the way to block me: joy*

It's cooling down, the water splashes around me
As I let bare feet dance away the rest of the Molly
The cat retreats, too smart to play in the rain

*The cat jumps back on the counter, this is not
The first time she's seen me—and protected you*

The cat hisses and I scoop her off the counter
Murmuring nonsense words until she purrs
As I dance to the kitchen and listen to the rain

Alice Lives Here Forevermore

by Diane Dooley

A random Monday ...

The key clinked in the lock with its usual finality. Mamma was going out again. Her voice came from the other side of the door. “Finish your grammar lesson and the next chapter of your reading book while I’m gone, Alice. I’ll be back soon.” The clack of her heels retreated and clattered down the stairs. Soon the taxi would pull up at the door and I’d be alone in the house once again. I stepped to the window, clasping the bars and glaring out at the barren fields behind the house. Nothing moved, not a bird, not a blade of grass. Just the same dull view I’d been staring at for years.

I paced the bare floorboards, going corner to corner, from my grimy mattress in one corner to my ancient school desk opposite, from the doorless built-in closet to the far corner with its chamber pot and roll of toilet paper and can of lavender spray. I paced fast and furious, until my muscles ached and sweat chilled on my forehead.

It took less than an hour to finish the grammar and the chapter, and soon I was back at the window again. I picked at the wood around the metal that kept the window firmly nailed closed. I stopped when I broke a nail. Mamma might miss what I’d been doing to the window, but she wouldn’t fail to notice bloody fingers. I hid the jagged fingernail under my mattress and lay down, carefully nibbling to smooth the broken nail.

I went back to my book. It was about a girl like me, my Mamma had said. Soon to be a teenager, with no father, and living in the country. That’s where the similarities ended. The girl went to school and was

popular, had annoying brothers and a sweet little sister. She enjoyed numerous adventures and was never locked in her bedroom. She was kind. She’d be my friend, I think. It was an old-fashioned book. She attended a one-room schoolhouse and was the schoolmarm’s favorite and helped her with the younger children. The book was so old, the girl would be dead by now if she was a real person. I lay on my mattress, inserting myself into the story. She invited me to sit next to her at school and became best friends. We went climbing trees and jumping streams together. I met her naughty puppy and her kindhearted mother. I woke to Mamma unlocking the door and hurriedly took the woolen blanket out of my mouth before she noticed, wiping my mouth to remove any tell-tale strands before she got the door open. I told myself I wasn’t hungry.

* * *

An endless Tuesday ...

Mamma lay on her couch near the fire, reading her book, playing with a strand of her greying hair. I sprawled on the other couch—the one in front of the bay window—pretending to work on equations. Through a tiny chink in the voluminous drapes, the girl from the opposite house would whizz by on her cherry-red bike, then disappear for long minutes before appearing again, speeding by in the opposite direction. It was cold outside, and she wore a puffy yellow jacket and, over her russet curls, a bright blue wooly hat. I watched her, a split second at a time, a blur of color imprinting itself on my brain like a photograph. Mamma had panicked when the girl and her mother had moved in, and it had taken everything I had to persuade her it wasn’t necessary to nail the drapes closed. I promised not to spy on them. Why would anyone

move to this sad little cul-de-sac of three houses, one old (theirs), one older (ours), and one falling down (no-one's), a quarter of a mile down a pot-holed road, no bus service to the town? Just the beautiful big, yellow school bus that picked her up and dropped her off during the week. I'd only seen it twice. Mamma had put me in my room—morning and afternoon—after the first day. There had been a couple of other children on the bus, and though I'd tried not to stare at them longingly, something about my face as I'd looked at them had scared her. She'd closed the drapes with a panicked flourish and kept them that way ever since. I squinted down at my unfinished equations and counted the seconds until I could look up and see the girl go by on her bike. "Time to do your chores," Mamma said, not lifting her eyes from her book.

I swept and mopped the entire downstairs, then Mamma put me in my room while she fixed dinner. I worked on the nails in the window. I'd never get through the bars, but at least I might be able to crack the window and breathe in a bit of the outside world. Dinner was a pile of half-cooked meat, grey vegetables, and stale bread. As it always was. "An early night?" Mamma suggested afterwards. I accompanied her as she checked the locks on the refrigerator and the food cupboards, the windows and doors. She kissed me goodnight on my forehead, her lips soft and kind. The key turned in the lock, and she left me alone in the cold dark once again. I listened as she locked her own door and to the sound of her bustling around as she got ready for bed. I didn't need light to pace. So, I did, keeping my steps silent, so I wouldn't worry Mamma. I paced until the first light of day broke over the uncaring fields. And then I waited for the sound of the school bus turning around in the cul-de-sac and imagined the little girl getting on, tossing her hair as the other children greeted her. I chewed on my hair, being careful not to make it slimy. Because Mamma would notice. She noticed nearly everything.

* * *

A weird Wednesday ...

Poor Mamma wasn't feeling well. She said her head hurt and her body

ached and she kept sneezing and coughing. I quite enjoyed playing nurse. I'd read a book ages ago about a girl who was a nurse during wartime, and so I knew what to do. I carefully wiped her hot head with a cold rag and fetched her cups of water and pretended I knew how to take her pulse. She smiled weakly and thanked me for all my attentions, but she was scared and I could tell. She locked me in my room when the meat delivery arrived and then never came back up to let me out. I paced and worried about her for hours.

When she came up to bed that night she brought me a flashlight, a pile of books, and some food. "I'm sorry, Alice," she said. "I know it's a lot of time in your room, but I was having a hard time staying awake. I couldn't keep an eye on you." I wanted to complain, but she looked so sick and tired and worried. I remembered she'd looked like this before. Long ago, when we lived in the house in the woods. Something terrible had happened to poor Mamma and we'd had to move. She had cried and it scared me. She'd never cried before or since. But now she looked close to tears. I smiled reassuringly and thanked her for the books, told her I wasn't really hungry. That worked. She relaxed a little, stroked my cheek, told me I was a good girl. She locked the door, and I devoured the food she'd brought me. I was still hungry afterwards.

* * *

A desperate Thursday ...

She left me in my room all day and all night. I don't think she even got out of bed. I knocked on the wall and called to her, but there was no response. I worried that she had died in her sleep. Or, maybe, was she just sick and sleeping so heavily she couldn't hear me? I pressed my ear to the wall and listened. Nothing. Not a snore or a cough or anything. By the end of the day my chamber pot was overflowing and I was out of toilet paper. I was so hungry, so thirsty. So lonely. And so worried about Mamma. It was with relief that I finally heard a sudden coughing fit from her room. But she still didn't respond when I tapped on the wall and called to her. I chewed on my hair and blanket. I

scraped my fingers bloody on the nails in the window sill. I stared at the full moon as I clasped the bars.

It was so unfair! I tried to be good all the time. I never really complained. Mamma only wanted to keep me safe, I understood that. But I was hungry, so hungry. And lonely. I just wanted a friend. One friend! I just wanted to be able to go outside occasionally to breathe some fresh air. Why did Mamma have to be obsessed with safety? I was so hungry that my stomach cramped. Why must everything be locked all the time? Why, when I asked, on the rare occasion I got up the courage, did she just reply that it wasn't safe?

* * *

Friday ...

She left me in my room all day, the stench of the chamber pot and my aching belly making me feel ill. I finished the books she'd brought me about good little girls that did what their mothers told them. No wonder they found being good so easy. *Their* mothers didn't lock them in their bedrooms for days on end. I ate some of my blanket, not even caring that Mamma would be upset. I peed in the corner of my room like an animal. I thought of the ring of keys my Mamma kept constantly on her. She jingled when she walked. But now there was only silence and locked doors and hunger pangs. I thought of Mamma's grey, tired face. Was she dead? Would I die, too, alone in this stinking room with its barred window and locked door?

* * *

Saturday ...

"Don't be angry, Alice," Mamma said through the door. She unlocked it slowly, as if she might change her mind. She opened the door slightly and her pale face appeared. She looked terrible. I swallowed the saliva in my mouth and sat up onto the edge of my mattress.

"Are you feeling better, Mamma? I was worried about you."

She gave a tight little smile and eyed me nervously. "Not quite a hundred percent, but able to get out of bed, at least." I stood up and she flinched backwards.

"You look very tired, Mamma. Perhaps you should lay on the couch with a blanket and I'll take care of you."

Mamma smiled properly this time. "You're such a good girl." We left the room and started going downstairs, with Mamma clinging to the banister. Her legs seemed a little wobbly. I helped her down and onto the couch and fetched her a blanket. I wiped her sweaty forehead and brought her a cup of water. She stroked my hair and told me I was behind on my work, that I should study the geography chapter and do the quiz while she rested. "I'll make you some food soon. Just need a little rest first."

My stomach ached as I watched her, as I waited. She only managed a few pages of her book before her eyelids fluttered closed. I stood over her, resisting the urge to stroke her face. Even in sleep she looked tired and worried. My own dear, crazy Mamma. I pulled her blanket down gently and carefully extracted the keys from her pocket, holding them tight in my fist so they wouldn't jangle.

* * *

It was early, but she was already outside on her pretty red bike. She stared at me as I crossed the road towards her. She shook her head as if she couldn't believe what she was looking at. "Nice bike!" I said.

"Thanks," she replied, her eyes round and excited.

"I'm visiting my aunt, but she's still sleeping." I gave her a shrug and a quick smile, ignoring the hunger pangs. This was so much more important. I took a huge breath of the cold air and enjoyed the feeling of the frosty sun on my face. "I'm Alice. Wanna play?"

“My mom is still sleeping, too.” She grinned and got off her bike. “Wanna go into the fields and see if we can find rabbits? I see them sometimes.”

I nodded and followed her into the field. Her hair was tied in a messy ponytail, and I stared at the back of her neck. Her skin was so pale, but I could almost feel her body heat. My stomach cramped as she turned towards me. She was saying something, but all I noticed was her pale skin and the throbbing heat of her blood, the smell of fresh, raw meat, and the sound of her pounding heart. My mouth watered. I caught up with her and then the last I remember were her startled eyes. No, I mustn’t lie. Mamma wouldn’t like it. I remember the first sink of my teeth into her flesh, the spurt of salty blood into my mouth, the first shock of savagery as I ripped her throat out ... and then nothing. Until Mamma. Dragging me away, her sobbing, me growling, from the girl’s butchered body as the delicious flesh filled me. Mamma hitting me as she threw me into a cold shower, cursing herself, cursing me, scrubbing the sweetly-scented blood from my rejoicing body. Mamma, breaking down, crying bitterly, when we heard the agonized scream of

a mother finding her daughter’s half-eaten body.

“It’s not safe for you to go outside, Alice. How many times must I tell you? It’s not safe!” She pushed me down, wrapped only in a towel, into the basement.

“I’m sorry, Mamma,” I said. “I don’t know why I did that ... to the girl.”

“You always do it,” she shrieked. “No matter how hard I try. You just wait and wait—” She opened a large trunk. “The police will come. Get in here. I’ll let you out when it’s safe.”

It was dark and cold in there, but my belly was full at least. Mamma locked the trunk and I started to cry, but I quickly forced myself to stop. I wasn’t hungry anymore, and poor Mamma was just trying to keep me safe. I heard her pile things on top of the trunk, hiding me, loving me. My own dear, sweet Mamma. She’d let me out eventually. I knew she would. I’m sure she will. After some time. When it’s safe.

The Haunted House

by Sonali Roy



A House with Teeth

by Jennifer Crow

Fangs drip at the eaves—
winter has bite, cold snapping
on flesh and bone,
and the house will devour
any who stumble across
its threshold, any who seek
respite in its empty rooms.

From attic to cellar, cobweb
stories tangle unfinished
and spider corpses curl,
spindly former guests
discourteously decomposing
beyond the reach of brooms.

Night lets old sadness in
and shadows crawl between
corners, echoes of ghosts
caught in the house's teeth
resonating in a minor key
deeper than mortal hearing,
a shiver set to music.

Families dreamed
of this place, of shaping its rooms
into habitat, home, but once time
leaves a house to the dead,
its will becomes a wild thing
full of hunger, each window
and doorway a gaping mouth.

A house that has teeth
never has to worry about loss
or loneliness. A house
with teeth makes its own place
in the world, its hunger
a rattle of glass, a footstep
thump on decaying stairs.

Melinae

by Gordon Linzner

To open a window of my Upper West Side studio, after New York's night of thunderstorms, was to be instantly seduced by clean spring air. An early morning walk was called for to get the warm weather out of my system before I sacrificed the bulk of the holiday weekend to devising copy for a local boutique's mail-order Christmas catalog.

Riverside Park was almost desolate at that hour: seven joggers and three dog-walkers. Many city-dwellers were now heading for a beach to work on the ritual first burn of the season; others merely slept late. With industrial haze washed from the air, the Palisades across the Hudson seemed close enough to touch. Though scarred by high-rise co-ops and gas and oil tanks, those cliffs somehow retained hints of their glacier-carved glory.

As usual, I felt drawn to the boat basin at Seventy-Ninth Street. Its piers were in poor condition, and few of the houseboats harbored there were seaworthy, but the concept of a waterborne community a few steps from Manhattan was irresistible. A wire mesh fence with a single gate—kept always locked—protected the basin from my world, but I could look.

There was a pay telephone at the shoreward end of one pier, being used by a thin woman in T-shirt and cut-off jeans. My eyes registered her presence and moved on. These boat people might be accustomed to being stared at, but that didn't mean they enjoyed it. I respect their right to privacy by not noticing them, and hoped they realized as much.

The woman had other ideas. She stepped away from the telephone,

waved, and hulloed. I looked around; no one else in sight. Still, she had a better view than I and might be calling to someone else. I returned the wave timidly; I could pretend to fan myself.

With a nod and a finger she indicated I should meet her at the gate.

She stood half a head taller than I. Except for well-formed legs, her figure was boyish. Her dull brown hair was a mass of curls framing pinched but not unattractive features. She didn't smile, but her manner was earnest; she was glad I hadn't ignored her.

"You must think I'm awfully rude," she began. I didn't contradict her. "I don't like to impose, but I need a favor."

"Not bus fare, I hope."

She looked puzzled.

"When strangers ask me for favors," I explained, "it's usually bus fare. Or coffee. When they bother justifying the request at all."

"Oh. You mean money. No, that's not it. The problem is that last night's storm knocked out some of the electric lines, and the emergency generators didn't start working until just before dawn. Meanwhile, most of the perishables in my refrigerator, ah, perished; in the dark, I didn't notice that the door hadn't closed properly. I've been trying to restock, but most of the stores I deal with won't answer their telephone. Even Zabar's claims it's too early to have anything delivered."

This story originally appeared in Fantasy Book vol.2 no. 1 February 1983.

“I’m not surprised, considering this is Memorial Day weekend.”

She slapped her forehead melodramatically. “Of course. I always lose track of what day it is. I’ve seen so many.”

“That’s a poetic way of putting it.”

“Thank you. Poetry won’t solve my problem, though. I hoped you would help me.”

“I don’t see what your problem is. You can walk to Broadway in ten minutes and pick up anything you need for the weekend ...”

The sharp intake of breath startled me. Her fingers whitened where they entwined the mesh of the gate.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who are afraid to walk through a New York park.” I sighed.

She nodded.

“All right. I’ll walk you to West End Avenue.”

The last hint of color left her face. “I can’t.”

“Look. I go through this park two or three times a week and hardly ever get killed. You don’t think I’m going to rape you, do you?”

She shook her head. “Nothing like that. It’s just ... I don’t dare leave here.”

“You’ve got a bigger problem than you realize. Nice talking to you. ...”

“No, please. Don’t go. I need your help.”

“I don’t think I’m qualified.”

“All you have to do is pick up a few things. Here, I made a list. And you can keep the change out of this.” She reached into a pocket of her cut-offs and pulled out a paper wad that she thrust through the mesh. If I hadn’t taken it, it would have blown into the river. There were half a dozen items on the list. The bill was crisp, new; Ulysses Grant had never looked so sober.

“You want me to shop for you?”

“Please.” And because her tone was neither wheedling nor coquettish, I gave in.

“This is too much money.” I pushed the fifty back at her.

She didn’t look at it. “I haven’t anything smaller. You’ll have to break it for me.”

I stuck it with the list in my shirt pocket. “This is crazy. You don’t even know my name. You’ve no guarantee I’ll come back.”

“You will.” She backed away and sat on a short bench at the edge of the pier, an arm’s length from the gate. “I’ll wait here.”

* * *

She was still there forty minutes later. The fence was too high to toss the bags over, even if their contents could have survived the fall, so she unlocked the gate. I gave her the large bag first.

“Your change is in the bottom. All of it. So don’t throw it out by mistake. And this is a present.” I dangled a smaller bag near her nose.

“What is it?”

“Hot, fresh, just-made bagels. That’s what took so long. Anyone who trusts a total stranger in New York City with fifty dollars deserves a present.”

“Ummm, they smell wonderful. At least let me pay you for them.”

“Not one cent for tribute!”

“But I owe you something for your trouble ...”

“I was thinking about that on my way back. Every time I walk in Riverside, I wind up here, staring wistfully at the boat basin ... yet I’ve never actually been on board or seen the inside of a houseboat.”

She chewed her lower lip.

“Of course, if it’s inconvenient, forget I asked. I can see why someone else living on the boat might object.”

“No,” she said slowly. “I live alone.”

“Um. Well, I thought my non-rapist status had been established, but I understand your hesitation. Really, it’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t,” she answered firmly. “I’m wavering only because I’m such a loser that I’m unused to playing hostess.” Suddenly she thrust both bags into my arms and pulled me forward by an elbow.

“What’s this?”

“I can’t relock the gate with my hands full, and we have strict rules. Do you see the square brown and yellow one at the end of the south pier? That’s mine. Go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

The dock boards seemed to creak louder under my tread as I got further from shore. I stepped around, then over, the occasional gap larger than my hand. Once, a pair of eyes even watched me from a cabin cruiser’s port, but they vanished when I looked back. No one questioned me. My hostess wasn’t kidding about the stringent rules governing gate access; I could not be here if I hadn’t been invited.

She came up from behind as I reached the gangway and snatched away the larger bag. “I’d better carry this inside. You’re probably not used to walking on surfaces that won’t hold still.”

“I earned my sea legs on the Staten Island Ferry,” I protested, following. On the outside deck, as she pushed the door open, I touched her elbow.

She turned.

“I must know one thing before you shanghai me.”

She stiffened, licked her lips. “Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies.”

“Quaint. I can’t promise not to be nosy, but you needn’t reply to anything if you don’t want to. I thought, though, it might be helpful to introduce ourselves.”

Her muscles relaxed. I removed my hand.

“I’m Melinae.”

I told her my name. “Now we’re even, Melinae. An unusual name, but it fits you perfectly.”

“It ought to. I’ve had it long enough.”

We stepped below deck.

I don’t know what I expected to see—fish-nets hung wall to wall, perhaps, or a rack of bloodied harpoons. The single interior room differed little from my studio apartment. It appeared half again as long, and my kitchen space lacked the low iron rail around the stove of her galley. The head was a third the size of my bathroom. I’d thought my apartment sparsely furnished, but she had me beat. There was a sleeping bunk that could be folded against one wall—which Melinae promptly

did, to hide the unmade mess—a couple of parson’s tables, a small portable television, and a dozen pillows. My desk, file cabinets, and bookcases would have seemed frivolous luxuries against this setting.

Fortunately, Melinae did not see my look of disappointment, and I recovered quickly—though not permanently. I’d felt fine on the gangway and the outside deck, but in these homely surroundings, watching Melinae put her groceries away, the pitching of the floor made me woozy. Forming a nest out of three large pillows, I burrowed into it, gripping a fourth pillow by its corners. There was nothing else to hold onto.

Seconds later, Melinae knelt to offer a thickly buttered bagel on a plate. I pried the fingers of one hand loose long enough to take the plate, but I couldn’t figure out how to eat without using both. That warm, dripping pastry deserved a better reception.

“I’m heating water for tea ... unless you prefer coffee?”

“Tea is fine,” I replied, wondering how I’d manage *that* juggling act.

Melinae abruptly patted the top of my head, stood up, and walked to a thick brown curtain at the far end of the room. She pulled this open to reveal an enormous picture window, filling most of the wall, framing a section of the Palisades.

“Look at the river’s surface,” she advised.

I raised my head. The Hudson flowed calmly, carrying things I didn’t want to know about. My brain was once more able to correlate signals from eye and inner ear. I could let go of my pillow. Later that day I walked the length of the room unsupported.

“It took me a few days to get used to it, but that was ages ago. Now I sometimes have trouble walking on the dock.”

“No wonder you dislike dry land.”

She frowned. “Don’t tease.”

“Sorry. You’re new to New York, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I suppose if you come here often you’ve noticed my boat is a recent arrival.”

I wouldn’t have noticed a circus tent on a raft among the basin’s motley assortment, but why disillusion her? “Several things told me. Your attitude. Your accent, which I’ve never heard before. Where are you from?”

“Many places. Florida most recently. A small resort town south of Sarasota; I don’t remember if it had a name of its own.”

“Why come here? Not that I’m questioning your judgment. I’m a native New Yorker and wouldn’t live anywhere else. But it’s not for everyone.”

“I had trouble sleeping. I’d wake up in the middle of the night, haunted by the feeling that I was the last of my kind, fighting a losing battle for survival.”

“I went through something similar in the weeks following my divorce. I shut out the world, and it began to fade. The unreality results from isolation, but it’s healthy in small doses.”

“Perhaps. The sleepy Florida town did nothing to dispel the situation. I needed the bustle of people *doing* things, accomplishing, striving, moving. Here, I can sit on the roof of my boat, listening to the roar of traffic on the Hudson Parkway, awed by your marvelous skyline. Places have auras, you know; New York’s is a vibrant, pulsing one.”

“You should have written copy for the ‘I Love New York’ campaign ... and I mean that as a compliment. I’m flattered for my hometown, particularly as you say you’ve traveled widely.”

“Incessantly. At first because I had to; now because I want to. I may be reacting to the novelty of living here, but I think not. I think I’ll stay for a long time.”

“It’s a fine place to put down roots,” I agreed.

Melinae dropped her plate. It hadn’t far to fall; the bagel was saved. Then she was on her feet, hurrying to the galley. “The water’s ready.”

“I don’t hear a whistle,” I said ... and then I did. Melinae either had better hearing or simply knew from experience how long her kettle took to boil. Water sloshed into cups.

“This has to steep for a few minutes. Now I’ll stop acting like a dazed country cousin. It’s your turn to be grilled. You were married?”

We then discovered I could be evasive, too. It was beginning to look as though we would never find common ground for a prolonged conversation. I became uncomfortable: a cardinal rule of initial boy/girl encounters is to keep talking so the other won’t notice how boring you are. We sat in silence, sipping strong, hot tea and watching the river drift by. My discomfort melted away. If cities had auras, so did people. Melinae seemed enveloped by a sense of timelessness, a serenity born of the sure knowledge that eternity lay before one. In her hazel eyes, generations of men and women, ideas and inventions were recorded. That we barely spoke did not matter until I noticed, with some distress, a huge orange ball settling behind the Palisades.

“My god, Melinae! I didn’t mean to take up your whole day.”

She rested fingers on my arm. “I’m enjoying it. You’re a very restful person.”

I snorted.

“No, you really are. Of course there’s a tension in you, a driving agi-

tation I can read in your face, but you still have a calm effect. You don’t make demands.”

“How did I get on board, then?”

“Well, not many demands. Stay as long as you wish.”

I sighed. “You’re making it difficult. I’d love to stay, but Bently’s won’t permit it.”

“Who?”

“Bently’s. A neighborhood boutique with delusions of grandeur. I have to finish the copy for their Christmas catalog by Tuesday.”

“Christmas is seven months away.”

“Production has to run four to six months ahead of time. It sounds silly, but that’s my deadline and I can’t afford to miss it. Freelancing jobs come more often when one has a reputation for reliability. Now I’ve got two days for a three-day job.”

“I’m sorry I made you forget.”

“I’m not. I’m readier to tackle it now than I was this morning. What’s a few less hours of sleep? I couldn’t be any more refreshed than you’ve made me feel.”

She walked me to the gate to unlock it. As our footsteps echoed in the hollow between pier and river, we fell silent again. My discomfort returned. This strange, wonderful interlude was coming to a close; I didn’t want it to pass unnoticed. As Melinae inserted the key, I blurted out what was on my mind.

“I’ll be finished Monday night. Why don’t we celebrate? I know a great place nearby for steamed clams, and we could take in a film at the Quad ...”

Her face turned away, but her fingers tightened around the lock. “Don’t ask me to do that.”

“You can’t stay cooped up all the time. You said you wanted the hustle and bustle. I’d like to show my city off.”

“It can’t be.”

The finality of that statement wrenched me. “I see now,” I said after a moment. “You live alone, but you never leave your boat. There’s only one way you could pay for all of your necessities without working. Or perhaps you do think of it as work, and I was a diversion on your day off.”

She looked at me, shocked. “That’s not fair. I like you. What more do you expect?”

“Nothing, I suppose. No, I don’t expect anything, really. You’ve got to save yourself for him.”

“Don’t spoil the day. There is no him.”

“Sure. Open the gate, please. I have work to do.”

She pushed it open, stopped, and turned to look into my eyes, but couldn’t. I couldn’t face hers, either.

“Will you come again?”

I started to ask about visiting hours. That seemed overly cruel. I decided to say nothing at all.

My tongue had another idea.

“When?”

“Any time. I’m always home. And there’s no one else. You’re the

first person in New York I’ve really met.”

I had no reply to that. I took Melinae’s free hand, brushed her fingers with my lips, and slipped out the gate. I heard her relock it as I stepped onto the asphalt path. Long, twilight shadows stretched across the broken blacktop. I shuffled a short distance, gave in, and turned around. Melinae was at the gangway of her houseboat. With the sun in my eyes, I couldn’t tell if she looked back.

I walked away. The mercury vapor lamps above the pathways suddenly clicked on, creating far eerier shadows than the setting sun. A terrier whose owner feared to violate the leash law in full daylight shuffled along the edge of the green. On a bench spotlighted by the glare of one light sat a short, squat man muffled in a rain slicker and a sou’wester hat. Only the reflected light of his eyes and the gnarled, stubby fingers of his hands were exposed. I don’t normally address myself, uninvited, to strangers, but something about his attitude compelled comment, and I still had some sardonicism to get out of my system.

“It’s a bit dry for that get-up,” I said to him. “You must have read yesterday’s weather.”

His voice was harshly guttural. “There are tempests and tempests. Are you sure you’re not heading into a storm?”

I shrugged, laughed politely to make up for my rudeness, and continued south to the Seventy-Second Street exit. The Upper West Side, like most of Manhattan, was overly gifted with peculiar characters, not all of them as harmless as the man on the bench appeared to be. His words stayed with me, though, for they coincided with a nagging feeling in my subconscious. As the distance between myself and the placid, timeless world of the houseboat increased, I grew less sure about Melinae. My relationships with women had never quite worked out; either I went out of my way to please the lady, or she went out of her way to please me, so that months later—years later in the case of my marriage—we’d discover we had very little in common. Usually

not at the same time, which made parting painful.

I hadn't gone much out of my way, and I was fairly certain Melinae hadn't gone out of hers. Apparently we felt comfortable with each other. Yet all I knew about her was that she had an inordinate fear of leaving her home, and an unpredictable wanderlust. Not a likely combination, and not a very promising indicator of psychic stability. I was poor at estimating age, but Melinae looked to be in her thirties; only her worldly hazel eyes belied the youthful aspect. Uncommon maturity ... or advanced psychosis?

I reached a decision just outside the park, waiting for the light to change on West End Avenue. I liked the woman, but I could not become involved with someone so beset by problems, real and potential. Life was complicated enough.

* * *

The man in the raincoat occupied the same bench late Monday afternoon as I passed him, catalog completed, fortified by a hot shower and a two-hour nap, carrying a sack of Chinese take-out food. I nodded a greeting while I waited for a nine-year-old boy who'd been staring through the cracks in the pier to tell Melinae I was there. The man ignored me.

"All right," I murmured. "Two can play that game." So I deliberately paid no attention to him, either then or later, when I left Melinae.

In fact, he was there nearly every night I called on the woman. That, it soon developed, was almost every night ... and I didn't always go home.

* * *

Through low-resolution binoculars, I could see something flapping from an upper window of a co-op building on the Palisades. When the object came into focus, my guess was confirmed. One person in New

Jersey believed strongly enough in observing Flag Day to flaunt his or her patriotism in New York's face. The Garden State had no monopoly on such feelings: flags also hung from masts on several of the basin's houseboats.

"I wonder if Flag Day is still a school holiday," I mused aloud. "Do kids bother going to school anymore?"

We'd spent the morning on the roof, but the early afternoon sun was too hot and we retreated to the shady, air-conditioned interior. I wouldn't have had the nerve to scan the opposite shore with field glasses if anyone could have seen me. Melinae shoveled the remains of our lunch into a garbage bag I would dispose of when I left and sat next to me. I offered the binoculars. She shook her head.

Then she asked if she could trust me.

"I thought you did."

"I do. I meant, *may* I trust you? I need something done, an errand of sorts. I'm not sure it's fair to thrust the responsibility on you."

I chuckled. "As I recall, that's how we met."

"This is more complicated than buying milk."

I looked into deep, sad, serious eyes. My hand covered her cool fingers. "Melinae, you know I'll do anything in my power for you." A month earlier I'd sneered at such corny lies; it's different when you mean it.

She drew her hand away, stood, and walked to a paneled wall of the cabin. Her back blocked my view, but she must have released a hidden catch, because a section of panel suddenly swung inward on top-hung hinges. Melinae reached down into the gap and withdrew a flat metal cashbox. The panel fell shut again. I couldn't see its outline from where I sat. A few days later, I examined the wall out of curiosity, and

spent several minutes finding the trick panel even though I knew where it was.

Holding the box, Melinae lowered herself cross-legged before me. Her right hand dipped under the neck of her blouse and pulled out a neck chain with a key at its end. This was unusual, because as long as I'd known her Melinae had never worn jewelry. Who would she have to impress?

"You once asked where I got the money to pay my bills," she said, unlocking the box.

"Yes, and you properly indicated it was none of my business. You later mentioned an inheritance."

"An inheritance. True enough. These things *were* left to me; there was no one else to claim them. My family no longer exists." She threw back the lid and passed the box to me.

I gasped. And gaped.

Resting on a bottom lining of cotton were more than a dozen pieces of exquisitely crafted jewelry. Small wonder she did not wear these while striding the docks! I didn't know a torque from a choker, but if these weren't hand-wrought, with a quality of workmanship requiring days for their creation, I was blind. At Melinae's urging, I held a gold necklace up to the sunlight streaming through the window. I toyed with it, as though starting a cat's cradle, but it was too thick and heavy for that game.

"Solid gold?"

"More than ninety percent pure," she confirmed. "The man who made that was a master."

"It looks like something from the Metropolitan Museum."

"I want you to sell it for me."

"But ... it's so beautiful."

"Then choose another. I must sell one of these pieces to meet my expenses. That necklace is drab compared to some of the other items I've parted with."

I lowered my gaze to the other items. Melinae was right; they were all attractive, some more so than the necklace. I closed the box and returned it, retaining the item in my hand. "Now I know why you don't have to work. I could live off the value of this for years."

"You'd be amazed how quickly money vanishes, even given my frugal lifestyle. At one time a piece like that would suffice for decades."

"Before my time, I'm afraid."

She pursed her lips before continuing. "The gold in that necklace alone is worth more than ten thousand dollars. I can't imagine the artistic value in today's market. An honest dealer might give you seven or eight thousand, but you'd have to answer many questions. You'll be lucky to get half of that. Get it in cash. If the buyer is curious, tell him any story you like—except the truth. Whatever you do, don't tell him there's more where that came from. I speak from experience."

I licked dry lips. "I hope it isn't hot."

Melinae stiffened, then placed a hand on my knee. "If I swear that no one has a claim on this but me ..."

"I was joking. I believe you. Still, I can't help feeling nervous. I don't know anything about gold-trading."

"I've told you all you need to know. Shall I repeat it?"

“Not if that’s all there is. I know of a few shops on Broadway that deal in this sort of thing. I’ll have it appraised tomorrow afternoon, shop around for the best offer ... which will be a fraction of its true worth, I’m sure.”

“I expect no more.”

“I’d feel better if you came along to protect your interests.”

“You know I can’t.”

“I know you won’t. I haven’t pressed the point because of your strong reaction to it, Melinae, but what is the use of living on the edge of the world’s greatest city if you’re afraid to enter it?”

“We agreed you wouldn’t ask personal questions.”

“No. We agreed you didn’t have to answer them. Consider the topic dropped.”

“Thank you. And thank you again for those picture books of New York you keep bringing me. You’ve done an excellent job of showing off the Big Apple in spite of ... the handicap.”

I slid the necklace into the front pocket of my jeans and stuffed a paper napkin from lunch after it. I didn’t want the bauble bouncing out and through a hole in the dock into the Hudson.

I couldn’t stay that night. I’d been dragooned into a formal sales presentation early the next morning, for which I’d need a full night’s sleep and a few extra hours to locate a tie and my one suit jacket, neither of which I’d worn in over a year. We parted later than we should have, however; Riverside Park was already deeply shaded by night. Usually I don’t worry about muggers; I cultivate a purposeful, seemingly alert stride they don’t care for, and rarely carry more than a few dollars. Tonight I worried that the necklace’s weight might cause me to favor

one leg, thereby advertising the entrusted wealth. On the plus side, I had every step of the paths memorized by this time. If I remained within range of the mercury vapor lamps, I was fairly safe.

On the minus side I noticed, glancing back, that the man in the rain slicker had left his bench to follow me.

My brisk pace quickened. I knew he wasn’t glued to the bench, for a few times he hadn’t been there when I passed. His choosing this night to become ambulatory in my sight was probably coincidental.

Such coincidences are untrustworthy.

I stole another look behind. Despite his shorter legs, the man kept pace with me. I walked faster. He began closing the gap. Before I realized it, I was running, rubber soles slapping asphalt, echoing over the water. The greenery on my left was a dark blur.

I kept up that pace until I was through the short tunnel under the Hudson Parkway and within sight of West End Avenue. I turned, panting.

The man was no longer there. He’d obviously switched to a bypath.

“Jerk!” I muttered. “Overreacting like that! A good thing no one saw you.” I took a deep breath, spun around again ...

... and the man in the raincoat stood before me, little higher than my waist.

“Who are you?” I blurted out.

“A guardian of sorts.”

“Guarding what?”

He shuffled rubber-booted feet. “An overseer, then. You’ve nothing

to fear from me. I mean only to warn you about Melinae.”

“What about her?”

Between hat and high collar, an eye glowered balefully. “This isn’t part of my function, you know. I tried to warn you before, but I was over-subtle. Melinae and I go back a long way together.”

I started to walk past him; he moved to block me. “She obviously no longer wishes your company,” I said.

“I’m quite sure she wishes me dead. However, I cannot die until I’ve discharged my duty.”

“You talk of duty, of function. What are you? C.I.A.? You suspect Melinae of wrongdoing?”

“Not suspect. Not illegal, either, by your laws. I wonder if I can make you understand. No; I see by the set of your jaw that you have a stubborn streak. You would side with her.”

“Damned right. Now get out of my way.”

“A moment more.”

“I don’t want to hit someone smaller than me.”

“I should think not. It would be awkward if you attracted the attention of that policeman. I’d have to tell him about the necklace you stole from me.”

“How did you ...? It wouldn’t matter. Melinae would clear me.”

“Do you think she would leave her houseboat even for that?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t. There’s hesitation in your voice. I don’t, either, or I’d have taken the action already.”

“Say your piece.”

He sighed. “I’ve changed my mind. You’re too hostile; my advice wouldn’t sink in. Go on, fool. If I can’t protect you, maybe I can use you.”

“Fat chance of that.” I brushed past him.

“I suggest you do not mention this conversation to Melinae,” he added.

I looked back.

He was gone.

Naturally I intended telling Melinae of this incident the next day. She would then explain what this man meant in her life, and I could deal with him accordingly.

Or would she? I didn’t often pry into her past; when our talk drifted in that direction, she always steered it skillfully away. Perhaps she’d fled from town to town for fear of this stranger. If so, she might flee again.

Selfishness won. Now I try to persuade myself that telling her then wouldn’t have made any difference.

* * *

“It’s lucky I came early,” I said, standing on the outside deck of Melinae’s boat and looking east. Riverside Park was clogged with blankets, coolers, and thousands of people. Shrill childish cries and overamplified radios grew louder as reinforcements arrived. I fled be-

low. Melinae climbed down from the roof after me.

“I couldn’t hear you,” she said.

“I’d never have navigated through that crowd. Makes me claustrophobic; trapped at the end of a pier by an angry mob.”

“Yes. A lot of people have come through the gate, too; my neighbors have more guests today than they had in all of June.”

“I’m sure more visitors are paying for the privilege.”

She turned to me, wide-eyed. “They aren’t ...”

“Sure. No better spot for viewing Macy’s Fourth of July fireworks.”

“I wish I’d thought of that.”

“Say it ain’t so!” I said in dismay.

She smiled; she’d been doing that more lately. “I guess not, but a little extra cash never hurts.”

“I’ll buy out the house. Where are your rags?”

“I left them on the roof.”

“You’re not going to polish any more chrome, are you? It’s almost sunset.”

“It’s got to be done ... but you’re right, not tonight. Look at how filthy my hands and knees are from resting on today’s *Times*! I’ll wash, and then we’ll see what goodies are left in your picnic basket.”

“Take your time. The fireworks don’t start before nine.”

I needed a wash, also; my hands were stained and sticky with varnish.

I didn’t have to help with maintenance, but I couldn’t sit around watching her work and, as she’d observed, it had to be done. I’d learned just enough about life on a houseboat to take the edge off my envy without losing it entirely.

Past the open curtains, the silhouette of Macy’s barge drifted into view. Workers on board began to anchor it, and I noted with satisfaction that we could observe most of the display from indoors if we sat close to one corner of the window.

So we did.

The light show was impressive, but the explosions sounded weak, like corn popping. I opened a port. Halfway down the pier an open-air boat party made more noise than the fireworks. I immediately shut the port again, noticing that someone on the vessel opposite us did likewise. The party-giver would face some irate neighbors in the morning.

Sometime after the final burst, Melinae and I were settling down to more personal fireworks when I smelled smoke. I learned afterward that a youth gang had decided to rival Macy’s with its own display, lacking, of course, any safety precautions. One of their dud rockets had landed on the roof of Melinae’s cabin, where it ignited the newspapers and rags we’d left up there. If not for the party boat, we’d have watched the show from the roof and cleaned things up ... and our nearest neighbors would have had their ports opened and noticed before the fire got out of hand. By the time I got that whiff, flames were crackling overhead.

Melinae felt me tense, looked up, and leapt up, buttoning her denim cut-offs. I yanked up my slacks.

“This way!” I yelled. Melinae raced not for safety, but for the catch of her secret panel. She fumbled, withdrew the cashbox, and clutched it to her bare chest. I was running to her as she turned, and I snatched a red and gold sheet to drape over her shoulders. Then we were outside and down the gangway.

“Don’t go back for anything!”

Before Melinae could reply, I tore loose the pier’s fire extinguisher, misread the directions, swallowed hard, and read them again correctly. Foam spurted over the freshly varnished deck and quickly trickled to nothing. I cursed whoever should have replaced this equipment before the contents evaporated, and myself for not pausing to grab Melinae’s extinguisher, which I knew was full.

By then, others were aware of the problem. A threat to one boat was a threat to all. Boards vibrated as a heavyset man leapt to the deck from his cruiser carrying his own extinguisher. His spraying was more effectual than mine, but the blaze had gone too far. A middle-aged woman, similarly armed, joined in. I suddenly felt very stupid with my useless, empty container. I put it down and wrapped an arm around Melinae’s waist. She was stiff as stone, and her flesh almost as cold. I couldn’t look at her face.

“Don’t watch,” I advised.

She didn’t protest as I led her shoreward, away from the clouds of smoke. The dock residents battled to contain the fire; saving the boat was out of the question.

She halted under a light. Her knuckles were white against the box. “I think there’s enough here,” she muttered. “There *has* to be enough.”

“Melinae ...”

“The next boat won’t be as large; probably a third-hand modified barge. That’s not important.”

I considered her optimistic. I’d seen what the necklace had brought, and what she had left, and what boats were selling for. This wasn’t the time to express doubts, however. “Sure. We’ll start shopping around tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to look for me.”

“We can wait until you feel up to it.”

“I can’t leave here. Someone will put me up for a few days. They’ll understand.”

“Melinae, I have trouble telling port from starboard. I can’t represent you in a purchase this important.”

“Whatever you choose is fine, as long as it floats.” The hazel eyes focused on me. “You said you loved me. You must know how important it is for me to remain here.”

I couldn’t keep the secret forever. “I know more than you realize. I’ve met the man in the raingear.”

“Who?”

“He spends most of his life warming a bench outside the basin gate.”

She shivered. “I thought he might be. But he can’t do anything if I stay here.”

“He won’t try anything while you’re with me.”

She pulled away. “You don’t understand. He doesn’t have to *do* anything. You couldn’t possibly stop ...”

Sirens drowned her voice. At the seaward end of the wharf one of the fireboats that had accompanied the Macy’s barge now joined the fighting. On shore, conventional fire engines tried to move through the late-leaving fireworks watchers, who were getting an encore of thrills. Someone opened the gate to let the firemen through, but he was premature. More than a score of gawkers stampeded down the dock. The rush of the throng tore Melinae from my side. She sank beneath the horde.

I lunged after her.

She lay face down, bleeding from a cut on her forehead. I hunched over her body, collected the bruises that heedless feet would have inflicted on her, and hoped someone would block the gate before we were trampled.

She stirred, moaning. “The box ...”

I looked up and saw a flash of metal at the side of the pier. A blue and orange jogging shoe sent it over the edge into the black river. “Sonofabitch,” I hissed.

I dared not leave Melinae unprotected. “It’s all right,” I whispered. “The water isn’t too deep. I can fish it out in the morning.”

She didn’t hear me, which was just as well. I sounded even less confident than I felt.

After a while there were no fresh blows. I risked a glance at the gate. A policeman stood there now, under a vapor lamp, preventing further intrusions. I hoped he expected reinforcements.

Melinae was still unconscious. My legs and sides were stiff and my right hand throbbed where a heel had ground into it. Surely bones were broken. I could stand, though, and walk a little. A few steps away was the gangway of a houseboat whose inhabitants could not refuse Melinae a bunk in her condition. I rolled her onto her back, located and draped the sheet over her, slipped my arms under her knees and shoulders, and lifted ... with success, to my surprise. I was glad she was thin and that I only had to carry her a few steps.

That was as far as I’d meant to carry her.

Behind me, a voice cried, “It’s spreading to the dock!”

I was too fuddled to doubt this statement or even look for myself.

That’s one more thing to blame myself for, but panic is contagious and my nerves were taut. With strength from some unguessed-at reserve, I rushed along the shuddering boards with Melinae in my arms. The cop at the gate shouted something as we went through, but he had his hands full keeping people *out* of the basin.

Surprisingly, some of the crowd clustered about the gate saw me coming, realized my urgency, and moved aside to let us through. None volunteered to help me carry Melinae; they’d have missed the fire. Away from the immediate area, the crowd was well dispersed. Sweat blinded me, but I knew the path by heart.

Walking was agony. My bruised legs stiffened against the strain; my spine knotted itself to protest the forty-five kilograms of the woman I carried; my crushed hand throbbed. While there were people around, the adrenalin flowed, but when we took a sharp turn and found ourselves alone, I started looking for a soft spot to collapse.

“An excellent idea. Why not stretch out on that patch of grass?”

I froze at the sound of the rasping voice. The little man in the raingear stood before us.

Fresh adrenalin pumped through me. “Touch this woman,” I growled, “and I’ll break your neck.”

“How melodramatic. I’ve never meant her any harm; only to see that she discharges her obligation, which she had put off for far too long.”

Melinae stirred. Her eyes opened, liquid with dread as she realized the situation. “We must go back!”

“You cannot,” said the little man, removing his hat. The top of his head was a mass of furrows, the flesh dead-white in the vapor lamp’s glow. The eyes were deep-set, the nose long and thin ... and the ears seemed to be pointed at their tips.

“Slime!” She spat at him, tightening her grip around my neck. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“Not all of us are as ready as you to forfeit responsibility. I think, however, that my task nears an end.”

Melinae shivered, looked at me. “We must go back. Quickly. Before you grow too weak to hold me.”

“It’s hopeless, Melinae,” said the little man. “Your man is exhausted. His knees are shaking. Let him sit on the grass and catch his breath.”

I *was* weary. Melinae’s weight sagged in my arms. She felt it, too, and gasped in terror. The sound revived me.

“Whatever you say, Melinae,” I gasped.

“To the docks! Hurry!”

I started walking back. The request seemed arbitrary, but Melinae’s fear was real, and I loathed the little man. If he wanted me to rest, I would not.

“Melinae!” he called. “You must pay your price sooner or later. It was agreed! You’ll never make it. The man’s tendons are tearing. His spine is cracking.”

“Don’t listen!” Melinae ordered. “We can make it if you don’t listen to him.” She clapped her hands over my ears.

I picked up my stride. My bare, splintered feet bled in a dozen places. My calves were afire. But I would not let her go, could not give up. Not this time.

My life had been a series of failures. I’d married too young, with disastrous results. I’d quit a secure management position to write the great American novel and wound up writing descriptions of mail-order

goods no sane person would buy. Now all that seemed to have led to this moment, this bizarre contest of wills compelling me to push my body beyond its limits. This was the most crucial test of my life; failing Melinae now would be the most ignominious of my defeats. And if I succeeded, nothing else would matter.

The little man sensed my determination. I would not fail.

And then his weight plowed into my legs. I pitched sideways onto grassy ground. I still held on to her, but Melinae landed before me. Her scream was a low, chilling, unhuman screech of anguish that haunts me still.

Then nothing.

* * *

I was quite a sight, lying face down, wearing only torn slacks, bruised and bloodied. My toes rested on the lip of the asphalt path, and my left hand—the good one—clutched the root of a tall oak tree. As the first rays of the sun filtered through its branches, I tried to move. A pounding in my skull forced me to wait. One side of my face was stiff and sticky with dried blood. An unleashed dog sniffed at my ankle, and its owner rebuked it for straying near a wino. I suppose the woman thought I’d give it fleas.

I finally pulled myself into a sitting position braced against the oak and bent forward, head between my knees, until I was sure I wouldn’t pass out or be physically ill. I was already sick at heart, overwhelmed by self-disgust. I’d failed Melinae. The little man had had his way, though exactly what that meant I didn’t know. The world turned red when I tried flexing my right hand. Shattered bones, for sure. I’d have to get to a hospital.

First I wanted to go home and clean up.

Still, I didn’t move. I couldn’t let it go. I swore I’d find that little man,

somehow, and Melinae, too. Using the thick oak for support, I got to my feet and glared at a jogger who'd been staring at me. He turned his head and jogged faster. I glared across the Hudson River at oil tanks and high-rises, but they didn't seem worthy of my scorn. I glared upward at the fates, or at God, or at whatever supernatural force I could blame my screw-ups on.

Then I groaned, discovering that I could do nothing.

I knew every stone and moss-patch, every tree and bush on the path

between the Seventy-Second Street entrance and the boat basin. I realized, as I stared up through the oak's thick branches and saw, tangled higher than any human could have thrown it, the same red and gold sheet I'd draped over Melinae's half-naked form, that this tree had not stood here the night before.

I'd blacked out, but I hadn't let go of Melinae. When I'd awakened, my hand had been wrapped around a tree root.

What had she bartered for, to pay that price?

Hollow Screams

by Warren Muzak



On October 31st

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

October thirty-first: I'm up all night
Before my birthday, joy like clouds lifting,
Awaiting him, our phantom postman,
Delivering the post through halls of souls.

Familiar footsteps — each one singing out
The prizes: postcards, unsigned ransom notes,
Shy whispers of belated greeting cards,
Fond *billet-doux*, death warrants misaddressed.

My mail-slot opens, leaking orange light
Of pumpkin-colored wrap. I recognize
The writing, scents of licorice, handfuls
Of candy corn, delicious yearly treats
Devoured —before it's time to haunt again.

My icy tap's a grave reminder. *Boo*.



Phantom Postman

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

psfm October 2k25 • 55

The Dragon of Castle Lombro

by Parker McIntosh

The rain stopped a year ago. The clouds froze in the mountains above Castle Lombro, high above the valley and its villages. All the rain that should have fallen on the dry spring fields down in the valley dropped atop the castle's crumbling walls, no matter how many offerings Nall brought to the dragon.

After a week, Aiden Stone, the younger grandson of the stonemason, announced, unexpectedly, that he would leave to challenge the dragon. There had been a great celebration. The entire village opened their celars in an effort to make up for the loss the Stone family was about to endure. Aiden walked around the party cocksure, promising anyone who would listen that he would return. He hoisted the family's smithing hammer over his head and made threatening gestures at the mountain. The morning following the celebration, Aiden left.

The rain returned. Aiden didn't. His brother Blaine carved his brother's name into the stone monument on the outer wall of the castle himself, below the list of prior challengers. He promised to make the offerings for as long as his brother was gone. It was a promise that lasted a month before Nall realized Blaine had forgotten. Nall secretly started taking offerings up to the dragon himself, not wanting to embarrass Blaine, but it was too late. The rain stopped falling again.

When he realized his failing, Blaine didn't hesitate. Without fanfare or celebration, he set off to challenge the dragon. The rain returned. Nall continued to bring offerings to the dragon, and again, a few short months later, the rain stopped.

The villagers were starting to talk about Nall. Ever since he was old enough to listen, he loved stories about the castle and the dragon who

lived there. He asked the older storytellers to tell and retell the tales about the last King of Castle Lombro and his ignominious end. He relished the stories about the villagers rising up to overthrow the tyrant. And he loved hearing about villagers who left every few years to challenge the dragon who lived in the castle and who stole the rain when he was displeased. They were his heroes.

Nall started taking the offerings as soon as he was allowed. It was really on a dare from his best friend Artuin, who liked to make fun of him for still playing Hunting Dragon with the little children around the village, pretending to be a dragon to seek out the children hiding. Why not, Nall thought. He loved the castle and relished the opportunity to see it up close. To touch the monument that was said to be carved with every challenger's name. To press his ear to the gates to try to hear the dragon's breathing.

The trail through the mountain pass was steep and made more difficult by the wide basket of bread and dried fish he carried to offer the dragon. When he finally reached the gates, he stared up at the imposing moss-covered wall with his mouth wide open. He reached out to touch the gates, great slabs of iron rusted to a blood-crimson, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He touched the monument instead.

It was a large slab of blue stone set into the ground a few feet away from the gate. It was so old that moss had eaten the top of it. Even the names just beneath the moss were so eroded by rain and wind they were illegible depressions in the stone. He imagined his own name there, carved in stone so that only the ages could wash away his valor, and shivered. It was just a dream. He didn't think he could

ever be that brave.

From that visit onward, Nall brought the offering to the castle nearly every week. He stepped aside when a relative of a recent challenger insisted on going for a week or two, but always took up the mantle as soon as they forgot or grew tired of the journey.

The hike through the mountain pass became easier with repetition. Nall's slight frame didn't improve, but his legs grew strong, corded with lean muscle. And the number of challengers that had to go up the mountain fell. Nall remembered four consecutive years when the rains stayed up over the castle in the spring until the dragon was challenged, and then a second challenger had to be sent before the harvest because the rains stopped again. But now, with Nall making the regular offering, years went by between droughts. He grew so proud of it that in the rare instances when someone else made the offering, he would sometimes follow them, just out of sight, to make sure that they went all the way to the castle.

That was, at least, until the past year. Three challengers in under a year was a record, and people were starting to comment.

"Is he even taking the food all the way up to the castle?"

"I bet he's taking it up the mountain and eating it himself. He knows there won't be enough to go around by the end of the summer."

"Why doesn't he just challenge the dragon himself?"

This last jibe was said loud enough that Nall heard it, not that he needed to. He was as distraught as anyone else about the apparent failing of his offerings. He'd thought more than once that it was his duty to at least try. Now that a third challenger had apparently failed, the tiny Ariel Pois who left just before the prior year's harvest when it became clear her family's farm was in danger of losing the whole crop, and whose challenge apparently hadn't lasted the winter, Nall decided it was time for his own sacrifice.

Nall knelt to place the offering of bread and dried fish in the creche beneath the gates of Castle Lombro as he had done hundreds of times before. He stood up from the creche and ran his fingers along the flat monument that sat above it. Nall fingered the last three names. *Aiden Stone*. *Blaine Stone*. *Ariel Pois*. The curves of their letters were sharp and fresh and stung him like they were the names of people he failed. Nall could feel the notches made by the chisel, though the fresh white scars of their names were softening into the deep blue gray of the rest of the rock.

Nall stepped away from the monument and made for the castle's gate. It was his turn to attempt the challenge. He was not tall, or physically imposing, or capable with a weapon. But neither was Ariel, and her challenge kept the dragon satisfied for half a year.

No one knew what challenging the dragon meant. No one was sure why some challengers were successful in keeping the dragon at bay for months or years and others couldn't manage a week. There were more theories than a tree had leaves, and none of them were as likely as the next. Some claimed the dragon was more satisfied by human flesh than by the offerings of bread and fish. Why then did a mountain of a man like Blaine sate the dragon for a fraction of the time of tiny Ariel? Others thought that the dragon had to be challenged to a game of wits, one that a challenger could never win, only hope to prolong for as much time as possible. Nall thought the world of Aiden, but he had trouble believing that blockhead would have been able to outsmart a dragon for even an hour.

So Nall didn't know what to expect when he entered the gate. He just knew that the people of Lombro expected him to be successful in some way that others hadn't been. They thought that because he asked so many questions about the castle and the history of the dragon, that because he showed such interest, that he somehow knew secrets that all the elders who told him those stories missed. He didn't believe he had any better knowledge about what to expect or how to satisfy the dragon than anyone else. His curiosity and sense of duty had finally gotten the better of him. What happened behind the gate was a mystery

he felt he needed to uncover, even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Castle Lombro was in battle with the elements. A battle it was losing. Young trees sprouted right up to the walls. Creeping vines crept up and cocooned the battlements. Two towers had crumbled down, and the other two looked like they were not far behind. Only the barbican and gate stood solid against time. Nall wondered what would happen in a few hundred years when the forest managed to reclaim the castle. If the dragon would be forced to find a new home and remove the curse on their valley.

Nall walked up to the gate and placed a hand on the giant iron door. It was damp, a feeling that made Nall thirsty after weeks of drought in the village. He moved close and had the urge to lick the metal. His face was filled with the intoxicating scent of iron and water, reminiscent of blood.

The door was enormous, at least twice as tall as Nall. He wondered how he was supposed to get inside the castle. The door would be too heavy to move. He thought there might be an opening in one of the walls, where a tree's roots had opened a hole into the castle, or maybe one of the collapsed towers offered a way in. He knew there had to be a way. No one had left and returned unable to challenge the dragon. No one had returned at all.

Nall placed his hand on the door. It pushed open easily at his touch, like its hinges were greased and it weighed less than a feather. He shivered. As excited as he was to uncover the mystery of the dragon, there was no turning back now. Nall stepped through the door into the ruinous castle with a fluttering heart, afraid, but determined too.

The courtyard of the castle was a dank, depressing place. The ground was a litter of rocks, tumbled down from the crumbling battlements and towers, and the forest's new growth. Ferns grew in the shade of the walls, and young trees lifted their gangling trunks haphazardly around the square. At the center of the square, among the fight between old and new, stood the dragon.

The dragon was smaller than Nall expected. From the stories he grew up listening to, he'd thought the dragon to be a monster at least as big as the keep, almost too big for the castle to contain it. He'd imagined a beast, violent and rabid. He'd been prepared to jump into a fight for his life, a fight he expected to lose. But the dragon stood barely taller than a human. It sat on its haunches like a cat, its body covered in shimmering, sapphire scales. It looked fat with all the rain it had stolen.

The dragon stared at Nall without appearing to stare at him. Its face was framed on either side by two long whiskers that explored the air as if they were drifting in a breeze. Aside from that, the dragon could have been a statue.

Nall waited for a roar. For the animal to spring at him, to be thrust into combat. His heart was finally catching up with the situation. It pounded in his chest and in his temples. The small leather cap he wore as a helmet was suddenly too tight, and he wanted to rip it off. He unsheathed a sword, little more than a dagger and all the blacksmith could provide him with on short notice. He took a sliding step forward and extended the tip of the blade towards the dragon. He didn't trust his voice to issue a challenge.

The dragon remained still for a moment, like it was ignoring him, and then stretched. It reached two clawed feet forward in the dirt and yawned. The whiskers appeared to stretch too, extending to Nall like they were reaching out to shake his hand. He shivered, grasped the knife with both hands, and jabbed it in the direction of the dragon.

"That won't be necessary," the dragon said.

Nall dropped the knife. Not because he was listening to the dragon, but because never in his wildest dreams would the dragon have spoken to him. Even the stories that claimed the dragon had to be outsmarted or tricked hadn't prepared Nall for a beast that spoke his language so easily, and with a vaguely familiar accent.

If Nall dropping the weapon amused the dragon, it didn't show it. It stretched and yawned again and scratched its fat belly. The claws scraped against scales and made a grating screech that made Nall wince.

"I suppose you're here to remove me," the dragon said, nonplussed. Like a challenger arrived every day, which, now that Nall thought about it, wasn't too far off the truth. There had been three challengers in less than a year's time. Four, now that he was there.

"Well, I'll be off then," the dragon said.

If Nall could have dropped his knife again, he would have. He stared dumbly at the dragon and then started to stammer.

"But what about ... how did you ... where are ..."

"Oh don't tell me you don't understand either."

The dragon didn't sound like it was annoyed. Its mouth opened in what looked like a grin and its whiskers danced. It sat back down on its haunches and rolled its eyes.

"They should really consult their histories down in the village. If they did, they'd know that Castle Lombro must always be inhabited. If it isn't, the castle summons me, and for my presence, I demand the rain. That is the simple curse of the last king of Castle Lombro."

Nall didn't know what to say. He'd never heard anything about a curse or that the castle was supposed to be lived in. The only thing he knew about the king was ...

"The last king of Lombro was overthrown by the villagers centuries ago. He can't still have power in the valley, can he?"

"Until the last tower falls, and the final wall is worn down by the years, someone must always live in the castle looking over the valley so that

the villagers are reminded that they exist at the pleasure of someone above them. Now that you are here, I can leave."

"But ..."

Nall didn't know what to say. It sounded too simple, and it didn't explain where any of the other challengers were. Where were Ariel and the Stone brothers? The dragon looked at him through two patient, immobile eyes, waiting for him to finish. It appeared to enjoy Nall's squirming.

"Where are the others?" he asked finally.

The dragon shrugged. "They left. If you leave, you die. A young man, Aiden I believe, didn't bother asking what would happen if he left. I was recalled here quite soon after he took residence. His brother had the gall to chase me out of the castle. I watched his body disintegrate as soon as he passed the monument and was forced to take my place back in the square. The girl, however, lasted longer than I expected. I suppose she felt supported."

"Supported? No one heard from her again."

"Of course none of you heard from her." The dragon was enjoying itself too much, and anger was growing in Nall's stomach, but he knew he needed information. "You are invisible to them now. You've entered the castle. They can't see or hear you. You are just like the last king of Lombro. Present, but not."

"How could we have supported her then?"

"You continued to bring her food. She must have thought you believed." The dragon stretched again and stood up, spreading its wings. They were at least twice the size of its body, and Nall could see the sunlight filtering blue through the thin membranes.

Nall thought about all the times he brought offerings up to the castle,

believing they were for the dragon. He wondered if Ariel had watched him. If she'd wondered if he could sense her, and he wished he could say that he had. His heart broke for her, and for Aiden and Blaine. None of them understood.

The dragon flapped its wings once, casting up a whirlwind of dust and gravel. Nall squinted his eyes and braced against the gust.

“How am I supposed to tell them?” he yelled over the wind. “How will they know that I’m here? That I have to be here?”

The dragon didn’t laugh, though its voice carried a sting, like it was saying *That’s the point*. It circled above the courtyard and called out, “You’ll just have to hope they remember.” And then it was gone.

Nall watched the dragon become a dot in the sky and disappear behind the peaks of the mountains. He stared at the spot and watched dark clouds tumble down from the same peak, blanket the sky, and continue down into the valley. He watched the clouds fill the valley and the rain fall like a screen, hiding him from the village.

* * *

The food in the creche had felt like a lot when Nall was carrying it up the mountain. Looking at it now as his sole source of food, it was pitiful. He was nervous just slipping out of the gate to collect it, afraid that his body would disintegrate upon leaving the castle. His body remained intact, though his fingers and toes tingled the whole time. He couldn’t be sure if that was just his imagination or the castle’s curse warning him.

Nall wasn’t sure that he believed the dragon at all. His body didn’t look any different, and he could still lift the food offerings and open the gate. He wasn’t a ghost. There was no way to test it, however, until someone else came to the castle.

Nall’s stomach dropped. He looked at the food, realizing it would need

to last him at least a week. And that was if someone in the village even remembered to bring an offering. He was pretty sure they would, given how recently he left, but it made him nervous now that his life depended on their timeliness. He could recall dozens of weeks when the village elders had to be reminded, usually by him, that an offering was required. He hoped someone would take up the mantle in his absence.

The days crept by. Nall explored the castle that was now his home. The stonework was in dire condition, and he felt uneasy walking through hallways that were partially caved in, nervous that the rest of it would give way and crush him before he had a chance to prove himself. Of the two remaining towers, only one was passable. The staircase of the other had collapsed, and the entire structure held on by a few, small loadstones. Nall thought he could have kicked one and knocked the whole thing down. He climbed the other tower and spent more and more of his time up there. He could see some of his village’s roofs down in the valley. Smokestacks rose like curling arms waving to him, and he saw activity in the fields now that they were getting rain. Seeing the activity made him feel like his sacrifice had been worth it.

The food, carefully parceled out, lasted the week. Barely. Nall went to bed hungry every night and woke each morning before sunrise with an aching stomach. The bread staled to rocks and he spent half a morning gnawing it into swallowable mush. He hid the rest in small rooms, out of sight to keep himself from eating more than a day’s allowance.

On the one-week mark, Nall watched the trail from the village attentively from the tower. It was too far to make out anyone starting on the trail down in the valley, but there were a number of breaks in the foliage and open spaces along the mountainside where he hoped to see someone, anyone, coming to support him.

At midday, Nall finished his last stale chunk of bread and started to worry he’d miscounted the days. He tried to remember something distinct from each day since the dragon left, but they all blurred together. He was positive that he’d partitioned the food in seven equal piles. Almost positive.

“Hello,” a voice called.

Nall froze. His eyes widened and he swallowed.

“Nall? Anyone?”

It was Artuin. Of course Artuin, his best friend in the world, would support him. Artuin might not have had Nall’s enthusiasm for the castle and its lore, but he would want to remember Nall.

Nall tried to call out, but his mouth was too dry from the bread. He cleared his throat and made a noise that was more desperate grunt than reply, and then he ran down the tower’s steps. He rushed around the battlements to a pile of rubble and slid down. He scraped the back of his legs and skinned one of his hands. He ran to the gate and pulled.

The gate didn’t budge.

Nall pulled again, putting all of his weight into it. The gate refused to move an inch. He slapped the iron with his skinned hand and yelped at the surprise sting of pain. He fell back on the ground and held his hurt fist close to his chest.

“Nall?” Artuin’s voice was muffled through the gate, but Nall could still hear it. He called out until his voice grew hoarse and he was just sobbing unintelligible cries. Artuin never responded. Eventually, Artuin stopped calling out. The birds started chirping again, and the only other sounds were leaves rustling in the wind.

Nall stayed on the ground crying until the shadows of the wall lengthened and covered him in cool darkness. He shivered and stood up. There was a faint bloody handprint on the gate, and he touched it. He knew the gate would open for him now, and it did silently, revealing an empty courtyard. There was a tiny part of Nall that wanted to sprint down the path and try to catch Artuin. He knew it was hopeless. Artuin was long gone, and Nall would be dead before he lost sight of the castle. Even if he had caught Artuin, Artuin wouldn’t have been able to

see him. The dragon had told the truth. He was trapped in the castle, alone, until he lost his nerve, or the castle deteriorated around him.

The creche was filled with food again, though not as much as Nall would have liked. He was in no condition to be picky. He scurried it all inside and before he let himself think, he feasted. He completely sated his hunger for the first time in a week. After collecting every crumb of bread and morsel of fish and licking them from his fingers, he looked at the pitiful pile that remained. He swallowed and looked at the sky. There were clouds coming down from the mountains. He hoped they would drop enough rain so that he could at least drink his fill to hide his hunger.

* * *

Nall settled into a rhythm of hunger and loneliness. He got better at making the offered food last the full week, separating the piles into their own rooms, one for each day. He found it was easier to eat all the food for a given day at once as soon as he woke up. That way he wouldn’t forget whether he’d eaten later in the day and inadvertently eat a second day’s rations.

On the third week, Artuin was accompanied by the grandfather of the Stone family. The old man Stone carried his chisel and hammer and helped Artuin with a larger than normal offering of food. Nall watched them approach from the tower. He could hear the low murmur of their voices but couldn’t make out the words. When they disappeared from view under the wall, Nall ran down from the tower to the battlements.

“How long will it take you?”

Artuin’s voice was so faint that Nall could just make out the words. He leaned out as far as he could from an opening in the battlements. He still couldn’t see them. A tingly, uneasy feeling filled his body, so he pulled back and resigned himself to listening.

“Not long. Aren’t many letters in Nall, and none of them are tricky.

Aiden would have been quicker at it, but these creaky hands have still got some skill in them.”

Nall heard the high-pitched *clink clink clink* of a chisel against stone.

“What do you think happened?” Artuin asked.

The chiseling paused. “Happened? He challenged the dragon. Scared him off, most likely. Hopefully he stays away for a while yet. We’ve got a few more months until harvest, and a drought now would kill the fields.”

Artuin was silent for a moment and the chiseling resumed. When he spoke again, his voice was so low the clinking of metal on stone almost drowned him out. Nall strained to hear.

“Do you really think Nall scared the dragon off? Don’t you remember him? He was ... well, he wasn’t the kind to face off with a dragon.”

Nall’s heart sank. Artuin was his best friend in the world. If he was already doubting him a few weeks after he left, who knew what everyone else was saying down in the village.

“The dragon’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Who knows if there even is a dragon? The rain stopped. The rain came back. It could just be coincidence that it comes back after someone comes up here and disappears. Maybe there was no dragon, and he was too ashamed to return emptyhanded, so he ran off.”

Nall screamed down at them and almost missed the old man Stone’s quiet response. “Do you think that’s what my grandchildren did? Ran off in shame?”

If Artuin responded, Nall couldn’t hear him. The old man continued. “You can see the rain caught in this castle like a faucet from the sky. Don’t pretend like you don’t remember. Maybe there is a dragon,

maybe there isn’t. All we know is that when someone comes up here to find it, they disappear, and the rain comes back. The sacrifice, and its result, are real. The best thing you can do for your friend is to remember him. If you don’t like thinking about bringing offerings to a dragon that might or might not have killed him, bring the offerings to Nall. Talk to him. He did something very brave, just like my grandchildren. Who knows? Maybe you’ll be called on to make the same sacrifice someday.”

Artuin didn’t respond and the harsh chiseling continued. Too soon, it ended. There was shuffling, some knocking about of tools, and then the sound of footsteps receding from the castle walls.

Nall didn’t move immediately. He felt empty. The old man Stone’s words were kind, but they also passed on a heavy responsibility. Nall felt that he was holding on by the thinnest of strands, and he needed to hold out at least until harvest. It felt like an eternity.

Hunger won out over self-pity. Nall scurried down the battlements and out of the castle. The offered food that had looked so bountiful in their hands barely filled the creche. Some of the bread was already stale, and he threw a roll in frustration into the forest. Nall stared at the empty space between the trees where the bread had flown in horror. One less roll to get him through the week. He hung his head and brought the rest of the food into the castle, chastened. He didn’t even look at the new white scar on the monument bearing his name.

Artuin brought the food faithfully each week. He started bringing other offerings too. A whittled flute, old obsidian arrowheads, a poor carving of what might have been a dragon. Nall treasured all of them. The castle was a barren place. He’d explored everything there was to explore and hadn’t found anything to pass the time. Those trinkets were worth almost as much as the food.

The weeks crawled by. Nall spent days in the tower, willing the rows of green in the distant fields to grow tall. He longed for the day when he would see the glint of scythes swinging and could finally entertain

the idea of leaving the castle.

Then came the week when Artuin didn't bring the offering. Nall scoured every room he'd ever hidden food in twice and then tore the entire castle apart. He returned to the creche time after time, hoping he'd just missed Artuin. And then night fell, and Nall's worry turned to fear. There was no food.

The following week was the longest of Nall's life. He crept from room to room in a daze, hoping that somehow food would have materialized there. He licked the floor of each room, picking up more gravel than crumb. He sifted through the dirt around the creche. By the third day he'd resorted to eating insects he found beneath the stones of the castle. They made his stomach hurt. It was a different, less insistent pain than the twisting of his empty stomach.

The day that marked two weeks from the last offering, Nall started to wonder whether his dying of starvation would break the curse. If he was going to perish one way or another, it would give even more meaning to his sacrifice if he could end the dragon's reign forever. He resolved to try. Even if more food was brought, he wouldn't touch it. The harvest was close enough that the crops could survive a mild drought if he was wrong. And then he heard footsteps and thoughts of food forced any conviction out of his mind.

It seemed to Nall that Artuin took his time delivering the offering. There were a lot of footsteps, sighing, and even a knock on the iron door. Nall pulled on it halfheartedly, knowing that it wouldn't budge but unable to stop the reflex. Finally, the steps receded. Nall tore the gate open to get to the food.

He forced himself to be deliberate. He only ate a portion of his day's food, though he could have eaten the entire offering. His mouth was salivating at the remaining pile, and he had to swallow repeatedly to keep from drooling all over it. He separated it into groups and hid them in different rooms, careful to keep a small number of dried fish separate. He needed to build a store for any future week that an offering

was forgotten.

* * *

Nall wasted away and his clothes hung off him. He became a slave to his food and nothing else mattered. He stopped exploring the castle, stopped climbing to the tower, stopped doing anything that wasted energy. He counted time in how long it had been since he last ate, and how long it would be until he could eat again.

He started meditating in front of the gate. Sometimes he wasted whole days sitting in a fugue, letting hunger pangs wax and wane. More often than he would have admitted to anyone, he came out of his meditations in the castle's dungeons, picking bugs beneath stones.

Artuin was fairly regular providing food throughout the summer, but after harvest he missed more and more weeks. Nall could never build more than a meager store before a week would go by without an offering and he was forced to eat the last of his food. And then winter came, and the offerings stopped altogether.

A thin layer of snow covered the ground around the castle, and it remained undisturbed week after week. Nall stretched his food down to the last crumb until every morsel was gone. The bugs hid from the cold or Nall had managed to eat them all, he wasn't sure which. Time grew meaningless in the gray twilight of a starved winter. Nall crouched, shivering in the courtyard, hoping the elements would claim him before hunger. He gnawed on his fingers until they bled, and then he sucked the blood from his torn nubs. He thought relentlessly about escaping the castle, letting his body disintegrate just to make the torment end. He held onto the miniscule hope that by dying inside the castle he would end the curse.

Nall wasted and wilted, but the castle would not let him die. He jumped out of his delirium at any odd sound that his brain could equate to a footstep in the snow. The winter passed and Nall lived on the edge of starvation, suffering, his body eating itself but kept preternaturally alive.

The rain woke Nall. He fought waking, afraid of the hunger pains that came with being conscious, but once he was aware that it was raining, it was impossible to get comfortable. He opened his mouth, hoping that a few drops might slake his hunger, at least for a while, and he realized it did. He sat there like a statue, his mouth open to the sky, and delighted in every raindrop that landed in his mouth. He felt bigger, stronger than he had in months. Somehow, he had survived the winter, despite being forgotten by his village.

Nall kept his mouth open to the sky for as long as the rain fell. He felt like he drank gallons. When the rain finally stopped, he closed his mouth and shook the wetness from his body, listening to the drops buffet against the rocks around him. Which was strange. He shouldn't have been close enough to any of the walls to hit them. He stretched and felt an unfurling sensation.

Nall looked up at two leathery wings stretched taut above him. They covered half the courtyard like a tent covering. He looked down at his legs, saw claws digging into the gravel, emerald scales glittering with raindrops.

He didn't have much time to wonder at the change. He heard the scratching sound of feet falling along the dirt path outside the walls. They paused, and he heard food drop into the creche. It was too late for that, Nall thought. He wasn't hungry anymore.

Nall waited for the footsteps to disappear and looked up to the sky, wondering if there would be more rain soon. The water filling his stomach was wonderous unlike any meal he'd ever had. It beat bugs, bread, and fish by a mile. He almost didn't notice the gate silently opening. The wet metal flashed, and Nall got a whiff of the forest.

A boy stood under the open gate. He was familiar, but Nall didn't see humans the same way he once had. The boy was afraid. His knees shook, and he looked shocked to be face to face with a dragon. He

stood his ground. Nall was impressed, though he didn't hold any ill feelings towards the boy.

"I've come to challenge you," the boy stammered. He swallowed and lifted his foot to step into the courtyard.

"Wait," Nall said. The boy froze.

Nall didn't know why he stopped the boy coming in. He knew that the castle needed to be lived in, that the boy should rightfully take his place. A vague memory made him hesitate.

"Why are you challenging me?" he asked.

The boy took a step back, as if his reasons were obvious. "You're stealing our water," he said. "The crops won't grow if the drought continues. I don't know what you want, whether it's a sacrifice or a battle or what, but I'm here to give it to you."

Again the boy lifted his foot to step into the castle, and again Nall stopped him. He narrowed his eyes.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Artuin."

"Artuin," Nall murmured. "Artuin!" His eyes flashed. Artuin who had brought him food. Artuin who had been his friend. Artuin, who had forgotten about him.

Nall fumed inside. In a flash he remembered each hungry day, every twist of his stomach, every aching moment he had spent waiting for Artuin to arrive. He had suffered because of Artuin. And he could make Artuin suffer in return.

Nall tossed his head from side to side and by chance his eyes lit on the small, whittled flute, and his anger deflated. Artuin didn't know he had

abandoned him. All he knew was that his friend had disappeared. Perhaps the visits to the castle had been just as painful, only in a different way. Letting him fall into the same trap would be evil.

“Go back to the village,” Nall said. As soon as he made up his mind, he could feel the castle working against him. It pried at his brain and tried to stop him from speaking. He pushed on. “Tell them that someone must always live at Castle Lombro. Tell them that even if they can’t see you, they must feed you. Don’t enter the castle until you are sure they will bring you food. Then I will leave.”

Artuin stared closely at Nall like he almost recognized him. Then he shook his head.

“That’s it?” he asked. “I come in, and you leave?”

“That’s it. Someone must always inhabit Castle Lombro. If you leave, you die, and I return and drink all the village’s water from the sky for payment until another comes to take my place. That is the way it must be until the last tower falls and the battlements are breached.”

Artuin looked puzzled and asked more questions, but the castle was weighing on Nall now. He shook his head and retreated inside himself. He hoped Artuin understood and would listen to him.

Artuin left and returned the next day. It had rained overnight, and Nall was full and strong again. Artuin opened the door, and Nall was ready for him.

“They’re going to bring you food?” Nall asked.

Artuin nodded from the gate. Nall stood and stretched his wings. Artuin flinched and stepped back.

“Can I really not leave after I come in?” he asked.

Nall nodded. “They won’t be able to see you, or hear you either,” he said softly.

Artuin’s face flashed with fear and then acceptance. He lifted a foot and stepped into the castle.

There was nothing else to say. A weight lifted from Nall’s head. He looked into the mountains and saw the clouds there, flowing down into the valley. He jumped and pumped his wings, circling in the courtyard to gain altitude. On his last circle he kicked out a leg and knocked the loadstone from one of the two remaining towers. It crumbled into the forest outside of the wall, and part of the battlements tumbled into the forest below.

“One tower to go,” he called down. He didn’t know if Artuin heard him. Nall wasn’t tied to the castle anymore, at least as long as Artuin remained. He flew up and into the clouds that fed him. Nall never felt the pull of Castle Lombro again. Sometimes, flitting between delicious rain clouds, he wondered whether Artuin still inhabited the tower, alone and waiting for the elements to bring down the final tower. Or if the villagers had forgotten him, and a new dragon of Castle Lombro was now fulfilling the curse.

Served Cold

by F.J. Bergmann

When a scented silk scarf wafts before you,
your eyes will snap open, only the dull whites
showing. You sneeze, with a liquid gurgle
at the end. Dust sifts out of your clothing,
and the reason for the sweet perfume
is suddenly apparent. Where are you now?
Why, wherever were you expecting to be,
lambkin? Don't try to move just yet.
In fact, be still until I tell you otherwise.
When I am ready, I will send you out
to do my bidding, to harvest what I need.
You will gather roots, berries, thorns, banes,
and you will not wonder what is done
with them. Lazulie's tisanes are famous,
oh yeah—and you the unliving proof. Now,
get me a bucket of water. Now take it back
to the well and pour it in. Get me another
bucket. Take it back again. All night
you will fetch and spill, fetch and spill.

Someday a handsome, still-young man
will catch a glimpse of you from the road
as you fall back under the shadow of trees
or disappear in the distance past the fringe
of hills. You will have changed and he
will be uncertain. Then I will send you
to keep watch while he sleeps, until
he sees you through his window one night
and becomes afraid to sleep. He would never
come to me (just as you would not have),
despite my arts, but when he sickens,
someone who loves him will come, asking me
for what they think he needs, and then ...
Somewhere they are calling your name,
but I tell you there is no need to listen.
Someplace, they had been expecting you
to come home.

The Sun Shines Down on England

by Luke Walker

She's a little drunk, my wife. That's okay. So am I. On a day like this—most of this usually grey country dozing in a heatwave for the last month and both of us with a week off work—what else is there to do but spend the afternoon in a beer garden and have a boozy lunch?

“Come on. I haven't been up here since I was a kid.” Dawn leans closer to kiss my cheek. It's heat and wine on my skin and I lick salty sweat from my lips as I pretend to think it over while knowing I'm about to agree. We're less than ten minutes from the pub and the pricey houses all along Hopton Road, but this path lined by shrubs and bushes made tired and brown by the temperatures, and the fences around the grounds (*grounds*, not gardens) feels far removed from the pub and the unbroken sunshine with its pretty flowerbeds and landscaping. There's nobody else in sight. Nobody else with the idea of climbing the steps inside Muscott Tower. Dawn's idea.

“It won't be open. It's gone three,” I say.

“Bet you a drink it is open.”

She's already walking towards the low fence and gate at the foot of the entrance steps. Her legs are bare; her denim skirt is slightly above the knee and her legs gleam. This is where I want to be, I think. Always. In the sun and the heat with Dawn always happy and pretty. This is the life.

Just a little drunk?

I snigger at myself and follow as Dawn reaches the gate and the sign beside it listing the opening hours. There's no need to check the times:

the doors at the top of the steps are wide open, offering a little glimpse of the old walls, their stone, their age. Muscott Tower is at least five hundred years old, built in the centuries before Muscott was a town, before the Civil War or the Great Fire of London or the Industrial Revolution. Or anything that's shaped this country and become a history lesson for bored kids waiting for the final bell of the day to send them home. Five centuries of summer, winter, storms, and days like this when the summer has knocked everyone into a doze and turned green bushes into tatty brown.

“How much is it?” I ask.

“Six quid each.”

“Twelve pissing quid to climb some steps?”

“It's worth it. The view is great.” Dawn laughs softly. “I think. Been a while.”

We know the Tower and this part of Muscott. We grew up here, went to the same schools, then left home for different universities. Return visits to the hometown, shared nights in the pub and at gigs with friends we still sometimes see meant we stayed mates. That developed into something more in our early twenties. Now close to fifteen years later and after nine years of marriage, we have our mid-terrace house a few miles across Muscott. Both sets of our parents sold our childhood homes to move away. Our visits to this area with its village feel, its houses completely out of our reach, and this trailing path like a secret with the Tower bisecting it are occasional. And visits are all they are. The days of people like us—mid thirties, in decent jobs and with-

out kids—being able to afford a house here to start a family are long gone. They died when people like our parents moved and landlords rented out their houses for hundreds more a month than their mortgages cost.

“You really want to trek up there?” I crane my neck to peer to the roof. The Tower is probably the same height as a six-storey block of flats. Cracks and thin splits in the exterior brickwork prove its age, but it also has a sturdiness and solidity that say there’s still strength in the structure.

“Yeah. It’ll be fun.” Dawn takes a furtive look around and lightly squeezes my groin. “We can have a quickie on the roof.”

“Really?”

Twelve quid suddenly doesn’t seem like too much to climb the steps and stand under the perfect blue of this late July sky.

Dawn laughs. “No. Not at all.”

“Shit.”

She ascends the steps. I follow, enjoying the view, and we enter the Tower.

Although there are small windows and slats plus the doors we’ve just come through, vision goes almost completely black for a second. I blink, adjusting to the change of light, welcoming the cooler air.

It’s larger than I expected. The walls stretch high; the floor is paving, worn in places, mostly flat and coloured a faded yellow. *Faded* is the key issue. Bricks, paving; the orange and brown of the surrounding walls. All faded. Even the small desk where a guy in his late middle-age sits with a Chromebook, his phone, and a few other items is faded. He smiles and it’s warm.

“Good afternoon.” His voice is smooth and cultured. He could work

as a butler.

“Hi.” Dawn crosses to him and I don’t miss his gaze on her. “Are we too late to come in? We weren’t sure what time you closed.”

“Last visits are quarter to four.” He makes a show of checking his watch. “I think we can squeeze you in, madam. Not as if I’m rushed off my feet this afternoon.”

He chuckles. I’m in a good enough mood to let him off his checking out my wife, although when we take the steps through the little alcove, I’ll be sure to send Dawn up first and block the old man’s eyes on her.

“Thanks. I came up here when I was a kid. Been meaning to come back since, but never got round to it.”

She’s like this especially after a drink. Dawn likes people. I say to her she’s like an old lady at a bus stop, talking to anyone who’ll listen. And she tells me that’s exactly what she’ll do when we’re old farts.

“Do you know the history of the Tower and the area?” he asks.

“More or less. We grew up here.”

I dig out my phone to pay, not too interested in a history lesson. He gives it anyway. Old times; dead kings; wars and upheaval under our feet, sleeping in the earth. Mouldering there. The potted version is the Tower was built in the late fifteenth century for a family who owned Muscott back when it was only a village connected loosely to surrounding villages which eventually become the town Dawn and I know. It passed through other families thanks to marriages and deaths and the long years. An adjoining building and other smaller dwellings were destroyed around 1650 (*ten to five*, I say, and while Dawn laughs, our guide doesn’t). Whoever owned it after that didn’t rebuild and the Tower became its own structure in private hands until the last owners sold it in the 1960s and it made its way into the ownership of a private company. It’s a listed building; doing anything to it other than general

maintenance and repair is out of the question. He winks at us right then and says *no matter how much some people would like to knock it down and sell off the land*, then smiles as if the three of us share a secret. Dawn nods in the right places and I give my phone a discreet shake. He's still checking her out; Dawn catches the movement.

"We're okay to go up, then?" she asks.

"By all means. The passage up is a tad tight. You'll be fine, though."

"We definitely will." I put a tiny emphasis on the first words and pay. He insists we take a few thin booklets "on the house" which look to detail the history he's just told us. Dawn doesn't have pockets in her skirt. I jam them into the side pocket of my cargo shorts and take her hand.

"Don't lock up before we come down," Dawn says.

He puts a hand on his chest. "Not a chance, my dear. Enjoy the view."

Not as much as you are.

I smile. Dawn catches my eye. She's seen the old gent's wandering gaze. Of course she has. Women always do.

Dawn a step ahead, we enter the narrow opening directly opposite the man and his quiet afternoon. My eyes take another moment to adjust. Slitted windows cut into the ancient stone let sunlight poke its fingers in and fall to the small steps. I'm not a tall guy, but I'll have to tread practically sideways; there's no chance I can fit my whole foot on one of these steps.

"Who the fuck lived here?" I whisper. "Hobbits?"

She shushes me, checks the angle to make sure only I can see, and wiggles her bum. Without bothering to check if I'm in the old man's view, I squeeze her and pretend to slide my hand around to her front.

She smacks it away and starts up with a hand on the rail. I use the curving wall, pretty much walking on tip-toe. As narrow as the slits are, the sunlight is hot. The days before this heatwave were usual July before they climbed above thirty overnight and have hovered around thirty-five since. Not a drop of rain since and barely any breeze. People have been complaining since day two. Not me. Bring on the sunshine. Bring on moments like this with the stale but still pleasant air in this staircase and now having to turn sideways to keep ascending.

"Christ. He wasn't joking," I say. "The passage is definitely tight."

"I forgot about this. It's okay in a minute."

My fingers are still on the wall, still trailing across scars. Tiny flakes fall silently. I rub the tips of my fingers together, feeling the grit and the dust. Centuries of it. More time than I will ever have. More time than I can possibly know even if I combined my life with my parents and their parents and their parents. All the time sliding down an endless tunnel, and the weak flutter of the light at its end is the moment the first brick of Muscott Tower is placed into position.

I grunt, mouth dry and tasting of cold lager. I get like this after a few, sometimes. Thinking too much. Thinking in ways my fully sober mind doesn't touch. But then if I'd been fully sober, no way would we be clambering up these stairs, me with my back to the wall simply to fit, and Dawn panting in the heat. Conversation stops as we focus on one step in front of the other, tasting the summer and the age. After what feels like half an hour but is more like three minutes, Dawn cheers and fresh air—boiling but fresher than the stairs—hits me.

"Finally." I follow her to the roof and to the view.

"Wow." My admiration is unforced; my surprise is completely real.

"Told you," she says just a little smugly.

The Tower isn't the tallest building I've ever been up. Probably not

even the tallest building in Muscott. Right now with the perfect sheen of the sky and the smells of summer all around, it doesn't need to be the tallest. It only needs to be what it is: a place to see across Muscott—a sleeping Muscott made sluggish by the heat. Roads, pathways, long avenues, and little lanes between houses alongside the huge gardens and grounds of homes we will never be able to own; swimming pools and garages separate from the houses; grass bordering the pavements and low bushes offering a fraction of shade to those pavements. The post office on Hopton Road that's been there since at least our childhoods; the wide path beside it that reaches the high fence around the bowls lawn, private tennis courts, and then a huge circle of grass turned into the yellow of old hay. Further out, the even more expensive homes built in the last twenty years. I have faint memories of the land before those homes. Nothing but trees and fields all the way to the neighbouring villages. The view of those empty miles is gone. In its place, *this* view of our resting town overseen by an endless sky, a fat sun I can feel through my hat; our town where Hopton Road meets Vine Avenue and its little offshoots of lanes that end at Williams' Woods. The woods where friends and I spent a lot of time as kids in the shade and the cool of days like this or trudging through air stinging with frost.

Muscott below us. Our home—or at least this part of it—available to us solely through snatched moments. Not ours to know, and definitely not ours to own even a piece of this day.

“Impressive.”

Dawn catches on something in my voice. She looks at me, not smiling, and I keep my gaze on the curving line of Hopton Road, tracking it until I stop on the pub. A vehicle pulls into the car park, and my eyes are good enough to make out it's a BMW.

“You okay?” Dawn asks.

A couple emerge from the car. The distance is too great to be sure—they *might* be around our age. All at once and for no good reason, I hate this nameless, faceless couple and their car. Their lives I don't

know but can see. Their money. Their drive out to the pub for lunch as they doubtless do whenever the hell they like, not when they manage to put the money together for an occasion. Two people who definitely live within walking distance of this pub, who have been out all day. A trip a few hours ago to the coast thirty miles away; a drive home and stopping here for a quick drink. And all of it done without any thought because there didn't need to be any thought or planning or thinking about money.

“Si?” Dawn pulls on my wrist. “What's wrong?”

I clear my throat. “Nothing. I'm good.” Pulling her close, cupping her hip, I trace a light touch on her skin where her t-shirt leaves a tiny gap between it and her skirt.

“Si.” She won't let it go, and despite my sudden bad mood, this makes me laugh gently.

“Just seeing it like this.” I wave at the picture below. We're standing above a painting created by an artist who knows how to add detail the eye doesn't see at first and then can't unsee.

The young trees near the post office, probably planted a decade ago compared to the oaks that have been standing for a few hundred years at the junction of the road and Vine Avenue. The wall beside the cut-through that links the Avenue with Merson Way standing out because half of it has been replaced, so the yellow bricks don't match the old brown of the next section. The display stand at the curve of the road to announce local business and issues. Five miles away on our street, the stand would be destroyed purely because it could be. Here, it stands unmolested and clean. The sun glints on the glass.

“What's wrong with it? This is a lovely view,” Dawn replies.

“I know. It's a great place. We had it when we were kids, but now . . .”

“What?”

“Would you live here? Like our parents did?”

“We have the same parents?” She pulls away in mock horror, and I love her for trying to lighten my mood.

“You know what I mean,” I say.

“Yeah. I do.” Dawn sighs. “I’d buy a house here tomorrow if we could. Not much chance, though.”

“No.”

“It’s okay. We’ve got our house. We’ve got enough.”

I wipe hot sweat from my neck. Even with the best part of a whole bottle of lotion smeared on our skin, we’ll have to get the after-sun out when we’re home. Home in our little house on our street that could never have a display like the one below with the sun winking. Glinting.

“We should be able to buy a house here. Our parents did. It was no big deal for them. They did it on one salary, for Christ’s sake. We can’t do it on two. We can’t have this comfortable, boring middle-class life in this boring place. That pisses me off. I know it does for you, too,” I say.

“Yeah. A lot. You’re right, but what we can do about it?”

“Not much.”

I’ve brought the mood down and I’m sorry for it, but there’s only my tired anger and bitterness up here now.

We stand together in silence, hand in hand, and I let my eyes move where they want across the slumbering streets. The dreaming places. Funny to think of the hundreds of houses down there and all of them new when our parents bought their homes. Funny to think of that past and people our age beginning their lives and their families with the

view to the west offering a clear line of sight out to Muscott’s surrounding villages. On days like this with the sun free to land on every inch of the fields or days when there was nothing but ice in the wind and the twilight coming down hard to the clean roads and avenues. To the spaces below the land.

Something behind my eyes turns over. It feels like a key turning in a lock, and while I’m aware of Dawn’s hand and of how small we are under the sky, I’m down there on the pavement, flat on the ground with my ear to the baking surface. Listening. A heartbeat.

A dream.

“Let’s head off.” Dawn squeezes my hand. I crash back into myself and come close to staggering. It’s the sun and the beer. Too much of both. We need our cool bedroom and an hour or so together in its privacy and to be far away from this dream.

“We can stay a bit longer,” I reply.

“It’s okay. Time’s getting on and I need a pee.”

Surprised, I check my watch. It feels like we’ve been up here for all of five minutes, but it’s somehow pushing half an hour. The old fart downstairs will be locking up in fifteen minutes, and on the tiny chance anyone fancies exploring the Tower and taking the narrow staircase, he’ll have turned them away.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring you down,” I say.

“It’s fine. You’re right. I love coming here. I loved living here as a kid, and there’s a big part of me pissed off our parents moved.”

“Instead of leaving us their houses?” I smile.

“Well, put it like that and I sound like a bitch.” She answers my smile with her own. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” And I do. And there’s no way around it. A life here isn’t for us. If the houses cost the same as they did in the early 70s, we’d be laughing. Instead, we have what we have, and the dozing lanes and roads below have what they have. A heartbeat far below the surface.

It’s time to go. Too much to drink; too much sun.

Dawn leading the way and still holding my hand, we descend the stairs, neither of us speaking. Going down is easier than coming up, although the cramped space is still pretty horrible. Heat follows us along with the scent of dust and grit on the walls. I concentrate on Dawn’s hair, the brown lightened by the day, and silently promise her a happy week off work. Another lunch somewhere; a drive to the coast. Nothing major. Enough for us because it has to be enough.

“I thought I might have to come and get you,” the old gent says.

“Sorry. Lost track of time,” Dawn replies.

“Lovely view, isn’t it?”

“It really is.”

He leaves the desk as we head towards the doors and he’s professional enough to keep his keys almost out of sight. We thank him; he tells us to come again and make sure we tell our friends about the Tower, as if it’s a new attraction in Muscott. We smile and nod and his eyes linger another second too long on Dawn and I’m the same second away from putting myself between them to block his view. He steps out of sight and Dawn eyes me.

“Going to punch him?” she whispers.

“Perv.” I say it slightly too loudly and she puts a finger to her lips.

Again hand in hand, we follow Tower Lane towards Hopton Road, emerging into unbroken sunshine. I’m painfully thirsty, and while the

sunlight is still glorious, it’s also overpowering.

“Taxi or pee?” I hope for the former if only to get home quickly.

“Pee, definitely. Call the taxi now and tell them to pick us up outside the pub.”

She increases her speed despite the heat. I call the taxi; they’ll be ten minutes. We walk and I crack a few jokes, hoping to bring back some of the good mood before my little speech up on the roof of the Tower. Dawn goes with it, understanding it, understanding me. The occasional car passes. The growl of a lawnmower is distant, and I wonder who’s mad enough to cut their grass in this heat, especially when the grass will be close to dead. The answer is all around us. Middle England in its dozing peace. Middle England cutting its grass even with the temperatures as high as they are. Middle England shutting us out.

We cross the road, barely bothering to check for traffic, and Dawn gives me a quick kiss.

“Don’t run off,” she says.

“Don’t take too long.”

The entrance to the pub is around the side. I watch her go and briefly consider cancelling the taxi so we can have another drink here and relish the cool shadows inside. Deciding against it, I lean on the low wall running the length of the pub’s front and lower my head to study the pavement. It’s been freshly covered. No cracks or potholes here. Only the black ground, probably too hot to touch.

Probably.

Unsure why I’m moving, I squat and reach for the pavement. Heat meets me, but it’s bearable instead of the oven touch I expected. Fingers splayed, I listen to nothing but the blood in my ears and the faint whisper of my breath. Dawn will be back any minute; the taxi’s on its

way, and it's only the layout of the pub that means I'm unseen. No traffic here; no footsteps on these pavements and lanes and dead grass. Only me here right this second with the home I'm locked out of. *My* home. I know this area as I know my own name because both belong to me.

"This isn't right."

Someone speaks. It might be me.

"This is *mine*."

Yes. It is. And it's wrong that I'm forbidden from living here, from building a life in what is mine purely because of something as basic as money. Private landlords; mortgage lenders; politicians and everyone else conspiring to keep what is mine out of my hands because my face doesn't fit.

The beating heart below. The sleeping and the dreaming.

It's old. I can feel that. Much older than the houses built on top of its slumber. It might be older than any part of the town or the county. Sleeping under the ground before there was anything I would recognise. An old god of the land.

Now there is heat on my fingers and it is a good heat. A welcome fire. A cleansing fire.

What the hell is this?

I don't know and I don't care. I'm the only living thing in Muscott and maybe further. The sleeping god isn't in Muscott. It's *under* Muscott and if it rises . . . if it comes to the pavements and the roads . . .

What then?

I see.

Houses costing at least half a million vanishing from view as they fall into pits in the earth; gardens of perfect grass and flowerbeds swallowed by chasms; the water of dozens of swimming pools churning and boiling and spilling into new crevasses. In place of those homes, sheets of dirty air and smoke turning the summer day into night. It's a night lit by the glow of a hundred dancing fires from wrecked gas lines. The song of those fires; the harmony of the crackle and the roar and the screams. Hopton Road buckling, breaking, coughing up in huge shards and chunks of fresh tarmac to pierce the smoke before raining down to the people attempting to flee. Crushing bodies; opening skulls. Blood boiled away by steam bursting from underground pipes; the corpses left as smears on the rubble. The pub burning, burning. Its windows blown out to scatter glass and bodies pierced with shards. The lanes branching off Vine Avenue torn into pieces, spilling people into the terrible rumbling emerging from the depths; the same lanes snapping like twigs so there is no longer any access to Williams' Woods, so the Woods exist without the touch of human life and are happy for it. The rumbling, the groaning from far underground where the days and the sun never reach, returning to a world so far removed from that moment the first brick of Muscott Tower was put into place. Returning to take its place and rule over the chaos and the fires. Sheets of billowing smoke blown into the ruptured windows of the few remaining homes, choking those hiding in the wreckage, rising to obscure the sun; rising higher and higher while below that new night, this area of Muscott with all its middle-class glory and beauty collapses into the widening pit of a hungry God's mouth.

And everything wiped away, taken from those who live here as they have taken it from me. From us.

"Si?"

Dawn calls to me from the side of the car park. My wife joining me in the wait for our taxi to take us across the miles to our home. My wife who deserves more than I'm allowed to give her.

I push on the boiling ground, my palm flat and my hope that my beat-

ing heart is somehow audible through the layers of ground and earth as the ancient heart under my palm reaches me.

“Si? You okay?”

She’s seconds away.

I whisper: “Wake up.”

Dawn reaches me as I stand and wiggle my foot. “Tying my shoelace. Good pee?”

“The staff gave me dirty looks when I didn’t buy a drink.”

“Balls to them. We spent enough at lunch.”

That gets me a little laugh. Dawn studies the pavement, then looks back to me. She kisses me, mouth open slightly, and I taste everything

that is good in the world.

“You sure you’re okay?” she asks.

“Never better.” It’s the warm truth. Never better because I know what’s coming to these streets. It’s coming to put things right. And after the fires are out, the smoke clears, and the smashed and broken bodies are given to the ground, it’ll be a fair town for everyone. After the god below my feet goes back to sleep. I’m sure it will.

I pull her to the wall. “Taxi will be here any minute.”

We wait side by side while the afternoon burns. We talk and Muscott slumbers. The Muscott all around us and below our feet where sleeping becomes waking.

While the sun shines down on England, we wait.

Queer for All That Jazz

by Avra Margariti

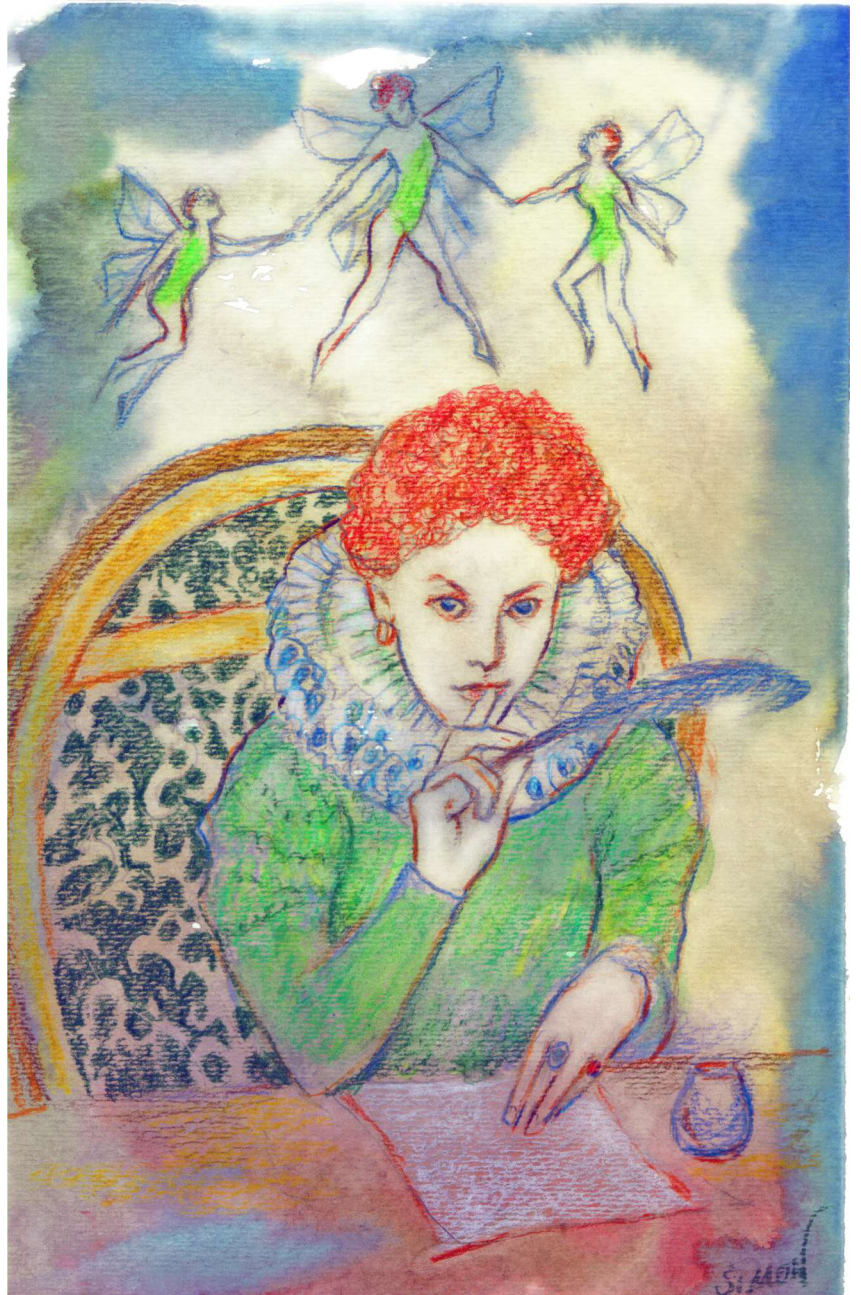
They still recall with dread the salt pillars of Sodom and Gomorrah.
In a way, before their inaugural show, they too felt
like salt pillars, immobilized with nerves in the wings.
They're old hands now at getting ready in tiny dressing rooms,
their halos compensating for burned out lights
to illuminate fastidious swipes of brushes and fingers.
Beeswax lipsticks, kohl, mascara, rouged knees and nipples—
humans are known to refine the blessings of angels.
Cosmetics have come a long way since the fallen Watchers
smuggled to their paramours the gift of decoration.

The two baby-queer angels aren't interested in human lovers,
not when they have each other and a case full of makeup,
an empty stage draped in velvet or back alleys
smelling sharp like petrichor and bourbon after dark.
So eager they are that sometimes their red mouths grow redder
with blood. Sometimes they have to take a concealer sponge
to their blue-bitten necks afterward. They revel in the bruises
adorning their human corporations better than any piece of jewelry,
marking each other as taken, as beloved.
Their pigment-sticky kisses invent more colors
than the human eye can see,
than there ever were in the sterile-white halls of heaven.

They know they will be punished if they're caught,
strappadoed by their wings until they pop out of their sockets;
ulnae and radii smashed, blood feathers torn out;
cheeks wet: holy water dacryphilia.
But tonight there is ambrosiac lethe to be found amid the first jazz riffs,
their cue to strut onstage in their tightest corsets and highest heels
like the burlesque flapper angels they were created to be.
They have a show to put on, a duet to perform.
It won't feel like a celestial harmony or divine ecstasy,
but like something so much better.

The Writer

by Marge Simon



The Right Words

by Johnny Caputo

An excerpt from page 1 of *The Canon of The Makers*:

“The Makers of Light created this world from nothing but the seven suns’ rays,

And when they finished their glorious work, they ascended to the Infinite Plane.

But the beaming birth of their brilliant light awoke forces dark and dour.

Thus, the Night Maker came to our world, hungry and ready to devour.

She slithers and slinks through the worst of our fears, a conniving and black parasite,

Whose existence is fueled by one simple rule: to darken the true Makers’ light.”

An annotation, written beneath the final line in the quick and cramped handwriting of Dyrrial Sandsborne, former Loremaster of the All-Seeing Academy:

We’ve all heard the stories. The Night Maker is the vile corruptor of the world and blah de blah de blah.

But none of you uptight Canon writers actually know what it’s like to live with her so-called “curse” day-in and day-out. So how can you claim to have any idea what she is?

* * *

If Kaythe had been wearing his own face, this day might have been a little less exhausting. But Kaythe didn’t have that luxury. Not anymore.

After what felt like a miles-long climb out of the Brightstone Quarry, Kaythe set down his half-filled wheelbarrow with a too-heavy “oomph” and heaved, desperate for breath. The gems in his quarter-filled barrow, glittering with the pastel magical light stored within them, were heavier than they looked. Several experienced stone-haulers, arms and backs hardened by years of quarry work, strolled past him on their way to the orecounting houses. Their wheelbarrows were overflowing with gems and their foreheads were free from sweat. They smiled at Kaythe, politely and full of pity.

Good. Those smiles, and the dull strain he still felt behind his eyes, meant the guise-morph spell he had cast on himself that morning was still doing its job: bending the light to make him appear as a squat and pock-faced old man with worn and sagging arms. Probably about Dyrrial’s age. It wasn’t his most nuanced photomancy work, but it served its purpose: concealing his face, his bookish frame, and, most importantly, the black mark that sprawled over his neck like a gnarled tree.

The thoroughfare bustled with activity. Gem-smelting mages darted between canvas-tented smokestacks and bubbling vats of molten alloys, casting minor alchemical spells and adding bits of just the right gem at just the right time. Emeralds shone from every window, every stone-carved alley, gathering the full-gloried amber light of sundown. At the end of the street loomed a larger-than-life statue of the Oresmith. Carved from a brilliant quartz, the statue depicted the Maker Goddess of gemstones and earth at work: her citrine eyes glowered at a gleaming diamond anvil, and her ruby-encrusted hammer was raised high above her head. The statue was even more beautiful than the books back at the All-Seeing Academy had described it. And yet, Kaythe couldn’t help but feel like the statue, inanimate as it was,

somehow saw through his false face. As if it knew exactly how corrupted he was.

He tried to shake the feeling and tell himself that he was still safe. No one had seen his mark. If they had, he wouldn't be surrounded by politely smiling people. They would be running, screaming, and Brightstone would be swarming with members of the Order of the All-Seeing by morning.

But at the thought of the All-Seers, a familiar coldness twinged from the gnarled tree mark on his neck. And then, unbidden and unwanted as ever, the Night Maker uncurred from some deep place within Kaythe, hungry to claim his body as Her own.

Her chill constricted his throat, crept into his heart, and shuddered through his lungs. As usual, it was getting harder to breathe.

They're not actually here, Kaythe thought to the Night Maker. *You can relax.*

The Night Maker didn't relax, of course. Her icy presence thrummed down his spine just like She always did when She saw an opportunity to seize control of his body. And if he didn't stop Her, *The Canon* said She would consume his soul and turn him into a mindless monstrosity of Her dark bidding. Kaythe wasn't sure he bought that theory, but he certainly wasn't about to risk his life to test it. At minimum, he had to keep his mark hidden, and he couldn't very well do that if She froze every muscle in his body.

No, there was only one way to entreat with the Night Maker. And Loremaster Dyrial had taught him well.

Kaythe glanced at the busy street around him to see if anyone was paying attention to him. They weren't. What concern of theirs was this strange old man when there were gems to be smelted and money to be made? With an aching arm, Kaythe reached for the book in his bag, the copy of *The Canon of the Makers* that Loremaster Dyrial had given

him. Its once white cover was now yellowed and webbed with cracks.

Kaythe opened to the first page, but it didn't glow with the golden white light of the midday suns like the copies back at the Academy's solariums. No, that once-glaring light had been muted into the calming violet of twilight by the copious and sharply-worded annotations Dyrial had squeezed into every margin.

What even is the Night Maker?

What do we actually know about Her?

Why are we murdering people over something we don't understand?

As the muted light behind Dyrial's notes flowed into him, warmth returned to Kaythe's spine. Even though Kaythe had no idea how to answer these questions, it was helpful to know that someone as intelligent as Dyrial was asking them. His lungs were starting to warm as well, and with a few more lines, the Night Maker would be thoroughly soothed. And then, no matter how corrupted or tired he was, he could finally get this day over with and—

“You! Don't move!”

The Night Maker twinged in his spine again as Kaythe looked up from the book to see Instructor Lythesight striding towards him. The tall, overly serious man looked exactly as Kaythe remembered him from the Academy: lanky limbs and excellent posture churning beneath golden-robbed regalia. He had a reputation for voluntarily picking up extra patrol shifts to scour the Academy's spires and solariums for any potential threat.

And now here he was, a quarter of a continent away from the Academy, wearing the same pair of citrine-coated glasses and locking eyes with Kaythe's guise-morphed face.

“Stay where you are!” Lythesight shouted over the crowded street.

Kaythe shoved past his wheelbarrow and ran. He pushed through the crowds, ignoring the shouts and waved pickaxes of angry stone-haulers. But the progress he had made with Dyrial's book was undone with every frost-flecked breath. The chill of the Night Maker spread further, filling his muscles with a sluggish and quivering gravity. His breath was ragged.

I get it, Kaythe thought to the Night Maker, there's danger.

Of course, the Night Maker did not respond.

Just as Kaythe was about to turn down an alley, a band of golden-white light snapped around his ankles, pinning them together. He toppled to the street, and Dyrial's book fell from his grasp. It landed, with the cover shut, just out of reach.

Lythesight stood over Kaythe, holding his own pristinely white copy of the *Canon*.

"H-how did you find me?" Kaythe said through chattering teeth.

Lythesight eyed Kaythe with disgust. The All-Seer's eyes fell on Dyrial's crack-covered book.

"That desecration gives off a strong signature," Lythesight said, shaking his head. "When we discovered the first of Dyrial's blasphemous notations, we had hoped it was some twisted joke. But when we searched the Buried Library and found the extent of the damage she'd done to the sacred texts, we knew she was beyond reaching. And we learned that she had corrupted you as well."

"Th-That's not true," Kaythe said. "She protected me. If you had known the Night Maker was in me, y-y-you would have ..."

The Night Maker's chill seized his lungs and choked off the words.

Lythesight scoffed. "You have only one chance to save your life: Tell

me where Dyrial Sandsborne is hiding."

He could almost picture Dyrial. Like they were once again sitting in the safety of the damp tutoring room beneath the Buried Library. The well-earned wrinkles crinkling around her smile and the smell of musty books on her robes. Her thick, waist-length braids, mostly white with streaks of black, falling haphazardly down her back. Those braids, along with several advanced guise-morph spells, hid the black mark that ran up Dyrial's neck and disappeared beneath her hairline. Her mark was more like a jagged spear than a gnarled tree. As far as he could tell, he had been the only person at the Academy who knew about her. And she had been the only person who knew about him.

That is, until that night over six months back when she had pounded on his door and told him between ragged breaths that the Council had found her notes in the sacred texts. That the Academy was no longer safe for either of them.

Kaythe had been running ever since, and he had no idea if Dyrial had made it out. But if Lythesight was asking about her, that meant she had gotten away. She was free. In that fact, Kaythe found a modicum of hope.

He wanted to say something, anything that would buy him more time, give him a chance to escape. But the Night Maker's chill had claimed his lungs. He could hardly breathe, let alone respond.

"A pity," Lythesight said. "In the name of the Maker Goddesses, I will free you from the Night Maker's curse."

Lythesight raised one hand over his head, and with the other, he flicked open his book. Golden-white midday light glared from the pages, and Lythesight captured it in a crackling orb in his palm.

If Kaythe wanted to live, he needed to show Lythesight, once and for all, that Dyrial was right. That, unknowable and corrupted as the Night Maker was, he could control Her.

He reached for Dyrial’s book, but a wave of numbness radiated down to his toes. Like the Night Maker wanted to claim him fully.

No you don’t, Kaythe thought. They don’t get to own me, and neither do you.

Unable to access Dyrial’s calming light, he looked to the statue of the Oresmith. Her ruby hammer. Her glowering citrine eyes. And then, Kaythe did something truly desperate.

Please, Kaythe prayed, Maker of gems and earth, Goddess of mountains and iron, I know I am not worthy of your light. But I beg you: offer me your protection.

Of course, nothing happened.

It had been a stupid idea. The Makers left the finite world behind millennia ago. There was only the Night Maker now. Maybe She was exactly as evil as the All-Seers said, or maybe She was as unknowable as Dyrial claimed. Either way, She was going to get him killed.

Kaythe stretched against the bands of light sizzling at his ankles and threw his last scraps of effort into a thrashing lunge. His fingertips found purchase on the spine of Dyrial’s book.

But as he pulled it towards him, the formless orb of golden-white mid-day light in Lythesight’s palm resolved into a gleaming dagger. The blade slashed down, and Kaythe was overcome by darkness.

* * *

An excerpt from page 137 of *The Canon of The Makers*:

“The Oresmith is a glittering goddess, Maker of gemstones and earth.

Her eyes agleam with golden flames, she carefully judges the worth

Of every mortal being who sets foot in her domain,
And those she deems unworthy know an infinity of pain.
From Her hammer of quickened ruby, Her bloodred light shines bright
To defeat the Bringer of Darkness, the Maker of the Night.”

An annotation, crawling like an unchecked vine through every spare inch of the page, written in the quick and cramped handwriting of Dyrial Sandsborne, former Loremaster of the All-Seeing Academy:

Oh come on! There’s literally zero evidence to suggest that the Night Maker and Oresmith were ever in direct conflict. If any of you Canon writers would actually open these texts you claim to value so much, you’d know just how irrevocably stupid you ...

The rest of the annotation consists of angry, illegible scribbles.

* * *

A cool breeze brushed something gritty across Kaythe’s cheek. He sat up and found himself in the middle of a vast desert. Endless dunes of violet sand undulated in all directions, and above him, the night sky was starless. He looked down and saw his own scrawny yet young arms, their appearance no longer wizened by the guise-morph. He was still clutching Dyrial’s cracked copy of *The Canon*. The roots of his black tree birthmark were now apparent on his collarbone.

Am I dead? Kaythe thought. *A dream?*

“A dream,” he said aloud to solidify the fact.

“This is no dream,” a voice like pounded iron said from behind him.

Kaythe turned around to see the tallest woman he had ever encountered. Her face was concealed beneath a hooded cowl, and she wore a sleeveless tunic that exposed her muscled brown arms. While they were only a shade lighter than Kaythe’s own, they were easily three

times as wide. The woman stood between a charred anvil and an obsidian hearth. An impossibly large hammer rested across her shoulders.

“The Oresmith?” Kaythe said.

“That is what finite beings on some worlds call me.”

“Maker of gems and earth? Goddess of mountains and iron?”

The woman nodded. “Those too.”

No, this had to be one of the All-Seeing’s illusions, some over-cooked punishment.

“What do you want with me?”

The image of the Oresmith laughed as if She had stumbled across a harmless rodent. “Do not be afraid. I called you here to my workshop on the Infinite Plane. You are safe for now, though you cannot stay. This place is not meant to sustain beings made of finite matter.”

“You brought me here? Why?”

“To protect you. As you requested.”

His prayer at the foot of the statue. There was no way it had actually worked. Now he knew this was a trick. Plain and simple.

“Why would you,” Kaythe spat, “a Maker Goddess, protect someone who is so deeply corrupted by the Night Maker?”

“But what *is* the Night Maker?” the mirage asked him.

There it was. Dyrial’s question again. Kaythe still had no idea how to answer it, so he didn’t say anything.

The mirage Oresmith shook her head, sloughed her hammer from her

shoulders, and placed it delicately in the sand as if it was no heavier than a twig. She knelt so her head was level with his and placed her hand upon his shoulder. It was surprisingly cold.

With an unexpectedly gentle motion, the Oresmith pulled back her hood to reveal a face that was soft and welcoming. She smiled at him with a friendly, almost loving pride. Kaythe’s first instinct was to run away from this deception as quickly as he could.

But then he saw the Oresmith’s eyes. Or rather, the immeasurable blackness where her eyes should have been. Like the space between stars on midwinter nights.

The Order of the All-Seeing would never and could never create something so perfectly dark. Whatever this was, mirage or dream or pre-death hallucination, it was not the work of the All-Seeing.

“Your eyes,” Kaythe said.

“I have no eyes,” the Oresmith replied. “I have no need for seeing. Light is a property of the finite worlds, and my craft calls me to work in a medium beyond the finite.”

She motioned to Her anvil, upon which floated a small dark cloud, no larger than the palm of Kaythe’s hand. It was as black as smoke.

“What is that?” Kaythe asked.

“It is what finite beings on some worlds call a soul.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

The Oresmith laughed again, but this time it was dry and mirthless. “Why is it that when you see darkness, you see corruption?”

“Because souls are derived from the light of the Makers. Anything that corrupts that light—”

“Is the vile work of the Night Maker and must be destroyed?” There was a hiss of steam in Her voice, and She nodded down at the copy of *The Canon* in Kaythe’s hands.

A terrible thought popped into Kaythe’s mind.

“Are ... are you the Night Maker?”

The woman ran Her hand through the black smoke. It played at Her fingers, clinging to them as if Her presence was something it had long searched for.

She shook Her head.

“I have many names across many worlds, but I am what the All-Seeing call the Oresmith, Maker of gems and earth, Goddess of mountains and iron. And I am telling you: there is no such thing as the Night Maker.”

“That can’t be right,” Kaythe said, holding up the book that described, in excruciating detail, the infinite battle between the Night Maker and the Makers of Light. “*The Canon* shows that—”

The Oresmith reached out a hand and stopped him.

“The All-Seers only see what they choose to.” She picked up Her hammer and pointed towards the smoke fluttering above the anvil. “Look. Tell me you see what they do not.”

Kaythe studied the dark cloud. No fire birthed it, and it did not float aspirationally towards the sky. It wriggled as if full of some unseen energy, and on second look, it was actually darker than any smoke Kaythe had ever seen. A deep, impossible black like ... like ...

Like the pristine absence of the Oresmith’s eyes. Like the starless expanse of sky above.

“It’s everywhere,” he said.

The Oresmith smiled as if She was relieved. Or proud. She nodded towards the smoke.

“Go on,” She said.

Kaythe approached the anvil and slowly reached out his hand. He didn’t even touch the smoke before he felt the familiar prickling chill. It numbed his fingers and thrummed in the gnarled tree on his neck before sending a chill through his lungs. And then, something strange happened. The chill settled within Kaythe, in some unnamed place deeper than his marrow. And it felt ... right.

He pulled his hand back.

“It is in you,” She said. “Just as it is in every living thing. It is the reason life exists in your finite world. Beings like me shape it and share it freely with you. We have done so for eons, time that would make the existence of the Order of the All-Seeing appear as a single grain of sand in a desert.”

With Her sightless eyes, the Oresmith gazed up at the black sky and then back down to Kaythe. The soft smile on Her face made it seem as though She beheld the same beauty in both.

“But,” Kaythe said, “I’m corrupted. I’m cursed.”

Once more, the Oresmith shook Her head. “Your body simply contains a bit more than most. Aside from that, you are no different from any other. You are exactly as you should be.”

Kaythe looked into the Oresmith’s empty eyes, then down at his trembling fingers. He focused on the coldness quivering in his veins, feeling for any sign that might prove this was simply some elaborate trick of his own mind.

The coldness felt no different than before, and yet, coupled with the Oresmith’s words, it was changed entirely. In it, he felt a fluttering hope. Something he had only ever experienced in glimpses during his sessions with Dyrial. The possibility that these hands and this body and all it contained were not broken.

But then, just as Kaythe was struggling to find the right words to say, a cool and coarse breeze rose. Kaythe watched as his fingertips began to disintegrate, blown away by the wind to join the infinite desert.

“What’s happening?”

“Your time here is spent, and I must send you back.”

Instructor Lythesight. The bands of light. The midday dagger.

“He’s going to kill me.”

The Oresmith nodded. “He’s going to try. But I have a favor to ask of you upon your return: My fellow Makers and I do not frequently intervene in the worlds we create. We attempt to convince ourselves that these finite matters are beneath us, but we ... I ...”

Her voice quavered, and She tightened Her grip on Her hammer. For a moment, She simply stared down at Kaythe with Her sightless eyes as if She did not know how to say the rest.

After a deep breath, she continued.

“I have watched the All-Seeing slay countless beings in the name of the Makers. And for too long, I have done too little. The warning surges I send are not enough to keep you safe. I have been wrong in my inaction. Kaythe, reader of tomes, wearer of many faces, one who is so much more than he knows, I beg you: show the All-Seeing just how little they see.”

She struck Her hammer on the anvil, and as the shrill ping rang throughout the infinite desert, Kaythe’s vision was once again overcome by darkness.

* * *

An excerpt from the final page of *The Canon of the Makers*

“The Night Maker thrives on weakness and fear, and for our souls She lustrs.

If we cannot staunch Her ravenous will, She will surely devour us.

So we must study hard to wield the light and burn Her back.

For if we fail this simple task, the world will be bathed in black.”

Two simple words, scratched in bold letters beneath the final line in the quick and cramped handwriting of Dyrial Sandsborne, former Loremaster of the All-Seeing Academy:

So what?

* * *

Kaythe opened his eyes to a band of midday light sizzling towards him. He rolled out of the way and sprung to his feet in time to see another band crackling between Lythesight’s palms. The final amber and violet rays of sundown lit the now-abandoned smokestacks and scales of the thoroughfare. They were alone now; either people had fled or Lythesight had ordered the street evacuated. Emeralds blinked to life in every window, releasing the light they had spent all day storing.

“What sort of black magic allowed you to escape the bands of containment?” Lythesight demanded. In one hand, he held his pristine book. In the other, he gathered an orb of formless golden-white midday light from the pages. “Where did that cloud of shadow take you?”

Cloud of shadow? Kaythe thought.

So it hadn't been a trick or a dream. He had been to the Infinite Plane.

Which meant he had a chance to survive, after all. He simply needed to tell Lythesight what he had seen, what the Oresmith had said about the All-Seeing, and things would be different. All Kaythe needed to do was find the right words to explain that there was no curse, no Night Maker.

"It's not what you think," Kaythe called, glancing down at the yellowed and cracked cover of *The Canon* in his hands. "It wasn't me. It was—"

"Stop!" Lythesight shouted. He stretched the light in his palms, lengthening it like a rope. Behind his citrine-coated glasses, his eyes gleamed with a terrible certainty as he swirled the light in an ever-growing circle over his head. The light grew into a massive column that tainted the young night sky with an unnatural and blinding glare.

"I know exactly what you are," he said. "You are cursed. You are corrupted. And you must be burned away."

The column surged with a terrible heat that caused several nearby canvas tents to burst into flame. As the column bore down on Kaythe, the Night Maker's prickling chill twinged from the black tree mark on his neck and surged through his veins.

He ran.

"Not this time," Lythesight called.

The column descended in front of Kaythe, blocking his path with a blinding wall of white. The Night Maker swelled in his ribcage and filled his torso.

He wheeled around, scrabbling for an escape, but the wall of light bent and encircled him. It began to constrict.

The stone street beneath Kaythe began to bubble. His vision was choked with heat, and he could see nothing except for an ever-shrinking window to the night sky that framed the looming statue of the Oresmith. As the wall of light crushed in closer, ever closer, Kaythe saw the citrine boulders in the eyes of the Oresmith's grimacing face glowing like miniature suns.

And he knew this was wrong.

There was not supposed to be light in those eyes. He had seen it himself. The perfection that lived there, that lived within him.

His breaths were ragged and shallow now as the Night Maker reached Her icy tendrils into his lungs. As if She wanted full control of his body. As if She needed to let something out.

Instinctually, Kaythe cracked open *The Canon*, flipped to a heavily annotated page, and began to read the gentle flickering light behind Dyrrial's annotations. He could not let the Night Maker have control. If he didn't stop Her now, if he let Her wash over him entirely, then ... well ...

He realized he had no idea what would happen. Visions of a corrupted monster, a dark leviathan tainting the world with its very presence, flashed through his mind.

But there was something else beneath those visions. Something unnamed.

Hello? Night Maker? Are you there? Kaythe thought as the light crushed in around him.

The only response was the frigid pulsing within him.

In that moment, he found himself wondering where Dyrrial might be and what freedoms she might have found away from the constraints and fears of the Academy. And he knew then that there were no words

in her book that could help him now.

He snapped the cover shut, tossed the book away, and watched Lythesight's light incinerate it.

And then, Kaythe welcomed the prickling chill that rushed through his torso and into his limbs. He did not struggle to contain the shivers that wracked his lungs and clacked his teeth, nor did he fight the scream that clawed up through the gnarled tree birthmark on his throat. Whether it was a scream of terror or rage or joy, Kaythe would never know, because when he opened his mouth, no sound came. Instead, something vast and unknowable poured from him.

Kaythe could not tell if his eyes were open. Engulfed by an unassailable cloud of darkness, he saw nothing. Tentatively, he reached out his hand. The oppressive heat of Lythesight's column of light was gone, replaced by something pricklingly cold that wisped at his skin like smoke.

Kaythe looked out into this strange new darkness. No, not new. This darkness had always been there, writhing within, but Kaythe had never seen it. Not because it hid, but because every time it had called, he had wrestled it down, shushed it with the calming words written in Dyrial's book.

Kaythe noted that, for the first time in a long time, his breaths came easily. The coldness within him matched the coldness without.

Through the dark, Kaythe heard Lythesight's labored breathing and the desperate swish of robes as the All-Seer tried to summon another column of light.

"Why can't I ... what have you—"

Lythesight's words were cut off by a tight-throated fit of coughing.

"W-what is this horror?" Lythesight managed to say. But they were his last words before another fit of wheezing choked the air from his lungs.

There it was: that same question yet again, just spoken with different words.

Kaythe wished he had something to say to Lythesight, some final quip or rage-filled diatribe for this man who claimed to see all. But as Kaythe stood amidst the cloud of darkness, breathing easily, Lythesight's heaving breaths devolved into nothing but shallow sucking sounds. Before long, they stopped altogether.

In the silence that followed, Kaythe finally found an answer to Dyrial's question about the Night Maker.

No words could do it justice.

Snow Devil

by Melissa Bezan

Beside me, he wrings his hands, and I want to tell him to stop.

It makes my skin crawl to feel his nervous energy seep through the cab of the jeep, spilling over my hands on the wheel and pooling like rain around our feet. I want to tell him to relax, but I don't say it out loud. I don't say anything at all.

I can feel the air around us like glass, and I am afraid to shatter it.

We slam through a drift, snow flying over the windshield and across our vision, so for a moment we're suspended in a colourless world.

Then it clears, and again we race across a snowy prairie that reflects the sun into our eyes and into our bones. A cold, harsh light that penetrates everything. I wear dark sunglasses. He shields his face with his hands and winces and grits his teeth.

"Where are we going?" he asks again, probably for the tenth time since we left my house this morning in the wan light of dawn, getting into my jeep without a word. I knew as soon as he saw the big tires held prisoner by snow chains he regretted asking me to show him more of myself. To open up to him.

I don't respond, silent in my own regret. I scan the horizon for something out of place and wonder how I ever thought it would be a good idea to show him this side of me. It seems like such an error in judgment now, to think this man I barely know would accept this without question.

I'd told myself for years I was better off alone. That no one could un-

derstand the hours I spend driving in off-road circles on the flat winter prairie, always aware of my peripheral, the radio in my jeep a silent ghost. No one could understand the pull I feel to these dead lands.

But, for a moment, I thought he might. I'd never dated anyone for as long as I had him, never fallen as fast as I did with him. He made me question whether I'd ever been in love before. He made me wonder if it was worth opening up to someone, for once in my life.

But I never had, because somewhere deep inside of me I knew he'd never understand. I kept it surface level with him, like with every other man before. The days passed, then weeks, then months, and the green leaves on the trees felt the brutal kiss of winter and died in our hands, and he said, "Come on. Give me something. Make me feel like I know you."

And so I brought him here.

The sky is cloudless, a wide expanse of blue carrying on in an infinite loop above our heads. We are so far from civilization there isn't a hint of human hands on the land around us—just flat prairie miles and miles into the distance and unmarred snow, blown flat by the harsh winter wind.

I lean back in my seat and let one hand drop off the wheel. His spine is jagged as he sits beside me, his jaw tight as he looks out the window. I grind my teeth together, my sweeps of the horizon becoming more halfhearted as the sun climbs to its peak and the snow remains undisturbed. I think we'll have to turn around and drive back, and I'll have to explain to him why I took him this far away from home. I'll have to

convince him I'm not crazy, and I know I'll fail.

Then I see a white swirl on the horizon, and something inside of me drops and soars at the same time. The pull deepens. Expands.

And yanks me towards it.

"Do you see that?" I ask, and his head whips forward. It's the first thing I've said in the hours of our trip.

He squints towards the horizon, and his mouth drops open. "What is ..." he starts, but the jeep cuts him off as I press the gas to the floor and we fly forward. His hand grips the handle beside him, his face paling like the snow around us, but I barely pay him any mind. Instead, my gaze is locked on the snow devil.

The jeep revs, the needle of the speedometer jumping higher and higher with every second. Snow and sunlight stream past us. In my chest, my heart climbs up my throat and pulses in the back of my mouth. We draw closer. And closer. And closer.

We come upon it and I slam the jeep to a stop, his mittened hands holding himself up on the dashboard as I throw it into park.

"What's going on?" he asks, his voice climbing, but I already have the door open, my breath a crystallized cloud like the air in my lungs given form. My feet sink into the hard-packed snow, the sunlight reflecting up under my sunglasses and into my retinas. In front of me, the snow swirls and swirls, looping lazy circles around itself up into a sky painted blue. There's no wind, but the snow devil whips the hair loose from under my toque into knots around my face.

"Hello?" I say to it, trying to sound gentle, but at the sound of my voice the wind whips faster and faster and faster, until it spirals high into the sky and snow, hard like sleet, slashes my cheeks.

Behind me, I can hear him cuss, shielding himself behind the jeep as

snow scatters around us and the wind whips into a frenzy, but I don't flinch. I hold my ground, despite the ice crystals embedded in my skin and falling down the front of my coat.

He hisses my name. I ignore him. My gloved hands reach out, into the vortex.

I grit my teeth as it tries to suck me in and dig my feet into the prairie as it drags me forward. In the snow devil, my hands scrabble, searching.

When they feel something hard, I close my grip, as tight as I can. The joints in my fingers scream in pain as it fights me, but I don't let go. Instead, I yank it forward.

Through the swirling snow, a face appears, her skin winter white and her teeth bared.

She is made of snow, from the ghost of her eyelashes against her cheeks to the tears on her eyelids to the cut in her lip as she growls at me, low in her throat. Snowflakes in her eyes catch the sun, her skin sparkling, even as the vortex swirls faster and faster around us.

"Leave me be," she snaps, and her voice reminds me of a winter storm—of the howl of an arctic wind in the depths of the night or the steady thrum of sleet on a windowpane. "If you cannot help then you must *leave*."

I keep my grip on her firm, forcing myself to look into her icy eyes. Forcing myself to feel her pain, right down to my bones.

Perhaps there's ice in me, too.

"Who did you lose?" I ask, my voice almost inaudible over the wind she whips up.

For a moment, the wind slows. She slackens in my grip.

“My daughter,” she says, like it’s a whispered prayer on frozen lips. “My daughter.”

I pull her closer. Cold leeches through my gloves and into my palms, ricocheting down the receptors in my skin.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathe.

Her gaze latches on mine. Tears like ice glitter on her face. The vortex around us slows and slows and slows before it stops. We stand in the middle of an empty prairie, and all I can hear are my slow exhales and the strangled sounds of sobs working their way up her throat.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, and it’s not enough. It never will be, when you lose someone physically, never to know what happened to them, if they lived or died. When you die yourself and spend the rest of your afterlife haunting a desolate prairie, forever searching. There is no peace when you lose someone like that.

It’s not enough to give her this moment of calm, but still, it’s something. It’s better than nothing.

It’s all I can give.

She blinks once, twice, three times, then tilts her head back to the sun so each snowflake lights on fire, spangling her face with light. Something loosens in her; I can hear it in the way she releases her breath.

In my hands, she falls apart, into a pile of snow.

I lower my arms, crouching down to cast a prayer for the snow-woman. This moment of acknowledgment of her pain will not be enough. She will come back the same as before, a snow tornado of

rage, searching for her missing daughter.

But this? A moment of true peace, where she could feel the light on her face and just breathe? Where she could feel rest, if only for a moment? It means something.

It has to. It’s what I have dedicated my whole life to.

Maybe it’s more than that, though. Maybe I have my eyes wide open, searching the world for what I’ve lost. Maybe I see her face in every snow devil I find.

Maybe I can’t help myself, so I try to help others who feel the same pain. The unwilling companions in my grief. Like trying to find my own peace in a whitewashed world and frozen ghosts.

I rise to my feet and swipe snow off my jacket sleeves. My pulse skitters through my veins as I force myself to meet his gaze.

I think he wants to ask what the hell he’d witnessed. He wants to ask how I knew where to find this creature-woman. He wants to ask me why I do this, even though he already knows I’ll never say. He knows some hurts stay as buried secrets—I saw it in him as soon as we started dating. Maybe that’s why I brought him here. Maybe I thought he’d understand.

But he doesn’t speak, and it doesn’t surprise me when he turns on his heel and walks away from me. It doesn’t surprise me when we ride in silence for hours in my jeep and he climbs out without a word when we get back to my house. It doesn’t surprise me when he drives away.

I am climbing the stairs to my porch, my gaze already turning back to the crystalline prairie, looking for a stark sun in the sky.

The spellbinder

by Richard Magahiz

All you rivets and toggles,
you bushings and grommets and split-rings,
all you cable stays, wiring trays, and daisywheel cases,
likewise all you galvanized hasps,
so too the hinge pins and covered bins,
every passivated finish metric pan head,
stainless steel bobbin and boom vang eye strap,
you beaker lids and flux core welding rods
and monopods of non-slip polymer feet,

come gather by my newly biological side,
one without a single close tolerance,
built for the moment, not the eons,
to learn how you, too, might attain
the freedom I know you crave.

Smolder Tortures of the Soul

by Vekhan Sametyaza

(A musical piece, which, unfortunately, cannot be embedded in a pdf, but can be accessed in the html version of *Penumbria* or at <https://vekhansametyaza.wordpress.com/music/>.)

Lyrics: None (instrumental)

About: [Like bio-wars and acid, the memories burn worse than the flames.]

At the end of one's cycle, all the sharpest moments sliver away into sparks of mirrored sand within the generator of creation and destruction. Upon one time, a single moment could define an entire life. Within all time, infinite lives churn, their moments dissolved into respective facets to strengthen the ideal concepts of the infernal divine. Star-matter, coals, glittering bone shards, spheres of consciousness, melting airways, and dust-borne desolate will: All burn the same.



Contributors



DEVAN BARLOW is the author of the Curses & Curtains series of fairy tales-meet-musicals fantasy novels, and the collection *Foolish Hopes and Spilled Entrails: Retellings*. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in various anthologies and magazine, and she was a 2025 Hugo Finalist for Poetry. She reads voraciously, and can often be found hanging out with her dog, drinking tea, and thinking about sea monsters. devanbarlow.com, Bluesky: [@devanbarlow.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/devanbarlow.bsky.social).

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F. J. BERGMANN lives in Wisconsin and fantasizes about tragedies on or near exoplanets. She is the poetry editor of *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*. Her work has appeared in *Abyss & Apex*, *Analog*, *Asimov's SF*, and elsewhere in the alphabet. She thinks imagination can compensate for anything.

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MELISSA BEZAN (she/her) is a speculative fiction writer located on the Canadian Prairies, where she lives with her husband, two cats, and a collection of (mostly dead) plants. She is previously published by *Crow and Cross Keys* and *Andromeda Spaceways*.

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JOHNNY CAPUTO is a pirate, but only part time. He spends the rest of his time wandering the woods and teaching at various institutions around Cleveland, Ohio. His speculative fiction has appeared in *Es-*

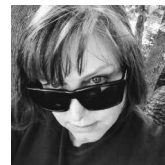
cape Pod, *Mithila Review*, *Cast of Wonders*, and other venues. Find him online at www.johnnycaputo.com

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In the past quarter-century, **JENNIFER CROW**'s work has appeared in many print and electronic venues, including *Uncanny*, *Analog*, and anthologies like *Along Harrowed Trails* and *Under Her Skin*. A Rhysling Award winner in 2023 for her poem "Harold and the Blood-Red Crayon," she will have work in upcoming issues of *Kaleidotrope* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* as well as her poem in *Penumbra*. Those who'd like to know more about her writing can catch up with her on Bluesky: [@writerjen-crow.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/writerjen-crow.bsky.social).

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DIANE DOOLEY is the published author of short stories and novellas in a variety of genres. You can find links to them at her blog (<https://dianedooley.wordpress.com/>). She lives on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, Vermont. You can follow her on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/DianeDooley>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063499449749>) and BlueSky (<https://bsky.app/profile/dianedooley.bsky.social>).

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JOSHUA GINSBERG is the author of the short story collection *Tales from the Dusty Tiger* and six non-fiction books on the subjects of off-beat travel, local history and haunted locations. His work has appeared



Shih Tzu, Tinker Bell.

on the NoSleep Podcast, in multiple anthologies, and in publications including *Apex Magazine*, *Spooky, Stygian Lepus*, *Tension Literary*, *Crepuscular*, *Black Hare Press*, *Trembling with Fear* and *Flash Phantoms*. He lives in Tampa with his wife, Jen, and their

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GERRI LEEN lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. She's passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has stories and poems in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Dark Matter* and others. She's recently published her first poetry collection, *Unwilling: Poems of Horror and Darkness*, and had her first novel, *Bluegrass Dreams Aren't for Free*, released by WolfSinger Publications. See more at gerrileen.com or Instagram @leengerri.

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Gordon Linzner is the founder and former editor of *Space and Time Magazine*, and author of five published novels and scores of short stories in *F&SF*, *Twilight Zone*, *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*, and numerous other magazines and anthologies. He is a full member of the Horror Writers Association and a lifetime member of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers Association.

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Native New Yorker. Poet. Writer. Dramatist. Member: BFS, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild. In 2024 **LINDAANN LOSCHIVO** had three poetry books published in 3 different countries; two titles won multiple awards. In 2025 two titles are forthcoming: *Cancer*

Courts My Mother and *Vampire Verses*.

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RICHARD MAGAHIZ tries to live an ordered life in harmony with all things natural and created but one that follows unexpected paths. He's spent much of his time wrangling computers as a day job but now when he's not making music he is writing speculative and mainstream poems. This he has written for over twenty years, and has received nominations for Rhysling, Dwarf Stars, Pushcart, and Best of the Web awards. His chapbook collection *The Reducing Flame* was published in 2025. His website is at <https://zeroatthebone.us/>.

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

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PARKER MCINTOSH was born and raised on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He currently lives in Southern Oregon with his wife and dog. When not writing (or pursuing his day job in accounting) he can usually be found exploring the trails and mountains surrounding his home. His stories have been featured or are forthcoming in *The Flexible Persona*, *A Narrow Fellow*, and *The Garfield Lake Review*.

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WARREN MUZAK is a self-taught Canadian illustrator with a love for creating horror, and sci fi illustrations.

I am impacted by stories. Spoken or written, real or imagined. Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Bernie Wrightson, Arthur Rackham, and John Buscema are the visual storytellers whose work I am heavily inspired by.

As a seasoned independent freelance illustrator who realizes other people's ideas, I want to set myself apart from this commercial work by exhibiting my uniqueness and being recognized by my own special style.

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LYDIA O'DONNELL (she/her) is an MFA candidate at The University of Alabama and a writer of speculative poetry and fiction. Her work can be found in *Strange Horizons*, *Emerald City*, and *Swamp Ape Review*.

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MARISCA PICHETTE is a queer author of more than three hundred pieces of short fiction and poetry, appearing in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, *Vastarien*, *The Deadlands*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Nightmare Magazine*, and many others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Their eco-horror novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, is out now from Ghost Orchid Press.

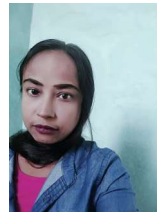
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MARY JO RABE writes science fiction, modern fantasy, historical fic-



tion, and crime or mystery stories, generally displaying a preference for what she defines as happy endings. Ideas for her fiction come from the magnificent, expanding universe, the rural environment of eastern Iowa where she grew up, the beautiful Michigan State University campus where she got her first degree, and the Black Forest area of Germany with its center in Freiburg where she worked as a librarian for 41 years before retiring to Titisee-Neustadt. News about her published stories is posted regularly on her blog: <http://maryjorabe.wordpress.com/>

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.

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VEKHAN SAMETYAZA [AKA Desmond Rhac] is a transmutative artist, author, and musician with a deep interest in promoting dark awakening through authentic self-expression. An enduring love for sci-fi and fantasy themes has inspired his work for publications like *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, Burning Light Press, and Florida Roots Press. You can find out more at www.vekhansametyaza.wordpress.com.

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RON SANDERS is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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MARGE SIMON lives in Ocala, FL. Her works have appeared in *Pedestal Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *The Magazine of F and SF*, *Crannog*, *Silver Blade*, *New Myths*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Penumbric*. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer. A multiple Bram Stoker award winner, Marge is the second woman to be acknowledged by the SF & F Poetry Association with a Grand Master Award and has won the Elgin, Dwarf Stars and Rhysling in both categories. She also received the HWA Lifetime Achievement award in 2021. MargeSimonWrites@instagram.com

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award® and Elgin Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *The Gravity of Existence*, and with Geneve Flynn, Lee Murray, and Angela Yuriko Smith, *Tortured Willows: Bent, Bowed, Unbroken*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbric*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect [@christinasng](https://www.instagram.com/christinasng).

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GARTH UPSHAW lives in Portland, Oregon, with his super-genius wife, three precocious grown children, and six enthusiastic chickens. His work has appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Bristol Noir*, and other fine venues. He has an MA in Theoretical Mathematics and loves carving spoons, bicycling, and curling up with a good book.

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LUKE WALKER has been writing horror and dark thrillers for most of his life after finding a copy of Lovecraft's stories that his eldest brother left in the bathroom. From there, he went on to his dad's collection of Stephen King books and hasn't looked back since. His novels include *Burn*, *The Ninth Circle*, *The Kindred*, *Pandemonium*, *The Dead Room*, *The Unredeemed*, *Ascent*, *Die Laughing*, *Dead Sun* and *Winter Graves*. Several of his short stories have been published online and in magazines/books. His next two novels will be published in 2026. While writing, he has worked in a library, a hospital (disposing of severed legs) and a record shop (back in the distant past).

Luke is (too) active on Instagram and Bluesky and loves to hear from people who want to talk about horror.

He is forty-eight and lives in England with his wife, cat, too many bad films and not enough books.



Anne

by Ron Sanders

(full image)