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Issue 3 - Autumn 2008
USD 10.00

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Greatest Uncommon Denominator Magazine
Issue 3

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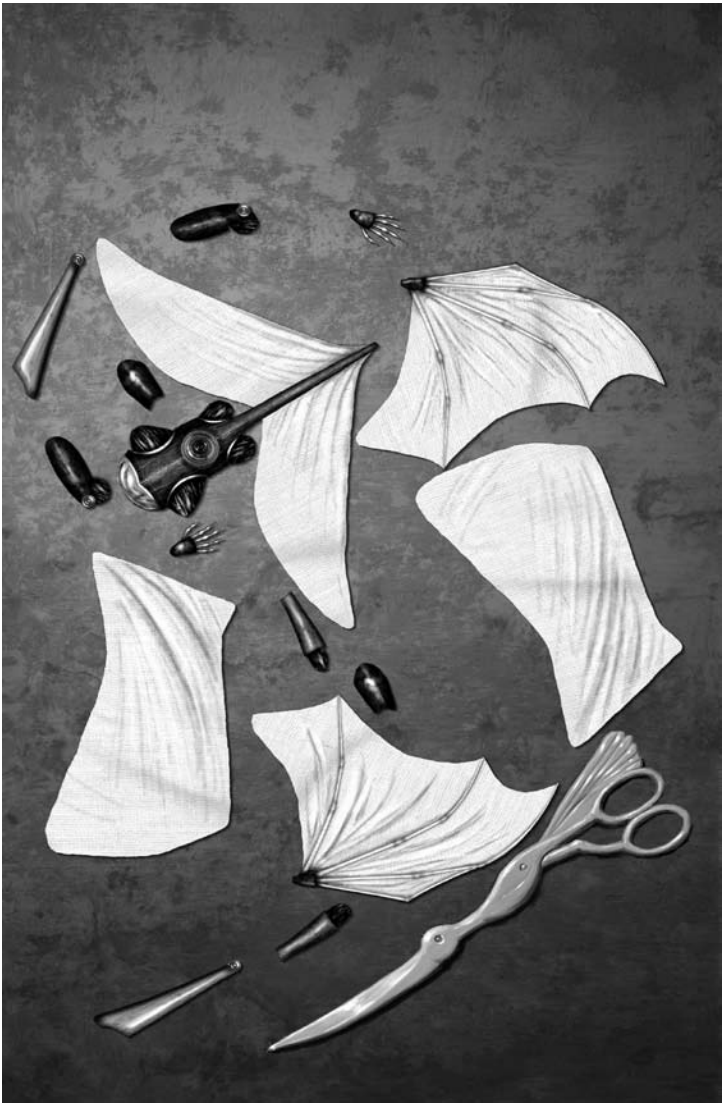
Greatest Uncommon Denominator Magazine (ISSN 1932-8222) is published twice yearly by Greatest Uncommon Denominator Publishing, PO Box 1537, Laconia, NH 03247 USA. Subscription rate is USD18.00 per 2 issues; USD10.00 per individual copy; USD3.50 per electronic copy (PDF). This publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without express written consent of the publisher, except for brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. All rights reserved. Copyright © 2008. Visit us on the web at http://gudmagazine.com. Contact GUD: editor@gudmagazine.com. Thank you.



Steam Bat Zak Jarvis

More than a cover—to assemble your own Steam Bat model, see instructions on page 205.

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Poetry's Yellow Warbler

Beverly A. Jackson

For Daniel Tiffany

Unwounded, feathered, safe, it rests—*sans* song,
oblivious to sky or twig, with nest unknown.

Caged in my hand, the downy chick sits still—
save for a heartbeat flutter on my palm.

A tiny clockwork tick? Its shiny beak
held shut by springs or cords of sinew?

Cleverness conceived by what? My own vein
pumps its diesel behind a bloody maw,

while plush pigs fly in squadrons. Bird tilts
its head, a convex eye (a bead of glass?)

entraps me in a conjoined stare. My hand
unfurls, starburst of finger-puppetry ballet.

A wondrous bit of engineering, that.
Chick vaults and flies as chip notes soar

in throaty song of freedom. My fingers
curl again—this time around my own metallic fog.

Yeats, God, and you may ponder toys while I gape
that pigs, bird, and planes lift off the ground at all.

Dragon and Gear Shweta Narayan

A Song, a Prayer, an Empty Space

Darja Malcolm-Clarke

The Isiola monastery has sunk into the sea.

That's what Bishop Dakar's letter said, but I didn't believe it—and not just because I'd have to blame myself if it were true.

Yet seafoam gathers where tide-powered turbines once crouched, raising and lowering the monastery for a hundred years. Here, beyond the edge of Fachi, on the Algerian shore, sand whisks over my feet and waves crash on rocks in the empty bay.

Surely Dakar's beseeching message was a ploy to get me back to Isiola after all these years—that's what I thought when another of his crag martins carried his words to me in Timkhi. I believed he had conjured the wildest story a reluctant bishop could manage: a tale of Isiola sinking and taking the desalination plant with it, and of a daemon, summoned by Hadez priests, ravaging prayer shrines all over Fachi. An absurd tale.

But a true one after all; so says the empty bay.

I turn my camel away from where the edifice of Egyptian stone once perched on hydraulic legs above the waves. Would that I had a seat on the steam camel, but it does not go easily here. The sands shift and devour its tracks. So I've had to ride this lumbering flesh that is spite incarnate. It's just as well; we make a good match at the moment, this camel and I.

- - -

It takes all morning to reach Fachi, but at last it wells up out of the endless scorched dunes. Mud-brick buildings bask gold in a flourish of green. I draw my camel up to the Yahvist shrine at the city's edge, crouched between the first oasis grasses and palms—a humble structure capped with a low, pointed dome.

Drawing up the hood of my monk's cloak, I slip off the saddle onto the hydraulic step-elevator beneath a palm tree. It lowers me to the sand beside someone else's beast. I tie mine in the sparse shade beneath another palm and duck into the narrow doorway.

The building holds only the ornate rugs where people kneel to imbue coins with prayer and the shrine itself: a dome of pure gold, as wide as my arm is long, low to the ground and gleaming in the dim light. It's unchanged from when I last saw it, the night I fled

for my betrayal of the Church. The broad porcelain dish beneath the dome is decorated with variegated geometrics and filled with prayer-imbued euchoi.

I crouch over the dish where the coins glint bronze in the muted light. Even before I fled this place—because I had given bags of euchoi unpurchased from the Church to the poor of Fachi—there were more in the altar bowls than now. The Hadez, drawn here by the euchoi and the wealth they can glean from the city, are to blame.

The emptiness of the dish is not all that's amiss. I thought my absence from the euchomifier all these years might diminish my ability to sense such things, but I feel something horrifically wrong with these euchoi. I kneel and glance around to make sure the place is vacant, then gather some into my cupped hands.

Their emptiness washes over me, pulls me down like an ocean riptide, fills my mouth with imagined brine. Empty: they are robbed of their resonance, stripped of the essence of prayer. Finding them thus is akin to coming upon a merry crowd, then discovering their faces void of eyes and mouths.

A gasp behind me makes me jump, and a few coins spill back into the bowl with a bright clatter.

"What are you doing?" It's Sor Feerah, looking from the euchoi in my hands to me again, eyes wide. So Dakar did send someone to escort me.

"You scared me," I say. "Where were you? I saw your camel outside."

"Put them down, Adan."

"I'm still sanctioned to collect them. Dakar—*Bishop* Dakar—never revoked my license."

"After what you did," she says from the doorway, "I wouldn't be surprised if Cardinal Aquiro himself revoked it." The sunlight is bright behind her, hiding her expression in shadow. But the tone of her voice is enough. She was not one of the few who approved of how I helped the poor after the Hadez assassinated the Prince. I ignore the fact that she skipped my title just as I ignore her instructions and turn back to the euchoi in the dish. Collecting them has always been my right.

"Next thing, you'll be telling me to call you Bishop again," she says.

"No, I assure you, I won't. Where were you?" I say again, a handful of euchoi burning their blankness into my palm.

"I was...down the way a bit. The shrines make me nervous."

"Have anything to do with why these coins are empty?"

"Welcome to Fachi as it's become in your absence," she says. "The daemon scours the city shrines nearly every night now. Taking what prayers people can afford...."

I turn back to her. "'Can afford?' Have the Hadez raised the tax on the coins?"

"They've raised it, and raised it again. *And* the price of water."

"And the ones that can't pay the cost? How do they pray?"

"Not by our giving out euchoi for free, if that's what you mean. The Church can't give away its livelihood," she says, still silhouetted in the doorway.

"Then their prayers can't be heard. They can't afford euchoi, and the ones they do buy the daemon takes away before they're brought to the euchomifier. How are they—"

"Look," Sor Feerah says. "The bishop sent me to make sure you make it to the monastery unnoticed. I'm not interested in hearing you defend your actions. You've made your mistake, and that's the way it is. Put the coins down. Let's go."

Before I can reply, she vanishes into the sunlight.

I return to the euchoi in the shrine. Repulsed by their emptiness, I nonetheless put several handfuls in my satchel and pockets—but not so many as to draw attention to the small number left. Already so few remain.

Outside, Sor Feerah is waiting on her camel as I get on the step-elevator. As we head toward Fachi, she barely wastes a glance on me and instead begins to sing, probably so she won't have to speak to me. It's a choral song they never sang in Timkhi. I envy her lack of reserve. I was never taught to sing properly; I barely whisper in chapel.

In place of joining her, I say, "How can you sing at a time like this? Don't you feel for these people?"

Her eyebrows arc toward the veil covering her hair. "The people have learned to take comfort where they can find it, Frer," she says. "You're the one who left the city." She begins the song again.

Outward-sloping building walls rise up behind a broad metal gate—a gate that wasn't there when I left Fachi two years ago. Sor Feerah stops mid-phrase, for waiting there are four Hadez guards

dressed in white linen kaftans, eyeing us. My cloak shields my face and Sor Feerah is leading, but I take an anxious breath.

"Yahvists. What is your business?" says one Hadez to Sor Feerah. The white of his kaftan is blinding in the sun.

"We were at the shrine," she says.

"I was here this afternoon. He wasn't with you," says another one, gesturing at me. "You went out alone."

"He left for Isiola before me," she says.

"No, he didn't," says the same man. "He didn't pass by this way this morning." He turns to me. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from here," I say. "I didn't tell you, Sor Feerah. I left yesterday before twilight." To the Hadez guard I say, "I prayed at the sunken monastery for my lost brothers and sisters all night." I take a few euchoi from my pocket to prove it. He and another guard step forward to look at the coins. If they had any sensitivity at all, they would know these are as blank as a newborn's memory.

"Where did you swear your oath of service, Frer?" says the first, trying to peer into my hood. I turn my head slightly as if I'm looking at Sor Feerah; it's enough to obscure my face.

"Why, here in Fachi," I say. A lie, but the Hadez nods. He signals two others, and they unlatch a large spring-powered lock binding the gate to a metal post. We press our camels forward. I try to look indifferent as I move past the Hadez guards into Fachi.

Dust and sand swirl around the camels' legs as the buildings grow ever closer to the street. The dark eyes of men and women in the narrowing street pass over us as they ease by. Each glance feels like the one that will recognize me and alert the Hadez.

The passage opens out again, guiding us into the market: the heart of Fachi. Music pipes to me on a breeze. It's tangled with the subtle stench of many people living in close quarters. We reach a camel stall, one for animals of flesh and blood, not cogs and steam. Sor Feerah, ahead of me, goes to the hydraulic platform as the full market comes into view: tents with bright linens swaying; copper and brass mirrors, trays, teapots; cages of automaton budgies and crag martins; tall piles of hand-woven rugs; bags of incense scenting the air; camel saddles. Tears spring to my eyes as I slip from the camel onto the platform. I thought I would never see this place again.

- - -

Our camels in the stall, we move into the market crowd. The cacophony of voices envelops me like a dune drifting over a

tent at night. I sense in the commotion something amiss. It's in the set of people's mouths, the subtle cringe in their movements. The market is colorful, but it is not as I recall; it is not jovial, but nervous. Frenetic.

Our pace is interrupted by an assembly of people around a tall red tent, beneath which stand strongmen of the Hadez. Behind them is a massive metal elephant similar in appearance to those from the forests and savannahs of the south. Its ears gleam silver and its trunk is a series of interlocked panels that shift with the beast as it lumbers forward. The hidden fire that burns in its belly turns water into steam.

Only those with reliable access to water could afford such a wonder, only those who control the spring and—now that Isiola has sunk—Fachi's one desalination plant, in the Parliament house. I look from the marvelous elephant to the crowd and think of the water used for this thing instead of being given—or even sold—to Fachim. Only fear keeps them from rushing the Hadez right here and now: fear of the daemon, of thirst, of God not hearing their prayers. It's as good a strongman as the Hadez guarding the edge of the tent.

"Let's get going," I say to Sor Feerah, but my voice is lost amidst the din. I motion toward a narrowing passage.

We're nearing the monastery at the center of Fachi when laughter and a scattering of notes rings off the mud walls—high phrases dancing around a low drone. We turn a corner and come upon a group of women, some standing in the shade and two others seated. Their heads are bare and their hair ornately plaited; they wear white trimmed with red or blue or green, and skirts dyed deep indigo. They are Tuareg, nomads from the south. One seated woman is singing, and the younger is playing the one-stringed imzhad cradled in her lap. A modest crowd has gathered to listen, and a basket has been set out for coins. This basket—even the Tuareg's very presence in Fachi—means their caravan has come upon hard times.

The singing woman laughs, interrupting her song, then murmurs up to another woman. But the girl still marches the short bow across the instrument. The silver hoops in her ears and the amulet around her neck sway.

I stop, for the way she plays unsettles me. Only in one circumstance have I experienced the feelings moving over her face: with the euchomifier.

Sor Feerah calls to me. I nod at her, then surprise myself by taking one of the euchoi from my satchel and putting it in the girl's basket. I turn without acknowledging her thanks.

Sor Feerah shakes her head in disgust when I reach her. "You still can't help yourself, can you?" she says. "You have to give euchoi away."

"They have hardship, can't you see? We can't take money from people who need it for food. It's not right to make them buy prayer."

"I know," she says, and her voice softens unexpectedly. "It was kind of you. But doing that, you undercut the Church. It'll fall to the Hadez. That's not helping people."

To that I say nothing.

- - -

We reach the monastery, the other heart of Fachi that beats in tandem with the market. I feel a pang as I knock at the broad wooden door.

A sor answers and looks past Sor Feerah to me, eyes widening. As we pass over the threshold, she vanishes down the corridor toward Dakar's quarters. The marble foyer, floor chipping and flaking at every crack, is wrapped in cool shadow. My eyes are still adjusting when the bishop appears before me, saying, "Adan. In Allah's name."

"Dakar—"

"I must admit I'm surprised you came back. At last, you've decided to heed my messages."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am for these past two years, and the difficulties I created before I left," I say.

"I sent bird after bird—"

"I know. I...couldn't face you after dropping the diocese in your lap. After everything with the euchoi," I say, not mentioning that I also couldn't bear to be reminded of the machine.

Sor Feerah makes a soft noise of doubt. What if she tells Dakar about the coin I gave to the imzhad player? In the shadows of the foyer, her expression is inscrutable. "I couldn't wait for the Hadez to find me. I had to leave," I plead.

"You *do* understand that we can't buy water without the proceeds from the euchoi?" says Sor Feerah. "With Isiola gone, there's only the one source of desalinated water—"

"And they will continue to raise the price of it," says Dakar. "But Adan, you won't repeat the wrong you did before. This I know."

"Dakar," I say, "I am truly sorry I caused you hardship. But the people must be able to speak to God."

"Would you have the Hadez take the monastery, then?" says Dakar, his voice rising, resonating against the stone. "Would you have us go bankrupt, have the monastery and the machine fall into their hands, and—?"

"No. Of course not," I say. "I wasn't saying that I'd do it again—no. Just that helping them pray wasn't wrong in itself."

"Helping them pray is not. But being reckless is closer to wrong."

That stings. All of a sudden, I want to tell him how, if I hadn't given out those coins, I could have stayed bishop in Fachi, could have kept the Hadez from sinking Isiola. Could have prevented all of this more than a year ago. Instead I say, smiling, "There was a reason I gave you the diocese. You are a wise man, Dakar."

He grits his teeth. "Adan, once you were a good bishop. You could be that again."

"I don't want the diocese back."

"That's not what I meant, though I'd give it back to you in an instant. I meant you could return again to grace."

Silence hangs around the three of us like a curtain, closing us in.

"How did the monastery sink?" I finally say, to push the heavy folds back.

He sighs, not at my question but at me. "We don't know. It should've stood five hundred years at least. The Hadez could have employed Egyptian magi, or called up some marine creature of dark, or the daemon running rampant could have done it. We don't know." He holds his empty hands out before him.

"The daemon. Have you tried to capture it?"

"Are you mad?" says Sor Feerah. "It will destroy all that is holy in whoever gets near it." Dakar nods.

"So then...you've just let it be, ravaging the city, stealing the hopes of the Fachim," I say, and regret it at once.

"You give me your advice now, Adan? I sent you message after message asking for your help for the past two years, and did you reply? You say this to me now." Dakar shakes his head. "It's taken

the sinking of Isiola to bring you back to Fachi. Give me the benefit of the doubt."

"I'm sorry," I say to the floor. "That was wrong of me." He's silent, and I realize it was a mistake to come back.

But for one thing.

"The euchomifier? Is there water to run it?"

"There's some," says Dakar, moving toward a closed door. "The machine is still up in the cloister." The tone of his voice makes me wish I hadn't come back...almost. I turn to the stairway.

"Adan," Dakar says from the door, his hand on the knob. Sor Feerah is following me. "So you've come. What do you plan to do?"

"I'll tell you when I know." It's a lie. He nods and turns to leave.

"How many perished in Isiola?" I say; the words almost stick in my throat.

He speaks, but it is a whisper.

"What?"

"Twenty-seven," Dakar says. "Though not all washed up on shore."

"And the rest—they're here?" Too many people around would complicate my plan.

"No. They've gone to Chinguetti by caravan. They were afraid. They didn't want to stay near Isiola."

I nod again, not trusting my voice.

Dakar looks at me hard, then motions to Sor Feerah to come with him. I've turned back to the cloister stairway when I hear him say to her quietly, but not quietly enough, "It's better to let him go up there alone."

- - -

The doorknob in my hand turns with startling familiarity and draws me back to when the daemon in the city was mere rumor, and I still bishop, and Fachi sound. At the center of the round chamber, a kerosene lamp casts a halo over the euchomifier—the grand onion-shaped dome, the large mouth for euchoi, all the cogs and wheels, the silver drum of water, the network of channels where water moves into the heating chamber, the iron stove that changes water to steam. And there are the ivory pipes from which it emits the celestial vibration, the voice that speaks to God in His own language—for the euchomifier translates prayer, invested in bronze coins, into the

tongue of the cosmos. Wishes, hopes, pleas resonate in metal as the euchomifier reworks them into the ephemeral fabric of Heaven, so God can see the images of the human tapestry.

The frequencies were discovered by Egyptian mystics four thousand years ago, a marriage of science and religion recorded in papyrus codices, and first tested in the construction of their pyramids. Moorish technology rendered that theoretical knowledge empirical.

Running the euchomifier is an epiphany. Seeing it, I must touch it again at once, must lay my hands on the dome, which resonates with residual grace. This is what I came back for: to be in its presence when it speaks to God.

Some have asked me how we know the machine works. When the hand of God sweeps past and the breeze brushes you, it rearranges the inner cogwork of your being. You simply know. The machine works as surely as I breathe.

When I can bear to take my hands from it, I stoke the fire beneath the machine. With the heat of the flames on my face, I open the spigot to the water drum. A thin stream trickles down the channel into the chamber above the fire. I pull the lever at the side of the dome, and pistons stir and cogs begin to rotate. I place a handful of euchoi from my pocket in the mouth of the euchomifier. The dome of the machine begins to vibrate. This is the moment before reality unweaves and the essence of each of the euchoi is lifted to another plane. My hands on the water channel are shaking only partly because of the reverberation of the machine.

But abruptly the vibration ceases, and the coins drop through the dome without releasing anything through the pipes. Where a bag would have been placed had I not been so eager, they hit the stone floor with a pitiful muted clink.

It's the sound of a city tapped dry and dropping away piece by piece, saturated with the salt of fear, without water or prayer to wet it and keep it whole.

That sound echoes in my mind for a long time.

- - -

I wake to Sor Feerah leaning over me.

"Bishop Dakar! Frer Doctor Khatib!" she cries toward the open door.

Someone appears in the doorway. "What's happened?" he says.

"Go get Frer Khatib," Sor Feerah says. "Adan's fallen into a fit." I try to prop myself up off the cold stone floor; euchoi press into my palms. I'm on the pile of them at the foot of the euchomifier.

I must have fainted—I remember the machine not working, and my needing, *needing* it to. I can tell by the light at the window that I've been here for some time. "I've got to destroy the daemon," I tell Sor Feerah.

"Don't try to talk," she says. "You're as white as a Hadez robe."

"It's taken the prayers. It's taken the epiphany. I'm going to destroy it."

Her eyes narrow at me. "It's the euchoi you want. You can't help yourself." Then she frowns. "No, it's the machine you want."

The night passes as Khatib and Dakar tend me. By morning, the fit has been replaced with determination to carry out my plan. Outfitting my camel at the stall, I'm not surprised to see Sor Feerah approach, a look of exasperation and trepidation on her face.

"Dakar's request?" I say.

She nods, and loads her bag onto a camel in silence.

Since Dakar has tended the shrines on the east side of Fachi, I set out, Sor Feerah with me, toward the shrines on the west side. There we will garner the euchoi that will serve as bait for the daemon.

We take bags for euchoi and little else, for little will protect one against a creature of dark. There is prayer, but prayer takes time.

- - -

By late afternoon, sacks full of euchoi hang over the camels' shaggy humps. We can't reach the fourth shrine, on the far side of Fachi, before twilight, so while Sor Feerah remains with the full sacks, I find a household willing to give two Yahvists shelter for the night.

Fear of the daemon chases people into their huts and tents at twilight. Dakar told me as much in his letters, but I did not anticipate Fachi could be like this. Joyous, carefree Fachi is no more. The sun has been down only a few hours, but the west side of the city is quiet.

Lying on a mat in the main room, with the sleep-noises of strangers around, I hear another sound, distant and strange, isolated notes of an alien wail that raises the hair on my arms and snags the breath in my throat.

I rise without a sound and pick my way to the entrance of the unfamiliar hut. I take a step into the night-shrouded street, and another toward the sound. Soon, I am hurrying through quiet, narrow passages. Sand whispers as my feet scatter it.

As I get closer, the wail becomes more audible, as gradually as stars coming out at night.

Closer still, I realize with relief that it's not the wail of something daemonic, but music. I hurry toward it, toward a row of travelers' tents at the end of the street. This, music at night: it's a shard of the Fachi I used to know.

I'm standing outside the skin tent the music's coming from when it stops. I clear my throat. There's a rustle and the tent flap is drawn back.

"I am disturbing you?" says a slight figure through the accent of a Berber dialect. I recognize her as the girl who was playing an imzhad near the monastery.

"It's not safe to play at night," I say.

"The daemon does not come close to here," she says, her Arabic rough but intelligible.

"You'll attract its attention and draw it here."

"Maybe so, but God is with me when I play, so I do not fear it." She steps out of the tent.

"Still—"

"Frer, will you hear another song?" Before I can say no, she's settled onto the sand with the instrument in her lap, her bow on the string. The song takes off like a flock of birds from an acacia tree. I glance around uneasily, for it's too loud and wild. I'm about to stop her when the strain changes. She integrates an eerie drone with a high phrase whirling around it again and again, hypnotic. Eyes closed, swaying, she races the bow across the string as her fingers dance on the instrument's neck.

She is lost to me, I can see, and has forgotten me standing nearby. She's reveling—and I'm transfixed. Seeing her thus makes me recall the euchomifier. That's what she's feeling.

She strums with sudden fervor and concludes with a flourish, her arm and bow reaching for the sky. The last note stands like the North Star in the night.

I cannot speak. Clapping emanates from a nearby tent and across the lane.

"Nice, no?" she says, smiling.

"Yes." It takes me a moment to collect myself. "But what about these other people? You can't be endangering the entire area like th—"

"They know they are safe," she says, waving the bow off-handedly.

"No more tonight, all right?" I say.

"If that's what you want."

But I want her to continue. I want to give her something. I reach into my pocket for euchoi, and hold a few of them out to her.

"Here," I say. This is familiar. For a moment it feels like I'm three years in the past. "There are taxes on our euchoi in Fachi. These will ease your way." I try to drown out what Dakar and Sor Feerah said earlier; I want to give this girl something in return for her music. "There are twelve shrines in the city; you may put these at any of them."

"Oh, Allah bless you, but no thank you," she says.

"What do you mean?" I say. "It's no hardship, believe me. I'm one of the monks who tend the shrines."

"You gave me these before, yes? I do not need them."

"You don't pray?" I say.

"Oh, I do. But I do not need those for praying."

"These are how God hears us."

"You think no one can talk to God but your way? I have my own way."

"What way is that?" There's an edge to my voice I can't keep out.

She shrugs. "My way. That's all."

"Tell me your way."

"What way seems right. You choose how. Use those. Or not," she says, waving the bow at my handful of coins.

"You don't get to choose how to relate to God. God is what He is," I say. "You take yourself to God. He isn't ours to command and tell when to come and g—"

"Tafat!" interrupts a woman's call from inside the tent.

The girl answers, "Yes, coming." She's going back inside when she turns to me. "God can be as close as the bow on the string. But, no worry, there is no more music tonight, Frer."

Then she's gone, and I'm left standing in the dark with a handful of empty euchoi.

- - -

Maybe I believe her: she needn't fear the daemon. God is near when she plays.

Maybe that's why I turn away from the passage leading back to where Sor Feerah sleeps and begin to close the distance between myself and the far west-side shrine. Passing palms and wizened acacias, I am vigilant for the creature of dark—what it would look like, I do not know. But for a few exhilarating moments, I go without fear.

The shrine emerges, a black form in the moonlight. I duck inside. Cool under my hands, the altar euchoi haven't been touched by the daemon for some time. Prayers still lie in all but those at the very bottom of the dish—many prayers with which to lure the creature. I'm moving euchoi from the bowl into my pockets when a muted clicking outside the shrine freezes me mid-reach. Without moving, I look to the doorway. But the moonlit entrance is empty.

Somewhere just outside is the Hadez daemon.

I ease away from the bowl and back toward the wall, watching the open shrine door. The relentless mechanical click mingles with a low hiss like a snake's. I slump against the wall, wishing myself invisible.

The doorway is eclipsed by a form that jerks into view. Even as it stands motionless, its body seems to writhe and shift. It clicks like a clock. Dread grips me as a tongue darts out into the moonlight, tasting the air.

Then its body is made of tongues, a dozen tongues flicking out. Tasting for me.

Every tongue's mouth hisses.

The creature steps into the building. Waves of cold air wash through the shrine. Its head oscillates and stills. It clicks once, twice, again, too many times to count.

Then it lurches back into the night. For a moment, while the silver light plays across it, I see its body shifting and sliding over itself like oil over water.

- - -

I wake to sunlight, to Sor Feerah helping me back into the warm open air. She doesn't speak and she doesn't ask me how I came to be curled into a corner of the shrine. Maybe she doesn't need to ask to know.

We make our way back to the monastery with enough euchoi for my undertaking. The entire way, Sor Feerah sings and does not look at me.

- - -

Another twilight has emptied the streets and alleys of Fachi. At the monastery, there is better reason for fear this night than most others in recent memory. On the doorstep is a pile of euchoi. I have warned Bishop Dakar to not leave his chamber tonight—to bar his door, and to instruct the other monks to do the same. He did not ask me why, did not need to when he saw the euchoi of four shrines in a small cell off the hall beyond the cloister.

"You'll need someone to help," he said, gazing over the bags of euchoi.

"You're the bishop. The people need you," I told him.

"There are others."

I shook my head. "Too many went down with Isiola already. I won't be responsible for more." I left him there in the cell with the light streaming from high windows across the euchoi, glinting bronze as though they were sunlight made metal, barely tangible at all.

Now they are dull and heavy in the gloom of the foyer. Their faint metallic smell mingles with the uncanny silence of the monastery. Gathered into a few grain sacks upon the stone floor are these thousands of tender prayers, pleas, last hopes. I place one sack inside the foyer and another at the bottom of the staircase up to the cloister.

The thought that these will be sacrificed to the daemon makes me ill, but I am afraid it will not dare the monastery for less. My only consolation is that not all of them will be lost. At least I can hope for that. I can pray.

So I take one of the euchoi from the bag just inside the cloister door—there isn't time to pay the fee. I stoke the fire in the euchomifier and turn the spigot that releases the water. Holding the coin in my right hand, over and over I whisper the invocation. I focus my hope into a pinpoint and exhale a sharp breath. I can feel it warm in my hand, an otherworldly heat.

I toss it into the broad mouth of the euchomifier dome. The single coin alone in the enormous mouth is disquieting. A handful

from the nearby bag scattered in the metal mouth is better. These few will be spared the daemon's appetite.

I pull the lever. Subtly at first, the machine trembles, and then the vibration spreads from this plane out, up. The world around the machine unravels. I stand bare as the eye of God looks upon the tapestry woven for Him.

A long time after, I lie panting, insensible. But I draw myself up; I must go on with the plan.

The machine is ready. I damp down the fire, gather what I'll need, and kneel inside the cloister doorway.

And wait.

- - -

The daemon is sifting through the bag at the bottom of the stairs, scattering euchoi across the stone floor. Finding no sustenance in the shrines, it has made its way to the center of Fachi, to the monastery. Its ticking, its chorus of hissing and flicking tongues, raises the hair on the back of my neck. From the impermanent mouths on its body come tiny shrieks. Ever-crescendoing, high, piercing, they finish in sudden gruesome silence.

The daemon is devouring prayers.

More hissing and the incessant clicking as it scatters more euchoi—then another chorus of shrieks.

I listen as it climbs slowly up the stairs until it is just outside the cracked door. It's so close now, if I were to reach through the door, I might touch it in the dark. But that would be premature.

It eases into the chamber, bringing with it a nimbus of cold; a shiver scuttles across my back. It creeps toward the euchomifier, where a pile of euchoi lies.

It's but a few steps from me.

I take a breath. I light the match under the stove, and the black form flares before me; the edges of it writhe, mouths opening and closing, disappearing and reappearing elsewhere on its body. It turns, but I'm on my feet, ready to push it.

I hit the daemon full-on and collide with cold machinery. Ephemeral mouths close upon me, gnawing, licking. We careen forward—

a door in me closes; my light is put out—

and it falls partway into the mouth of the euchomifier. It struggles beneath me, and I try to hold it while I reach for the lever...reach... and pull, and the pistons begin to bob, the wheels begin to turn. I can

feel the euchomifier vibrating, so I know it must be working, but I have no *sense* at all that the machine is working. Struggling, the daemon hisses with transient mouths. My skin sears with cold where I touch it, holding it in the machine. The smell of burning fills the air.

The euchomifier lurches, and an explosion in the dome knocks me away. As I hit the stone floor, a chorus of ethereal screams comes from the pipes at the top of the machine. They evanesce into a wisp of sound, a hiss, a sigh. The euchomifier's wheels and pistons slow to a stop.

I sit up painfully and crawl through scattered euchoi to the machine. The bowl of it is cracked. A pile of cogs and wheels rests in its mouth.

I cannot bear to look at the fractured euchomifier. I turn from it and gather euchoi up in my hands.

I can't feel a damn prayer in a single one of them. I can't feel anything at all.

- - -

For weeks after, I dream of being on Isiola as it sinks into an ocean of empty euchoi. The clinking roar as they roil in waves blots out Feerah's and Dakar's cries from shore.

I dream of the daemon devouring the hallowed fabric of me, so that when I crawl into the euchomifier to reach God, all I hear is Him saying, There's nothing here, there's nothing here, there's nothing here.

- - -

Not since its shattering or through its slow, painful repair have I left the euchomifier's side.

The daemon is dead, yes. At the far end of the cloister I've piled the machine-innards from the body the Hadez fashioned it. Dakar wanted to take them from me, but I would not let him in. I've lost track of how many times he has sent Frer Doctor Khatib with the sor who brings my bread. I've always sent the doctor away, and Sor Feerah and others too.

I've repaired the euchomifier. Dakar collects the euchoi from the shrines himself again and passes them to me. There are no more than before I destroyed the daemon, it seems.

Sometimes, I cannot bear the euchomifier's mute, mundane presence and what feels like the emptiness of the euchoi. I know

they are full because the machine vibrates and trembles like it always has. The epiphany is gone, yet I cannot bring myself to leave.

Sometimes I think I might feel the grace of it again if I could burn away the places where the daemon touched me. I'm contemplating this when there is a knock on the door—contemplating and clutching the dome of the machine, the fissure where it was cracked barely visible.

A knock. I tell them to go away. A knock again, and a pushing at the door; the table holding it shut heaves an inch, then two, then more. I hear voices. Dakar. "Let me in, Adan," he says.

I rise just as Sor Feerah slips into the room. She gazes around and then stares at me, amazed. "Have you gone mad?" she says.

"Leave," I say.

"Bishop Dakar and the whole monastery are worried about you."

"So he sends you again. He's always sending you."

"He couldn't fit through the crack in the door."

"I need to be alone," I say as she goes to the euchomifier.

"No, you need to leave this machine. You need to...." She looks the machine over, and then turns to me. "Why are you here, Adan? Why did you come back? For this?" Her hand rests on the dome. For one wild moment I fear she'll topple it, push it over and crack it again, even shatter it. "Or did you come back for the city—for Fachi?" She speaks low, incensed. "People are whispering about the daemon—some think there's hope now that it's gone, but others think the Hadez will send another. The problem of water.... People are talking about seizing the Parliament building, Adan. Fighting the Hadez for the desalinator, regardless of all their contraptions and creatures and mecha-priests. What will you do, stay locked up here with...with a machine?"

"Somebody has to run it," I say quietly.

"Once you appalled me with how you'd give away euchoi by the bagful. I didn't think I'd ever see you do anything that would make that seem saintly."

"I can't feel Him any more."

"Then find another way to feel Him!" she says. "You gave the machine up once already. Who did you do that for, Adan? Ask yourself that." She marches to the door. "Let me out of here," she says to whoever is at the door, but turns back to me, shaking her

head. Then she slips into the hall, and I'm alone again in the quiet with my machine.

The silence seems emptier even than the euchoi.

- - -

The sun is blinding in the market noise, disorienting after the long calm of the cloister. Aimless, hopeless, I don't know why I am here. I wander from tent to tent, fingering carpets, glancing over a kaleidoscope of wares. But ever do my thoughts return to the euchomifier.

There's a strain in the air. Instead of the dull resignation of before, there's a sense in the market atmosphere of something imminent. Women with solemn-eyed children in tow, men with straw bags don't smile as they did years ago. Still, their gazes do not slide over each other, unseeing, as when I was newly returned. The spangled tents of the Hadez have disappeared from the market. Fachi is alive, buzzing with tension, and restive.

I pause at a tent, ostensibly to admire zellige tiles, avoiding the merchant's probing gaze. Under my hands, cobalt and turquoise arabesques entwine on white earthen tiles. I summon my nerve. I am about to bid the merchant 'come close' so I may whisper a query about the Hadez daemon when the notes of an unfamiliar tune drift to my ears.

I know who is playing before I even turn away from the merchant.

She's alone, a basket before her where she's seated on a knotted crimson rug. Her eyes are closed as she works over several phrases of an insistent tune; in them is posed some dire question. Clockwork scarabs creep across the rug in circles, their shells iridescent in the sunlight. I leave the zellige tent and stand near her blanket, with others. She finishes on three long notes, releasing the transfixed crowd from their enchantment. She smiles at us, and I can see she recognizes me. As people drop coins into her basket and wander away, I linger, trying to find words.

It's she who speaks. "It's the frer," she says to me in her rough Arabic, silver earrings swaying.

"It's the girl who fears no daemon," I say.

"Ah well, they say the daemon has gone and another replaced it," she says. That gives me a start. "They say they do not know what the Hadez will send next."

I mumble, "I was hoping to ask you a question." I crouch beside her in the dust. She waits, the imzhad cradled in her lap. "Forgive me, but...you don't go to the shrines," I say. "How then do you pray? How do you know God is with you, how He protects you...." The sudden faltering of my voice surprises me. "Like from the daemon?"

Her eyes narrow. Perhaps she thinks this is a trick, or worse. "A frer man asking this of me? They say my people were abandoned by the gods." She lowers her head and reaches for a bag in which to put her instrument. "Do not mock me."

"Wait—I mean no insult." I reach for her arm but draw back as she looks up, startled. "It's just, you don't go to the shrines. You don't kneel there, or put prayers into coins to be taken to Him."

"I talk to Allah like He is standing here," she says. "I talk to Him—"

"When you play your music?"

"Well, yes," she says, her hand still on the bag.

"How do you do that?"

She shrugs against the urgency in my voice, eyeing me. "Maybe I am praying by the voice of the instrument. Maybe it makes me an empty space, or...."

"What do you mean, like...?" Like something else I know.

"His voice is the music, and He is speaking through me."

"You are a voice box," I say, "He the voice." I the dome, He the celestial vibration.

"The imzhad speaks for Him; I am the place he speaks through. That is what it's like." She shrugs again.

I find myself nodding slowly, standing.

I'm a few steps away when the weight of something left undone slows my feet. I turn back, hand in my pocket.

The coins that I hold out to her in exchange for a scarab are not euchoi, but ordinary Algerian dinars.

The thing squirms mechanically in my hand as I turn toward the monastery. The lilt of Tafat's imzhad rises up behind me like a desert breeze.

- - -

By the time I emerge from the cloister again—after days? a week or more?—Dakar has ceased to send Frer Khatib, or Feerah, or anyone. Heading down the worn marble stairs, down the cool, quiet corridor, I have no sense of the day or time. At the heavy doorway

to the men's dorter I pause, listening to silence. They must be eating, and that, with the slant of light from a high corridor window, indicates it is just before vespers—time for service.

At last the men pass me; I am pressed deep into the shadows of the chapel foyer, cool stone against my back. As the women pass next, I glimpse her in their midst and waver. When I bring myself to call her, the rawness of my voice surprises me. "Sor Feerah. Sor Feerah!"

She lets the others trail inside; when I step out from the shadows, she is framed by arches of limestone.

"You're out of the cloister," she says.

I nod. "I need to ask you," I say, keeping my voice low. "I need to know if you'll do something for me."

"What is it?" she says, her dark eyes wide.

"I need you to teach me to sing."

Some unnamable emotion passes over her face. "To...sing? Adan, are you...?"

I hold out the hand that conceals the scarab, and she extends her own, reluctantly. She gazes at the motionless insect I give her, its shell satiny in the shadow, a gold key protruding from its side.

"To sing," I repeat. "To replace the machine."

Sor Feerah blinks at me once.

"You wind it up," I say, nodding to the automaton in her hand. "I got it in the market."

At that she smiles.

- - -

In the cloister, I lay hands on the euchomifier's gleaming dome for the last time. I feel nothing of God's residual grace, only the cool of porcelain and metal. Still, turning from it is not without pain.

By the doorway sits a bag of newly emptied euchoi. There are so many people who could use them. I feel a pang of temptation....

But there are better ways to piece together the shards of Fachi. I take my robe off, leave it upon the table. I step back into the hall empty-handed.

Empty-handed, but in the pockets of my kaftan are wheels and cogs, gears and cylinders of metal from the Hadez daemon's body. For I will gather Fachim to track whatever else the Hadez send into the city, and these apparatus will teach them about the mecha-bodies fashioned for the creatures. I can tell them the rest.

Though I said once before that this would be the last time I'd leave the cloister, this time I feel it's true. I'm trembling, but the cogs sway in my pockets, and they hearten me as I go down the chipped marble stairs, one step at a time.

I'll go to chapel again, yes, to see Sor Feerah, and Dakar. But this is the last time I'll pass through the dark foyer of the monastery into the dusty street...into the street where the Fachim gather and sedition lies tense in the silences between words, between carpets and swaths of dyed yarn, among bronze teapots and creatures that subsist on fire and steam.

I'm going to the heart of Fachi, where I'll help the people piece our city back together one shard at a time; going to the heart of Fachi, to find an empty space where God can speak through me.

The Dragon's Thorn, Sword of Kings [& Fred]

Idan Cohen

The Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, slayer of evils abundant, forged a dozen centuries ago in the deepest caves of Angurbandur, enchanted in the finest halls of the Seven Hidden Kingdoms, both aesthetically and practically a fine figure of a sword, found its way to Fred by a complete accident that neither would deign to talk about. Nonetheless, it was a fact: the Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, wielded by the hands of Jirard the Blue himself, which had hewn the breast of Bloody Tinarisiar and ended the Fifth Great War, and which could not, in fact, talk, due to a small confusion in the contract presented to the Angurbandurian blacksmiths and the enchanters of the Seven Hidden Kingdoms, was stuck.

With Fred.

So it got off to a rocky start.

The Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, whose perfect point once pierced the single vulnerable spot of Grigor the last Dragon, which stood as a symbol of the Pridehorn nations for a hundred years, and which was never (even once!) thrown into a lake, motioned Fred—to action! It was obvious this was what it meant.

Fred, uncertain (he was an accountant at a minor firm, but he was thinking about moving up to the big leagues), whispered harshly, But that is my wife!

The Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, sower of destruction upon the fields of man, grew ungratefully quiescent. It did not mutter a curse, but if it could have, it surely would have; but it could not because there had been a confusion in the small print of the contract presented to the Angurbandurian blacksmiths and the enchanters of the Seven Hidden Kingdoms.

Time passed. The Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, etc. etc. etc. etc. etc., lay upon the shelf and the mantle of Fred, who had had to get a shelf and a mantle, though first he had had to look up mantle on dictionary.com, which had been a lot of help. Fred, in fact, thought dictionary.com was one of the great inventions of the age. Fred held very few opinions, but this was one of them; if he ever happened

to meet the inventor of dictionary.com, he would very thoroughly shake his hand. This was also one of Fred's opinions.

Occasionally the Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, took it upon itself to leap into Fred's hands, as though by magic, guiding his arms and making him the greatest swordsman in the land. The dodge, the parry, the thousand moves of the master dueler rose in Fred's mind, and his legs could dance while his arms flashed like lightning and a dozen men fell beneath his wrath.

Sadly, the Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, unerringly chose to do this when Fred and his lovely wife (whose unfortunate resemblance to Grigor the last Dragon need not be mentioned in this story, as it is a sordid tale that began when Grigor the last Dragon was walking in the woods and came upon a fair maiden, and then there was some anatomically inappropriate tête-à-tête, if you will, which we really did say need not be mentioned, but then who listens to us anyway) were having a dinner party. The guests, needless to say, while amused the first two or three times, were losing fingers and toes and other small appendages at a growing rate, and they began to make sarcastic comments about the quality of the wine. This always sent Fred's unfortunately-faced wife into a crying jag, and when the Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, started slicing her tears into perfect halves, well, that was just too much.

It has to go! Fred's wife said. By this she meant, of course, the Dragon's Thorn with all the descriptives.

Well, said Fred.

Well what?! she said.

It's sort of part of the family by now, isn't it? said Fred. The Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings, did not perk up its ears, because it did not have ears, and this was quite all right, since there was no mention of ears in the contract we have already mentioned twice.

It, said Fred's wife, has to go!

Fred marshaled all of his manly power, that which had been hidden inside him for years and had been unleashed by the strength he felt momentarily when holding the Dragon's Thorn, butter knife of dukes, and said, No.

Fred's wife looked at Fred with her unfortunate face, which was unfortunate but unavoidable; she did not have any other face.

Fred's manly power took a Viagra, girded its loins, set out to the battle, took a look at Fred's wife's face, and wilted completely. Fine, he said. I'll go throw it in the lake.

So the Dragon's Thorn, nail clipper of squires, was taken firmly in hand and led to the lake, which had of course been there all along, and though it pleaded quite a lot, it was to no avail, since it could not speak Fred and Fred was not very good at Sword.

He took it in his meaty accountant paws.

He swung it round and round and to and fro. And he—

Released.

Thus ended the confusing relationship of the Dragon's Thorn, sword of kings most likely, slayer of whatever needed slaying most at the moment, forged and enchanted at the places we have mentioned earlier, and Fred.

And what forward in the future unknowable? Well, it's unknowable. But we're fairly certain the sword found a person of its own to make a king, and Fred, well, he actually ended up finding the Crown of the Ancients while walking down Main Street, but since it did not fit on his head, he gave it to the Lost & Found. The Lost & Found eventually went bankrupt because no one ever returns things any more, and the Crown went back to Fred. But what his wife said about that, besides, Did you take out the garbage already?, is another story.

And unknowable.

Probably.

Dangerous Innocence Joseph Jason Roger

Attack of the Mennonite Paratroopers

Ivan Dorin

The North. Vast, rugged, untamed. Wellspring of the Canadian imagination. Behind me, the stubborn granitic core of the Anvil Batholith slumbers beneath its Paleozoic blanket. Before me, the ramparts of Rose Mountain tower over expanses of boreal green veined with silver streams, where salmon who have swum fifteen hundred miles arrive to spawn and be eaten by grizzlies. The primeval silence is broken only by the distant rumble of hundred-and-seventy-ton trucks in the huge open-pit mine to the south. Yes, it's an awe-inspiring view. And it's mine, all mine. I helped the geologist with reconnaissance this morning, but now he's doing detailed mapping, so I don't have to do much more than provide an alternate target for the bears, and they're all down in the creeks anyway.

I'm holding pen to paper and just beginning to feel inspired when I hear the crunch of a booted foot on gravel. I turn to see a stern-looking young man, dressed in combat fatigues but unarmed except for a large leather-bound Bible. He nods to me and lies down next to me on his stomach. Then he opens his Bible (to one of the Old Testament chapters—I think it's Ecclesiastes) and, holding it open in his left hand, begins to read while doing one-handed pushups with his right.

There are quite a lot of questions that spring to my mind at this point, but somehow I'm most preoccupied by the fact that I'm sitting on a slope of twenty degrees or more, and his body is pointed directly downhill.

"Doesn't your head hurt?"

He stops mid-push and looks at me politely, over his right shoulder.

"Pardon me?"

"Uh, doesn't the blood rush to your head when you do that?"

"Oh, a little. It's not that bad once you get used to it." He waits for a reply and then, seeing that none is forthcoming, resumes his exercise.

A few pushups later, he stops and turns his head again, to find me still staring at him. "Don't mind me," he says. "Just go right ahead with whatever short story it is you're writing."

"How do you know I'm writing a short story?"

His head snaps forward and his shoulders move in what is, considering his position, a heroic attempt at a shrug. "Did I say 'short story'? It was just a guess. I mean, a man's entitled to a lucky guess now and again, isn't he?"

He heaves himself into the air and transfers his Bible from his left hand to his right, but doesn't get the left hand back underneath himself in time to avoid a collapse. "Whoops," he says. "Didn't make too much noise there, did I? I hope not. I won't disturb you now that I've changed hands. You just carry on with, well, whatever."

I look back at my notebook, hoping that he will be gone when I look up again. But he's still in my peripheral vision, and my brain chooses him as its point of reference. He seems stationary while my notebook, my knees, the silver-veined forest, and Rose Mountain begin pumping up, down, up, down, up—

I force myself to look at him and the world becomes stationary once again. He eventually rolls over on his back, props his open Bible on his insteps, and begins doing uphill situps, scanning the page when his elbows reach his knees and mouthing the words as he lies down.

"Look," I say, "I don't mean to pry or anything, but who are you?"

He glances up, surprised. "Why, I'm the Mennonite," he says, with the air of somebody delivering something between a pizza and a throne speech. "I thought you knew."

That's what annoys me the most about Mennonites. I'm always supposed to know. If I've ever actually met one before, I haven't noticed. But in the works of some of the people in my creative writing classes, they sprout like mushrooms. I never get a straight answer when I ask what Mennonites are or why people write about them, and I refuse to learn anything more about Mennonites until I do. I've gleaned occasional bits of information from such fiction; apparently they're Anabaptists. In geology, *anatexis* means partial melting, so I suppose Anabaptists are partial Baptists, but what does that tell me? I know that Mennonites are blond prairie farmers who study hard, read their Bibles, and sponsor film nights in Nimoka. I've also noticed their apparent fondness for cameo appearances. You

can't read very far without seeing them through the windows of school buses, in classrooms, on farms, in Yukon bush camps, maybe even on the Anvil Bath—

"All right, cut the aerobics routine! I know what you're up to."

"So would I, if you hadn't made me lose count."

"So this is how you Mennonites get written about so much, stalking the Prairies and the North like literary commandos. Well, you're wasting your time with me, buster. I don't make deals with gratuitous Mennonites."

"What makes you think I'm gratuitous?"

"Every Mennonite I've ever read about has been gratuitous. If you're so different, what are you doing here?"

"I'm homesteading," he says, without batting an eye.

He's cool under pressure, I'll say that for him. Maybe they're called 'Mennonites' after the Mennen antiperspirant commercial that says, "Never let them see you sweat."

"But," I say unsteadily, "we're above tree line."

"So much the better. I won't have to clear any trees."

"But we're only a couple of degrees shy of the Arctic Circle, and fifty-five hundred feet above sea level. Don't you think the growing season is going to be a little short?"

"Pah! In the 1800s, they said the same thing about Manitoba. My forefathers homesteaded on marginal land, and so shall I. We Mennonites are hardy folk."

"Well, I don't care how hardy you are. I'm still not writing about you."

"But you must."

"Why?"

"Because I'm part of your artistic heritage, a sacred trust passed down from generation to generation of Albertan creative-writing teachers, like a living torch—"

"Or a congenital defect."

"Bite your tongue! Have you never heard the Parable of the Good Alberta Writer?"

"No, I haven't. Nor do I—"

"In the beginning, the settlers of the Canadian West came unto a new land, and saw that it was vast and harsh. They wandered in the wilderness, and were beset by cold, and drought, and fires, and plagues of grasshoppers, and American television. Yet of their labors

little was written, busy as they were with wresting their living from the soil and rock.

"But it came to pass that there arose among them a man of divers words beautiful and powerful who spake of the frontier peoples in a voice most wondrous. He toiled long and hard over the written Word, and yea, he was Published and esteemed by wise and venerated critics. Yet when he went among his own people, he met with great sorrow, for they knew nothing of his works, but did debase themselves with perusal of the *National Enquirer*. But he dipped his quill anew and prayed, 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they read.'

"He gave many great literary sermons to his disciples, and yea, he was esteemed more than before, and did receive divers literary Awards, though there was no profit for him under the sun. So he said to himself, 'Fear not, for it is written that a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country.'

"And so it came to pass that, as he sought inspiration in his favorite wheat field, a strange shadow fell over him, and he cast his eyes aloft and beheld a great white bird descending. Its feathers shone with the gleam of a million sheets of fine vellum, and in its wings could be heard the roar of a thousand free-trade agreements. And the bird did circle near to him and did Land, and a great voice spake unto the Writer, saying, 'Fear not, for I bring you glad tidings from my masters, the Publishing Kings of the East. They have prepared a banquet for you in the presence of their Presses, and request that you visit them, First Class And All Expenses Paid.'

"Therefore did the Writer climb Aboard, and watch his field shrink and disappear as the bird carried him toward the rising sun. Then was he accosted by fair young women of strange raiment and offered fine spirits, but he stood firm in the face of temptation. He passed over many fields, and vast forests, and great seas of sweet water, and came unto a vast City, and its towers were as tall as a host of grain elevators, and as many as the bales in an autumn field. Then was he taken to the highest tower, even unto the topmost floor, and was brought there into the presence of the Publishing Kings, who spake unto him, saying, 'Praise be to the Future Philosopher-King of the Manhattanites!'

"And he saw that there had been chests prepared for him, overflowing with silver and precious gems, and that he was surrounded with shiny Vehicles, and Appliances, and all manner of precious

Consumer Goods, even unto the abundance of *Wheel of Fortune*. Then was he applauded by many great Critics, and taken to look out the Window, and the Kings said unto him, 'Behold your Readers! They are wealthy, powerful, wise, and esteemed, for it is written that if you can make it Here, you can make it Anywhere. Your Readers shall be as many as the grains of sand on the beach. We offer you the whole world, and on one condition only: you shall be the voice of the Manhattanites. You shall write of the Yuppites, and the builders of pink granite towers, and of the wealthy daughters of Israel who do seek to translate by surgery the flesh from their noses unto their breasts.'

"Then the Good Writer was sore afraid, and greatly tempted, but he stood fast, saying, 'But I do not wish to write of these things. I wish to write of Mennonites in Central Alberta.'

"And the Publishing Kings were greatly vexed, and called for their seers and sages, saying, 'Tell us all there is to know of these things, that we may assess their market potential.' But the sages could find no knowledge of Mennonites in all their audience, nor did their market know aught of the place called Central Alberta, whence the Writer had come. Thus was the Good Alberta Writer put once more aboard the great white bird, and carried homeward as he had come, First Class And All Expenses Paid."

The Mennonite's eyes mist over in adoration. He hasn't done so much as a leg lift during the whole story.

"But I don't want to write about Mennonites. I don't know anything about them. I'd just be selling out in my own way if I did."

"Oh, no," he says. "You don't have to write about us that much. We want to be in your story, not of it."

I fidget, and scan the valley, the mountains, the mine; I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched.

"No," I tell him at last. "It's silly and pointless and you can't make me do it."

"Ah, I think you'll find otherwise," he croons.

I hear the sound of a plane engine above me and look up. The sky is filled with parachutes.

Ffft. Ffft. Nowhere to run.

Ffft. Ffft. Tidy, smiling blond people with spray bottles on mist setting, settling inexorably toward the ground, partially-baptizing as they go.

He says, "A cat's tail follows it wherever it goes, you know." Ffft. Ffft. "Do you really think you're fooling anyone, hanging out in your artsy cafes and watching your movies at the Plaza? Your neighbours were Mennonites."

"But—"

"Your friend from the next farm over!"

"But—"

"Your substitute teacher in fifth grade!"

"But they never said they were! They seemed just like everyone else!"

"You were raised beside a town founded by Mennonites, on a farm founded by Mennonites, in a cruciform house facing a two-storey barn with a ground-level rear entrance and a rail-mounted manure-collection system!"

"No!"

"Because YOU are a Mennonite!"

"Noooo!" I howl, in my best Elephant-Man voice. "I am not a Mennonite! I am a human being!"

"Put us in!" call the Mennonites.

"But—"

"In! In! In!"

"I can't!" I howl.

"You will!" they chant.

"No, I can't write about you the way you want. Not now. Not even if I wanted to. You can't make just a brief appearance. You're the subject of my story, the driving force of my story, the antagonists of my story, even, according to you, the protagonist of my story. Of, of, of, of, of!"

The Mennonite pauses and glances around him. "You know, I think I see an interesting outcrop over there," he says.

The wind shifts, the mist vanishes, the parachuters divert their course. Within minutes, the Mennonites are gone, leaving nothing but my fear that if I ever write a word of this, I'll never be published in my hometown again.

Lacerta—a Constellation Named by Johannes Hevelius

J M McDermott

observe the individual freckles
for they twist and wander
like phytoplankton on wet, black skin

beautiful Mira does something nasty
pulsates, they say, around a white dwarf
and Johan burning in beer in Dantzig

Johan seeks rebirth below the Southern Cross
he stops to run his finger down the pagan sky
sketch this thunderbolt's elbows

call it Lizard and damn
the dead mythologists that
never knew a skin from skin

these starry southern sirens had no song after all
lost men dove to fill the gaps in the scales

Display

Beth Langford

No one goes to the museum to see animals.
The taxidermist knew this. The one who sculpted
a guilt-struck burrowing owl hunching up
his shoulders and a pelican wise as grandfathers.
And a notched-beak gull, chest out/head up
like a proud conqueror, and a thick-legged hawk
sneaking up on its prey
for Hallowe'en. And a little falcon's
wing, thrown back, became her dress. And a snowy owl,
wings open against a hanging light,
joyous in the cold wind
from the air-conditioning vent—
wheeeee

Facts of Bone

Tina Connolly

Jules stripped to her underwear, dusted herself with powder, and stepped into the stretchy flying suit. She smoothed it around her fingers, careful to line up the yellow dots on her knuckles, careful to leave no gaps or bubbles around her palms. Her ritual for suiting up was rigid. Enough could go wrong in the air...but some things she could control.

She trudged out of the shed, holding the carry pegs of the flycycle. The wings and rotators spread awkwardly out behind it, the right wing scoring the dirt. She poked her earbud in as she walked, settled the braced helmet in place. The worn path was muddy and her feet grew heavy.

She was studying the cold grey sky when her sister's voice came on in her ear. "What's the weather report?"

Jules squinted to the north. "Looks like rain later. Where are you this week?" She stepped into the flying gear, settled the padded harness. Chute cord at her shoulder, battery light on full. Check.

"Pallister," said Marnie.

"Where's that?"

"Big grimy city in Saeland."

"Yuck." Wireless on, routing the data from her goggles, her suit, to the cycle company, who were trying to improve the precision of their equipment. Something Marnie had set up. The money would offset a bad harvest—heaven forbid.

The wind cut across Jules' cheeks. She rocked back, shifting her feet to the pedals, then rocked forward and off the cliffs. The spring wind buffeted her, flicking her with spray from rain and river, pungent with the acrid odor of the eiddar flock. A cursory check of the cliffs to start, then she turned her attention to the wider area.

"What's for today? Just checking on the egg-laying?"

Jules did not answer.

"Dammit. I don't want you going after those poachers. I've got my city rep working on them."

"I don't see her out here on the cliffs," said Jules. Her goggles zoomed in on the forest on the other side of the river. Even this early, before all the trees had leafed, there were too damn many places to hide.

Jules swung back to the first nook, leaning against the turn. The eiddar she called Speckly Grey Mom was awake and active, plucking down from her chest to fill her nest for the eggs. Responsible harvesting didn't start until after the eggs had hatched, but poachers didn't give a damn about responsible. There was comfortable silence in her earbud as the two sisters worked, a continent apart, one tracking birds and the other foreign currency.

Jules was checking on White-Bib Mom—she was displaying unusual plucking behaviors—when a spray of rocks exploded next to the nest.

She spun back out to face the forest, and then another something whistled by her ear. There was a huge tearing noise, and her left leg was suddenly far below her right, and then both legs were overhead and the whole flycycle was hurtling toward the ground. Jules rolled with it, righting her head, and pulled the ripcord at her left shoulder. The chute opened and jerked her and the machine up, and she pulled her legs up from the pedals so that when it finally crashed she could roll away from it on the ground.

It all worked like it had the other time she'd crashed, except this time she had just enough time in the air to look off into the forest for the poacher. She saw something—a flash of color—and anger confused her body. The cycle landed, tilted forward, and the wrong kind of instinct made her stick out her right arm. It skidded in the wet ground and there was a flash of pain as it broke, then broke again, pinned under the curving control bar. As she blacked out, her sister's voice seemed to be crying in her ear.

- - -

But she might have imagined that. The next thing she heard was Marnie's calm, dry voice repeating something about an ambulance being on its way, and she'd better wake up for it, because family property or no, if Jules thought Marnie would give up her career for the daily gamble of a life tending dirty birds, she was seriously mistaken.

"I do well enough," mumbled Jules. "Got my own crappy flat, don't I?"

"So you say." Relief was clear in Marnie's voice.

With her left hand, Jules disentangled chute ropes from her head and then struggled to rock the cycle bar off her right arm. After the initial shock, there was surprisingly little pain. The adrenaline kicking in.

"Stay where you are, Juliana. Let the professionals do it."

"I don't see any professionals." Her arm was a funny shape, an S curving in front of her. She sat back down in the reddened mud and cradled her arm in her lap.

It was not bleeding. She touched one of the curves, expecting to feel the end of a snapped bone. But instead her arm was smooth to the touch.

She ran her fingers along the bone from the wrist to the elbow, tracing the S the whole way. There must be internal bleeding or swelling, she thought, because her forearm felt like solid bone—bone that had always been in the shape of a doubly-broken arm.

- - -

The nearest hospital was forty miles from her cliffs, a long building with a rick-rack of roofs over a warren of underground rooms. After the tests, she was pushed in a wheelchair down a succession of ramps and lifts until she was put into a bed deep below the surface. The hospital seemed to press her under its thumb.

She lay flat on the firm bed and wished for her own down mattress, a luxury too costly for the hospital. She looked at the ceiling for a long while. She didn't seem to be able to do anything while her arm lay heavy and twisted at her side.

By the time the surgeon came in, she knew the ceiling intimately. The doctor's eyes were black and glassy like her birds', and he had a thatch of black hair that stuck out around his ears. "Are you comfortable?" he said. "As much as possible, that is."

"Will you tell me what's with my arm? No one will say. Is it infected?"

He did not answer.

She swallowed. "I need it to fly."

"It's not infected." His hands on his electronic clipboard were still. "It's an extremely rare genetic disorder. The immune system is working imperfectly. It's trying to fix the damage done to the bone. It sent signals to knit the break back together, but it over-compensated, turning tendon and flesh to bone as well. The break in the arm most likely triggered it."

Jules could not make sense of this. "I broke my toe when I was ten and nothing happened."

"Adult onset. It's rare enough that no consistent pattern is identifiable as to the trigger, except the patient is always past puberty,

sometimes well past. You were flying?" His body was still, the muscles taut like a watching creature's.

"I'm a gatherer, and yes, I flycycle. I'm perfectly competent. I wear a full latex suit and I don't take risks."

"I'm sure you don't. But the dangers are serious for someone with this disorder. Once triggered, the trend is irreversible. It may be wise to consider a new career."

Jules did not want to think about that. She went on the offensive. "What can you do for my arm?"

He held her gaze. "Perhaps nothing." Then he turned away, holding the clipboard behind him with both hands, tapping it. His thumbnails were gnawed halfway down. "The difficulty is that any attempt to remove the excess bone may trigger further outbreaks. Attempting to reshape the arm may make it worse."

Jules stretched both arms in front of her. The right arm curved and bulged like a snake that had just eaten. The tips of its fingers reached no further than the wrist bone of her left hand. "I want it straightened. I can't fly like this."

He pivoted. Those bird eyes glittered in his face. "There's an experimental procedure I've been considering...." He explained the operation, bitten fingers fluttering, technical details of surgeries and timed-release immunosuppressants piling on hard and fast, till Jules shrank into herself and thought, How do patients pull decisions from this? It's like he's recounting the dry facts of uplift and downdrafts, the sudden gusts that sweep sideways across the cliffs. I'm not used to being a patient. It's all head information, and without a lifetime of experience tucked in my body, I can't know any of it.

"Yes," she said in the end.

- - -

When she awoke, the room was dark. She tried to raise her arm, but it was tied down. No, it wasn't that; it was just dead heavy. She swallowed, and felt along her right arm with her left fingers. It was straight all right. Her forearm was straight—and solid to the touch. It was like skin stretched over stone.

New striations of bone now reached into her upper arm, one running almost to her shoulder. But the bicep seemed to work and her elbow still had some play. If she let her body recalibrate to the new weight, she could still use her arm to fly. But it was her hand she needed the most, palms to grip and fingers to tilt the gyropics. She almost didn't want to try to move it and find out if any muscles

and tendons still worked, if anything was left, snaking its way through rivulets in the bone. She closed her eyes, and in the blackness she wiggled the fingers of her right hand.

Only then could she open her eyes and watch her fingers move in the dim glow of the bedside monitor.

The knot in her chest loosened and her mind turned away from thoughts of her injury. The birds were nesting and she needed to get back to the cliffs. Her earbud lay in reach, on a tray of her personal items. She put it in place and subvocalized her sister's code.

"When can you get them to release me?" She offered up the dry details, but did not feel like hashing out her feelings with her sister.

"You should consider staying in bed. It sounds serious. What did he say about going back to work?"

"Oh, to be careful."

"I see," said Marnie. There was skeptical silence. "Look, I've hired a bodyguard," she said finally. "She'll be walking the foot of the cliffs and watching the trees."

Relief. Then.... "Just till I get back?"

"Permanently." Marnie's curt voice. "I'm putting my foot down. I know what's best. You use the cycle for data collection and harvesting only. No more baby-bird-protection agency."

"She'll scare the birds. This is their egg-laying season. They don't know her like they know me."

"Grow up," said Marnie. "Better fidgety than dead."

"Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired," Jules said dryly. "If you can call it bedside when you're halfway across the world. Where are you today?"

"Lyddon. Awful thick fog. It's no picnic being here. You wouldn't like it."

Jules looked down at her arm on the hospital bed. It seemed to belong to somebody much older and heavier. Someone with a different life, some Jules who sat in an office and programmed ship schedules or inspected snakeskin handbags. "The doctor thinks I should stop flying," she admitted.

"And you?"

"I think I'd rather die. I think."

"It's that serious?" said Marnie.

"Might be." There was something about saying it out loud, and suddenly Jules added, "What do you think I should do?" The question felt strange on her lips.

"Keep flying."

"Yeah?"

"You can't stop your life just because you might die. We're all dying. Just be careful. Please."

Jules nodded to the ceiling. She was obscurely comforted to know they had returned her to the same room.

"Besides, we still need that data you're gathering," Marnie said. "We need the money for it from the cycle company. It's important."

"Ah," said Jules. Her left hand fluttered. "Will you come see me now? In the hospital?"

"I have commitments this week. I can't...."

"Marnie." The word was a stone pressing up through her throat.

"I...." A silence. "I'll come. I'll be there."

"I knew you wouldn't let me down."

- - -

Avar the bodyguard was restless and relentless, with short blonde hair mottled with grey and a hunch to her back like a tortoiseshell. She paced the bottom of the red cliffs like a machine programmed for one thing only. Her heavy tread shook stones.

Jules couldn't watch her. After she checked to make sure the laying birds hadn't been disturbed further, she hopped the river and went to see where the poachers had been. The shot had come from the full beech past the stand of those skinny trees the squirrels liked.

She unhooked her cycle gear and went poking around the beech, looking for traces. There were plenty: broken limbs and bold, careless footprints leading back to the northeast. There was a trail a quarter-mile up that led to a good fishing stream for carp. She couldn't think what lay beyond that.

Jules picked up a stick and crouched by the beech tree, pointing it back toward the nest she had been observing. Her shoulder ached from the extra weight. Avar stopped in her stomping, stared hard at Jules, then continued again. The distance was not far and the flycycle's wings had been old; it didn't have to have been an elephant gun to have ripped through the left one. But powerful enough to kill an

eiddar; not a poacher of the down harvest, then, but a common criminal, bagging nesting birds for their beaks.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the hospital." The voice in her ear was loud after all that silence.

Jules sighed and put down the stick.

"Come away from the forest. I told you to be careful."

"Stop watching me off the vidfeed. Let me work." Jules raised the stick again, sighting along its bark. He'd been aiming at White-Bib Mom. "I thought this equipment was for the data for the flycycle company, not for tracking me."

"Can't I see my sister when I call?"

There was an obvious answer to that. Jules pressed her lips tighter and felt the earbud like a rock in her ear.

Marnie's voice, softer, a whisper. "I meant, I mean, I'm sorry."

The regret in her tone was the twist of the knife. "Sorry doesn't cut it," Jules said. "Sorry doesn't mean a damned thing. It's a word you poison me with like it should do something, like it should make up for not coming. For condescending. For not bringing me home from school when—"

"When mother was sick." A beat, and then a sudden rush of words unburdening. "Jules, it was her wish. She didn't want you to see her...."

Cold fear rippled in her chest at Marnie's words. Jules ruthlessly closed down that train of thought, traded fear for the old anger. "Right." Jules wiggled out her earbud. "Well, maybe I want to be left alone, too," she said to it, and dropped it on the ground.

- - -

Nesting season began and the mother birds laid their eggs The first down harvest could not happen until the birds were born, so Jules took to exploring the forest, watching for the poacher. Avar returned a disinfected earbud, but Jules put it in a pouch on the flycycle. She was careful with her body.

There were several times when she thought she saw the poacher, but never anything she could identify. He—in her mind it was a he, with beady eyes like her surgeon's—stayed just out of sight. But she was certain he was there, behind this tree or the next, watching. She could feel him waiting for her to make a mistake.

A month passed and the eggs hatched. Her work called her to the cliff, but her attention stayed focused on the forest. Searching

it on foot was the first and last thing she did in her day, and while she ate lunch, she would lean back against a twisted pine on the outcropping and watch the forest, distracted by every fox and leaf and squirrel.

All over the red cliff face, bits of brown and buff were fluffing out, cheeping for attention. There was one nest, that of Speckly Grey Mom, where the eggs did not hatch. The shells had been too hard for the chicks to pierce with their egg teeth. Days after all the other birds' eggs had hatched, the mother bird had tried to free her offspring from their shell prisons. The eggs lay cracked and open, oozing dead, slimy bird onto the down of the nest, and dead worms lay on top of them. The nest swarmed with maggots. Speckly Grey Mom warbled distress at Jules as she tried to clear the mess away.

Jules brushed the dead creatures to the foot of the cliff with one hand, fingertipping the gyropics with the other. The down could be cleaned, so she collected the dirty clusters and slid them into the suction bucket at her thigh. With a clean nest, Speckly Grey Mom would soon forget her children and start the second round of stuffing the nest with down, for her and her mate's comfort during winter.

The eiddar grew more agitated, flaring her wings. "It'll be all right," Jules crooned to her. "Next year will be better." She extended a heavy, black-gloved finger and cautiously ran it over the eiddar's bill. The bird jerked. "Next year," said Jules. Speckly Grey Mom lifted her feet, then calmed, settling her wings.

"I promise," said Jules. She eased back. The eiddar cocked her head at the empty nest. Then plucked a bit of down and nosed it into place.

The second round, the early autumn harvest, was always the most lucrative; it was cleaner and lasted a month. Jules harvested down and the females refilled it, until the down on their chests was slim enough that they would need to keep it themselves to live comfortably during the winter. That was when the males took over, lining the nests with their coarser feathers. When the males started downing the nest, harvesting stopped and the bird pair could finally complete the process of preparing their winter shelter. Those were always long, sleepless days, colored by the knowledge that she was interfering with their cycle, forcing their home-building to take three times as long as it should.

The spring harvest, on the other hand, was usually one of her favorite times. The fluffball birds were charmingly ugly, and if Jules

didn't take the soiled down that had cushioned their births, the mothers would clean it out themselves.

But these hours were long, too, trying to get to the fluff before the birds tossed it down the cliffs, and as Jules got tired she made more mistakes—mistakes that hadn't formerly been worrisome, but now were. She told herself to be careful, but her body didn't instinctively know this meant something other than it once had. Her legs were always exhausted and she must have banged her thigh, for there was a hard lump in it that moved when she pressed it.

Harvest days stretched into nights. Jules was at half-speed, stopping after every handful of down, or landing between nests to rest her legs and stare into the forest. There were days she managed to forget Avar was below, and once she landed her cycle on the riverbank and tackled the woman, certain the bodyguard was the figure that lurked in wait. Avar restrained her, holding Jules with stiff arms till she calmed. Even so, she lost the joints of two toes to rigidity.

Some nights she slept in the shed, or she didn't even really sleep at all. Once she looked across the ridged plateau to where the family home stood, shrouded in pines, obscured by rock. It was inaccessible from here, except by going back to the road and winding across the cliff face. She almost considered trying to reach it on the cycle, but weariness overwhelmed her. She had not set foot in the house since her mother had died.

A light flickered. Marnie? The caretaker? A trick of the moonlight? She imagined Marnie sitting in the old kitchen, all alone...but she hardened her heart. Marnie wanted nothing to do with her.

- - -

The first harvest wound to a close, but Jules' long days didn't. She spent more time in the forest, measuring broken twigs and footprints, once yelling at a pair of hikers.

She didn't talk to her sister until she was investigating the broken limb of a tree and Avar stepped silently from behind it with a second earbud. Jules weighed it from one hand to the other, looking across the wind-ruffled river at the birds on the cliffs. Avar crossed her arms.

Jules put the earbud in. It was a foreign object and invasive. She ran her fingers along the tree limb, trying to guess how it had snapped.

"Have you found the poacher?"

"He's out there," Jules muttered. She didn't want him to overhear their conversation. She retraced her path, crossed the bridge to her flycycle. "He's been tracking me; I see the signs."

"Have you seen him?"

"Not yet." Jules slung the cycle harness on her shoulders, flicked at the hair whipping into her eyes. "But he's being careful. He knows he's mine." An eiddar was calling overhead, a lonely distress signal carried off on the wind.

"Jules," said Marnie. "There's no one out there. Avar's watched the forest. I've watched the forest, through your vidfeed. Whoever he was, he knows what he did to you. He's not coming back."

Somewhere deep down Jules both knew this was true and resented it. Her hands were loose on the straps, the harness. "You don't understand. I have to catch him." She hit the battery-powered thrust and launched herself from the ground, searching for the crying eiddar. She could not tell from which direction the sound came; it seemed to surround her. "He's out there and I'll find him."

"Let it go, Juliana."

The wind buoyed the flycycle and then swept it back down. Jules' hands were loose on the controls, and the world tumbled around her head. Wind and bird cries raged in her ears, sweeping her instincts off-balance. She didn't know which way was up and then she thought the sky was the water and the cliffs were the ground and Avar was running sideways, arms reaching out.

"Jules? Jules!"

"Damned poacher mine," she said, and her tongue was thick in her mouth and she already knew that nothing made sense.

The flycycle crashed on the riverbank and Jules tumbled from it. She coughed against something hard, choked, spat, and then lay where she'd fallen, stiffening.

There was a voice far away, calling her name. Marnie? No, Avar. No, it was the poacher, her poacher, with beady black eyes and barred wings, crying in her ear. The sky was very far away.

The black ground swallowed her whole.

- - -

This change was much more painful. They drugged her again, and in her dreams she was chased by broken baby birds whose black heads flopped as they ran.

From a distance, she heard Marnie's coldest voice directing the doctor, telling him what he was and wasn't allowed to do, what

experiments he wasn't allowed to make, how long he was allowed to keep her. She tried to open her eyes to see her sister, but each time she thought she had managed it, there was blackness, and Marnie was never there.

There was a very lucid dream where she was standing in the black hallway of her boarding school in Issland, and the headmistress was telling her someone had died. Only it wasn't her mother this time, it was Marnie, and then it was Jules herself, and then it was a little speckled-grey bird whose feathers had turned to hollow bone.

One morning in early fall, she woke into consciousness. Her head was muzzy, but not drugged. For the first time in a long time, her brain seemed to function as it had in spring, before the nesting season. Her body was aching and heavy. It lay flat and stiff on the hospital bed like a suit she should be able to walk away from, if only she could find the snaps.

A message on her earbud triggered as she woke. It said, "Come home."

- - -

Jules tried three times to leave her hospital room, but her body would not obey. Pain returned in full force as she tried to move her new form, her new bones grinding on each other. Her remaining muscles could not pull the weight. Each time, the nurses caught her before she could finish the long, slow pull to the doorway, caught her and put her back in bed, where she fell asleep from the exertion.

At last she opened her eyes and there was Avar. The woman picked Jules up, her movements slow in order to let Jules' body shape into a form that could fit in her arms. She carried Jules through the low halls of the hospital and up to the sky.

The drive up the cliffs to her childhood home seemed long. Jules drifted in and out of awareness, strapped into the backseat. The hospital had made Avar take a wheelchair, but it was designed for someone with a flexible midsection. Avar set it aside and carried Jules to the front door of the house.

The sight of the red door wakened her, hit her with a rush of old memories. Images from the dream about her mother's death flickered, then vanished, rejected. She couldn't conjure up any more rage over the past.

Inside, the chairs were covered with shapeless dusters; the front room was an indistinct blur. The still air smelled of unfamiliar chemicals. Jules' head bumped against Avar's shoulder, and the pain,

the smell, her helplessness pricked tears. The door to the master bedroom was ajar and Avar nudged it open with a foot. She stood Jules just inside the door, holding onto her waist with a steady hand.

The master bedroom had been cleared of her mother's things. Her father's, too.

In place of their bed stood two massive glass aquariums filled with gelatinous green, with tangles of tubes. Bundles of cords ran from the cases to what had once been the master bath; a thrumming sound from that direction suggested a generator.

In the lefthand aquarium, attached to the tubes, was a woman. She hung stiffly in the gel, tilting forward. One leg was curled in three places, but frozen there; it did not undulate. An asymmetrical lump protruded from her belly, as if she had swallowed an eiddar-sized rock. One breast was swollen, misshapen by a torus of bone. Her head was covered by a tangle of wires and tubes that ran into her ears and nose, and a clear band that covered her eyes.

But Jules could see those eyes, and they were still Marnie's.

A voice said, "The tank will relieve the pain." Her sister's mouth did not seem to move, and Jules wondered if it were only her new knowledge that made the voice in her ear seem not her sister's at all, but a dry whisper constructed to sound like the voice she expected.

Tanks. Fluid pressing in. Aquariums for the dead.

Jules could not turn and run. Could not cycle away. But she also could not move toward that tank.

"Please," said Marnie. "Just try it."

There was quiet except for the generator, and then Jules said, "Okay."

Avar immediately picked up the body that seemed less and less to belong to Jules. She stomped up stairs to a platform behind the tanks, turned, and lowered Jules in. The fluid filled in around her, cushioned her stone body. Avar fitted a mask around Jules' nose and mouth, and then she slipped beneath the surface. Her right ear closed with gel, and the world cut off except for dry directions coming from the earbud.

With her left arm, Jules directed tubing as her sister commanded, Avar reaching in to assist. There were gloves of stretchy black rubber with yellow dots, and for a moment loss transformed into panic that rose like a bird in her throat and beat against her stone body.

She swallowed. She braced herself against the tank to wiggle the left glove on, one-handed, and then smoothed it as best she could against the hard surface of her leg, trying to leave no bubble or ripple in the fabric. Sensors. Tubes. Patches. Long rests. A headset—a stripped-down version of her flying helmet. Her stone fingers shook as she tried to put that on. It took ages before she could fit the clear band to her eyes. "And now what?" she murmured, half to herself and half to Marnie.

An explosion of pink light answered. It streaked, striated into painful white and red, spun clockwise, counter, and then the red darkened and marbled and the white slid into a blinding blue lit from within, the blue that only occurred in the early fall over her own red cliffs.

She thought at first it was a video of another day. A memory of last fall, captured by Marnie. But the nests were in this season's arrangement. She looked at her equipment, and it was too new and shiny to be her flycycle, though the controls were the same, and there were hands holding them in just the asymmetrical way she always did.

She lifted one and stared. It was a hand from the past. Fleshy and supple in black gloves with yellow dots, and when she stretched its fingers out and in, they moved.

Except it was thicker. The joints puffier.

Mechanical.

Jules folded and unfolded the hand for a while, until the vidfeed suddenly sparkled, turned blue.

"They're still working out the bugs," Marnie said. "You wouldn't believe the trouble I had with Avar."

Through the watery glass of the tank, Jules saw the form of Avar leaning against the wall. Eyes closed, immobile. And there, always there. Jules whispered, "Marnie...."

The feed came online again.

"So what's the weather pattern today?" said Marnie.

Jules looked up at the sun, the real sun, and the brightness pricked tears. "Sunny morning. Probably clouds by noon."

"And the birds?"

In the tank, Jules imagined her fingers curling around the controls in familiar patterns, and the new flycycle obeyed just as the old one had. She took the new body off from the squarish rock and dropped a few feet, angling back to hover at the first nook. Speckly Grey Mom cooed and hopped along an outcropping. "The nests are

thick with down," Jules said. It was a sure sign that no down had been stolen in her absence—but it meant something else as well. "Too thick."

"Hard winter coming."

"Yes," said Jules, and she reached out the black-clad arm that she saw. The hand closed around fluff and slid it into the suction bucket at her thigh, seeming both miraculous and matter-of-course.

Speckly Grey Mom warbled and hopped, uncertain about the intruder with the unfamiliar smell and slightly strange reflexes, rearing back as if she would slam her bill into the strange black hands. For a moment there was panic again as Jules thought this whole arrangement wasn't going to work, and she felt herself back in the tank, cut off from the air, cut off. But she swallowed that and crooned to the mother bird. "It's the fall harvest. Time to give up your down. Just like every year."

The eiddar hopped again. Then settled on the rocks and stuck out her bill toward the new cycle contraption.

Jules ran a finger along the bird's bill, hardly daring to breathe.

The eiddar cooed again, watching with eyes of beady black. Jules slowly reached down to the nest and drew forth another handful of feathers.

There was silence in her ear as three sets of eyes watched her hands slide and pluck at Speckly Grey Mom's nest.

Jules breathed out. "Where are you off to this week?" she said.

"Good question," said Marnie. "I hear the cliffs are nice this time of year."

"Sunny mornings, clear evenings. At night the birds settle into their nests and great tufts of their down fluff into the air. You might like it."

"I might, I might."

Jules nodded, spreading her wings to seek out the next nest. Her hands were sure on the controls and her weight shifted to counter the gyropics as wind swept along the cliffs. Below her, Speckly Grey Mom rose, fluttering into the air alongside Jules, then arced back into her nest, nosing it with her bill. She plucked a cluster of fluff from her chest and patted it into place, rebuilding.

It would be a good harvest this year. The nests were thick with down, as the birds prepared for a long season of snow.

a father a son a disaffection

S A Tranter

I mind one time, maybe 1981? Well, it was a Sunday. And it was very cold and it was wintertime and very early—five a.m.?

My father had a subcontract job at some extension for a hospital. Plastering the walls of the empty shell of the building.

He'd asked me a few days earlier if I wanted to help him. He said he'd pay me. So aye, you know; too right I would.

We didn't have a car and there were no buses. So we walked in the dark for three miles to the job through the snow and the ice. We had to carry the tools. Hard work. Felt like a husky carrying those tools in the snow.

I mind walking up the Frogstone Road and seeing a used condom lying twisted on the ground, full with white spunk. Just lying there; must've been used and discarded on the Saturday night, a few hours before we walked by it.

I mind feeling very shy at seeing it. I wonder now, as I did then, if my father also saw it. And if he would remember, and laugh about it, if I mentioned it to him. Strange. But everything is strange.

We got to the site.

My job was to take two pails and carry the water back and thro fifty yards from the outside tap to an old tin bath where I was to mix the plaster with a broken old rusty shovel.

Hard work. But I liked it. I liked the ache in my arms, shoulders, back, legs. Cold air burning my lungs. Very sore. But it made me feel like a man when I was still a twelve-year-old boy.

It was hard doing that thing. The water-carrying was okay, but mixing the plaster was an agony. The cold made the plaster hard, made it set too quickly. I wasn't fast or strong enough.

My father had to keep leaving the wall-plastering to help me mix the stuff in the tin bath. Then the plaster on the wall would set and get all fucked up. He was getting angry with me.

We stopped and had our pieces. Cheese on white bread for me. Jam and cheese and treacle together on white bread for him. And hot tea from the tartan flask.

After we ate, it went on like that, me not keeping up and he getting angrier. Fuck.

We didn't get the job finished. But I knew he had to for the money. If the job wasn't finished that day, there'd be no payment. And we didn't get it finished. My father sighed and sat down. I just stood there before him with a pail in each hand.

He said to me, When you get in a fight, never ever go down, and always keep your back to the wall. Remember, Scott, it's what you're prepared to do, how far you're willing to go. If you're prepared to go further than those against you, then you'll win.

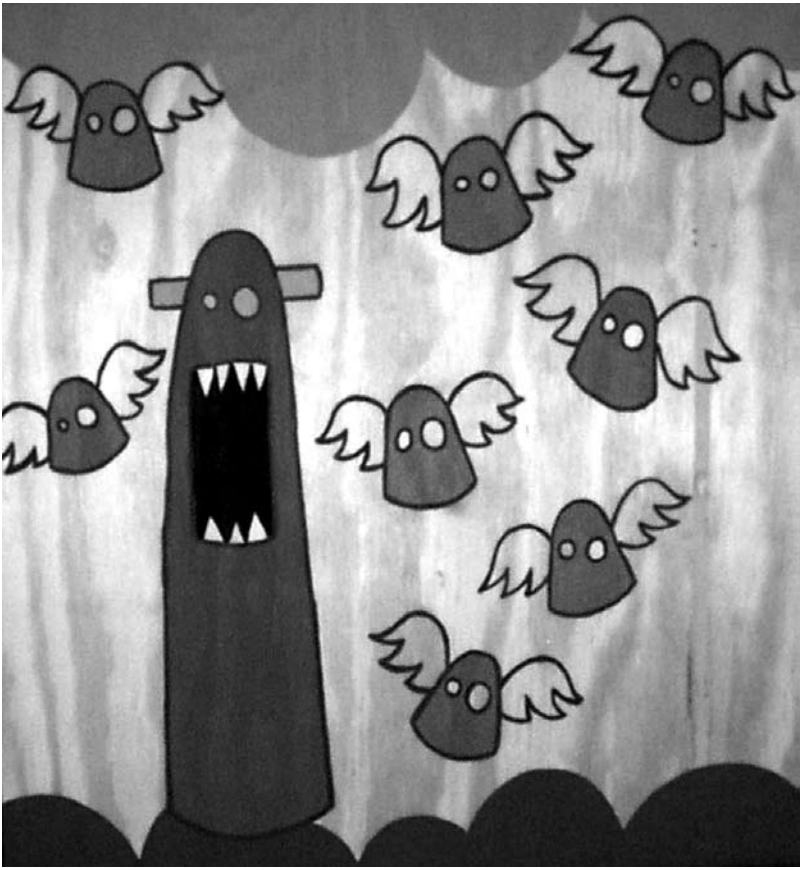
What a philosophy.

But he was right, I suppose.

I can't remember how we got home from that job. It's lost to me now. But I do remember he was adamant he'd be paid, and him coming home from work the next day with two black eyes and no money.

No money, but two black eyes.

That used johnny discarded in the street.



Monster Flights

Jessica Nicole Hill

Hunt of the I-Don't-Knows

Matthew Chad Weinman

Silence. Soft blue moon lights burnt-grass prairie.

Man with grey beard, "Shh.... Don't make a sound."

Bryce the Scribe to me, "What did he say?"

"I don't know."

"Shhh!!!!" looking over his shoulder to glare back at us.

Bryce the Scribe, "Why does he want us to be quiet?"

"I don't know."

Then a murmur. A wave of hectic whispers. Comes like a tide out of the darkness that surrounds us. Fills dry night with nervous chatter. Then a hush. Gone.

Silence. Looking around. Dark ashen forest in dim-blue distance behind.

Bryce the Scribe, "What was that?"

Man with grey beard, "Shut up!"

Bryce the Scribe, "What's going on?"

"I don't know. How should I know?"

Bryce the Scribe to me, "You're a goddamn penguin."

"I'm not a fucking penguin."

"Are too."

"Am not!"

Bryce the Scribe, "Bach-Bach!"

Me, "What the hell was that?"

"That's the sound a penguin makes."

Man in loud hoarse whisper, "Shut up!"

Silence. I stare absent-minded into the darkness.

I backbone-freeze as I see them. Their two-eyed pale human faces hover low to the ground. Their movements slow. Their lips moving in hunger-licking.

I point. Whisper, "Look."

Bryce the Scribe, "Oh yeah, I'm going to fucking look where a fucking penguin is telling me to look."

"Look."

"What do I look like to you? A toaster oven?"

Man, "Shut up!"

Bryce the Scribe, "Oh, don't mind the penguin, sir. Their species isn't culturally evolved enough to understand the meaning of silence. They just Bach! Bach-Bach! Bach!"

Man in anger, "You're a fucking moron."

Bryce the Scribe grinning towards me, "Get it. Like the composer. Come on, that's funny!"

"Look."

Man, "Both of you shut up!"

Their eyes hypnotize mine as they bob low and listless in the moonlight.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice Bryce the Scribe back-bone-freeze. A whisper, "What are they?"

"I don't know."

Man turns frenzied eyes on us. Then quick-snaps head back towards low-heads. Contemplation on his forehead as his eyes snap back on us. He starts to run towards us. He sprints past.

Bryce the Scribe in loud voice, "What's going on?"

Man yells as he disappears into darkness towards forest, "I don't know!"

A low-head perks its ears.

Bryce the Scribe, "Jesus, no one knows anything."

A second low-head perks its ears.

Third low-head has a frenzy of slow thought come upon its eyes. "I don't know."

First low-head turns to third, "You don't know?"

Third low-head, "I don't know." Its face strange-twisted pale frozen in moonlight.

Second low-head in background to self, "I don't know. I don't know? I don't know."

Bryce the Scribe and I watch in horrified silence-shock.

A fourth low-head, "What if, like, none of us know?"

A fifth and sixth join in, "Know what? Know what?"

First low-head, "We don't know."

A seventh and eighth, "We don't know! We don't know!"

Now there are twenty. Now there are thirty. They begin quick-filtering out of darkness. Their pale faces come ghost-like into moonlight. All in nervous panic-huddle, "I don't know! Do you know? I don't know! I don't know!"

Some of the low-heads jumping up and down out of frustration, "I don't know! I don't know!"

Arms begin waving frantic in moonlight, "I don't know! I don't know!"

White-knuckled hands begin tearing at hair, "I don't know! I don't know!"

Fierce-rubbing foreheads with tremble-fingers, "I don't know! I don't know!"

Arms on each other's shoulders mad-shaking, "I don't know! I don't know!"

One spots Bryce the Scribe. It slow-steps forwards. The frenzy quiets. A solemn low-head accusation, "He knows." It grins. All grin.

Bryce the Scribe, "Bach-Bach?"

Another low-head steps forwards, "He knows."

Bryce the Scribe, "I don't know shit."

Another, "He knows."

Another, "He knows."

Bryce the Scribe, "Come on, fellas, I'm about as witless as a widdle."

Me, in a whisper, "A widdle?"

He shrugs, "I don't know?"

All the low-heads have come closer. Slow-moving. Prowling. Senses twist tight to the brink listening. Their whisper, "They know."

We begin backpedaling in the direction of the forest.

The flanks of the herd begin spreading wide to surround us, "They know." In solemn ritual chant, "They know."

Bryce the Scribe's off. His shoes soft-crack the burnt grass. I quick-follow.

Footsteps now behind us drumming, "They know! They know!" Louder solemn chant, "They know! They know!"

"We don't know! We don't know!" Running. Hard breathing. Desperate towards the forest.

Voices uniting in great solemn crescendo, "They know! They know!"

Ground earthquaking, "They know! They know!"

Faster-running. Ground growing softer. Muddier.

"They know! They know!"

Bryce the Scribe just in front of me begins to kick up mud in his running.

Shoes begin to slip and suck-in.

Bryce the Scribe falls. I quick-step left. Keep balance. Keep running.

Bryce the Scribe soundless-screams as they bear down upon him, "They know! They know!"

I hear tortured screaming as they solemn-surround him, "He knows. He knows."

Forest. Closer. Thirty yards. Twenty yards. I still hear them chasing me, "He knows. He knows."

Hands begin grasping at muddy ankles.

I fall. Get up quick. Regain footing. Continue running.

I'm tackled. Fall to mud with strong pale arms around waist.

I still see the forest.

In ear heavy hot breathing, "You know. You know."

Fight my way out of grasp. Begin running before I have footing and fall back to mud.

Again grabbing at ankles. I kick and keep clawing towards dark forest.

Now one on my back. Still fighting with fingers deep in mud.

Feel weight of hundreds come down upon me. Begin to suffocate. Barely breathing. Try to keep head above muck-water-mud.

Solemn hot breath almost orgasmic, "You know. You know."

Barely breath left and last gasping whisper, "I don't know."

Drowsy. Slow-enchantment distant-stretching shout, "You know. You know."

When All Is Forgiven

Kelley A Swan

Her first childhood memory is of her father sliding out of bed, naked. She remembers little else except she knows she's scared of him, of the way he's angry and sad all at once, all the time. She knows she freezes, caught peeking into their bedroom, and stammers that she will clean her room. That she'll be a good little girl. She can taste her heart in her throat as she stands there.

Here the images become sharper, and she clearly recalls what happens next. He waves her off and slips on a battered blue-velour robe, disappearing behind a door. This is familiar to her; it feels right, his vanishing act. She shuffles closer and wrinkles her nose; their bedroom, as always, smells so old and dry. She peers in again and sees her mother's eyes are closed, her hair slithering across her pillow. The sight makes her shiver.

She pivots on her pajama footies, skidding across the floor, and dashes into her room. Her heart is racing. Her toys are scattered on the floor. Gathering them in her arms, she piles stuffed animal on top of stuffed animal, tucking an elephant under her chin.

The animals bulge, threaten to escape. There is no toy box. No drawer. Her eyes dart around the room and land on her bed. She kneels and stuffs each animal between the mattress and the fraying box spring, until each one is hidden and gone.

She stands and tugs at the bedspread. Holly Hobby smiles at her from the fabric. Eyebrows knitted, she pulls and smooths, but it resists. Finally, Holly gives in; the fabric relaxes and lies in place. Letting go, she steps back. She checks. It's okay, she thinks. Hopes. He might not be able to tell. She fears for the elephant, for her friends, that they won't have enough oxygen. The idea they might suffocate tiptoes into her head. But she ignores it. None of them have a choice.

She cocks her head and listens. No one has come. She can't hear him, and this is good. Her heart has slowed some. Things might be okay. She takes another look around and decides to adjust her books. They aren't straight, and crooked is wrong. Better to be safe, to be sure, she thinks as her fingers grip their spines.

He comes, finally. She is on the floor, sitting cross-legged and perfectly still. Her floor is clear, her room clean and serene. She looks up at him and smiles, but she worries it may look more like a frown. So she works harder at it.

It's clean, she tells him. See?

He grunts and leaves, and her smile collapses. She unknots her legs, scrambles off the floor. She dives for her bed and paws at the covers, ripping them back. Huffing, she wedges mattress and box spring apart. One-handed, tears beginning to cloud her eyes, she frantically scoops her animals out.

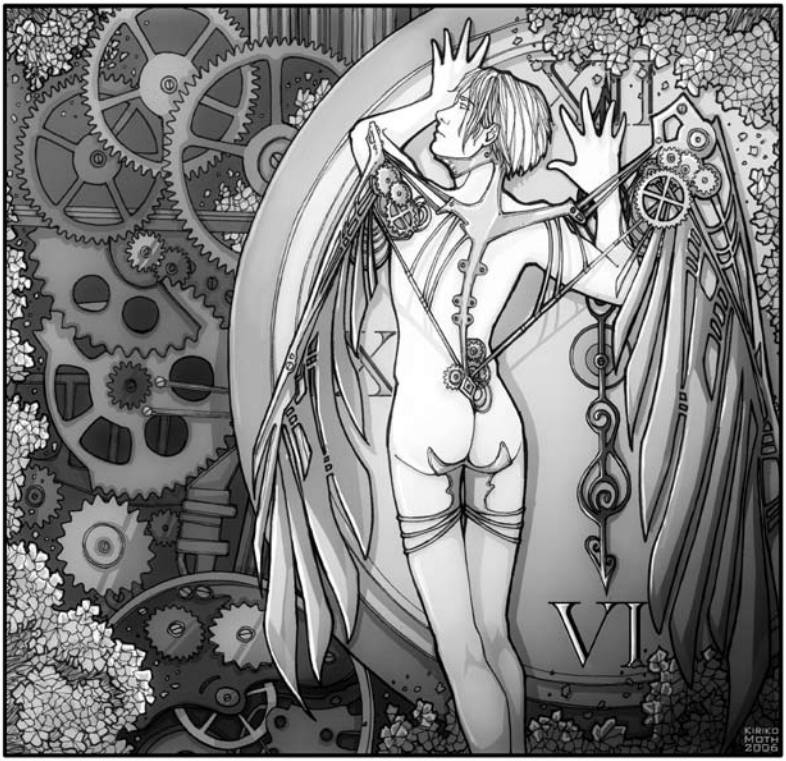
The elephant is tucked too far back, though. He is almost beyond her fingertips. She strains and lifts. The box spring cuts into her rib cage. Her fingers just reach his plush skin; she strains one last time and then she has him. The mattress thuds down as she clutches him to her chest, and now she cries without restraint.

Please breathe, she pleads. Please. The elephant's eyes are blank, unresponsive, and she whimpers. No, please, she whispers. Her breath hitches and she begins to keen softly. As she's seen done on TV, she places her lips on his and blows. She blows harder and harder, willing her breath into his squashed body.

And then she feels it; she thinks she can just detect his heartbeat. Pulling away, she strokes his fuzzy purple head. She checks for his heartbeat again. She believes he is okay, that he has been saved. But she is sorry, so sorry, as it was all her fault.

She begs for forgiveness and cradles him in her arms. She rocks. To comfort him, to comfort herself, she rocks him in the middle of the floor. Surrounded by her pile of friends, she does not stop rocking until they are both calm. And she is sure all is forgiven.

It is this, and only this, that she can remember.



Clockwork Wings Kiriko Moth

Chica, Let Me Tell You a Story

Alex Dally MacFarlane

I was a door, once.

One night a year I put down my poultices and many-scented herbs, my spindle and clumps of tangled sheep-hair, I covered my sun-tanned, pock-marked flesh with a dress of moonlight, and I opened.

How can I describe such a thing?

Like unlocking an attic door fallen into long disuse, tugging it open on its rusted hinges and feeling the weight of cobwebs and shadows and gorged boxes suddenly pressed memory-thick upon the senses—but it was not quite like that. Or going to the riverside, where the cold waves, the slippery weeds and darting fish all brush against exposed skin, where the eye is treated to ripples and reflections and the ear takes in the wind's whisper, the river's murmur, the call of wild things. But again, not quite that.

I opened, Chica.

- - -

You sip your beer and I know what you think— She is mad, but harmless so far, and I have time to hear her silly tale. Well.

- - -

And when I opened, through they came.

The spirits and fey folk, all fools and kings and nightmare dead things—a picture book of terrible beauty, a bestiary of the darkly strange. I was their door, a stepping-through from one world to the next, and they crossed in their thousands. On my grassy mound I stood, open, bones and veins and muscle-strings each an archway, a gate for a chuckling shape.

I could not stop it, nor did I ever think to.

At first it did not occur to me that what stepped through would not be welcome. I did not think, Chica. I merely opened, as I always had.

They found me, eventually, the people of this world. There were many quests, I later heard, with heroes and maidens and all the rest, until they reached my brick-and-mound home and began slowly to bind me.

- - -

No, Chica, don't go. Is my tale so bad?

Please.

I was a door, once. Will you not listen to the rest?

Ah, thank you so much. Have another beer, share my pork scratchings. I ask such a simple thing of you, this listening.

- - -

They bound me with dresses.

One of them pinned my legs while two others held an arm each, manoeuvring a white chiffon gown over my head, pushing my arms through the sleeves, letting snowy fabric whisper down to my slipper-caught feet. The veil covered my face, curtain-thick. Thus blinded, I was wed to the Saints and my Name became theirs, all theirs, and on that same day each year they forced me to honour my husbands and their host of blood-gilded Names.

I was still a door, I still opened, but gradually my portico shrank and the traffic through me lessened.

The spirits fought back, briefly. Growing teeth like knives and spells like poison, they tried to tear aside my captors, and naively I thought they might win. Before long, though, they were overcome.

I played no part in the fighting. All I could do was sit on my grassy mound, bound in white, a sagging door.

Then came the Forgetting Dress.

Its folds and frills seemed to shimmer, to shift under my gaze, making it more beautiful than any dress I had ever seen, but the winking foolery could not conceal its true nature. From across my mound of grass, I felt it like seedlings must feel the frost—a fist, cold and strong, with the desire only to tighten around me.

Once again my arms and legs were held, once again a dress dropped over my head and down my thin body, and I felt its vice-grip instantly. I could not fight it; I was just a door, no more cunning than anything of wood and metal.

Years passed. My archways and gates shrank as the dress worked its magic—the dark, difficult magic of Forgetting. I felt my real Name slide away from tongues and minds like rain slides from an oiled umbrella, and as I faded from memory I grew weaker, smaller yet. This was a battle the fey folk and spirits could not muster enough numbers to fight.

When the people of this world came finally to imprison me, I could not resist. A shadow of me floated through memory, no more than a broken remnant, my new, empty Name honoured only by

children wearing gaudy imitations of those things that once stepped through me. I was fastened tight. My hinges rusted.

Such a pathetic thing, a door that no longer opens.

With a final dress, an overgarment of chains to adorn the Forgetting Dress and its wedding-dress petticoat, they bound me into my prison: Calendar. A prison of paper, sometimes glossy and other times matte, where my cell lies under pictures or beside them. I hang from walls in a thousand million places, as powerless as any other ornament, or sit on shelves in the gummed binding of a diary.

I have come to know my prison well, its faces and its trickeries. How it whimsically changes its paper-shape, from thin rectangle to ink-rimmed square to no larger than a number. How writing comes and goes, staying for weeks or just a fleeting moment. When the words first stained my skin, my dress, my hair, I would be scrubbing them away from myself long after they faded from my walls—until eventually I conceded defeat and became a thing coloured by countless tattoo-phrases.

- - -

You are thinking—If you are imprisoned, how can you be sitting here?

A good question, Chica.

- - -

There are still doors in this world. They are smaller, these days, to better evade a fate like mine, and they never remain in one place for long—but they do exist, in shadows and corners and quick winds.

Sometimes they come to me. Slipping into my prison, they croon over a captured, weakened sister; they comb my writing-stained hair and then they open their little bodies for me.

Calendar pursues me, of course, and before long cages me again. But there is time enough for me to step into the world and spread my tale. We take happiness where we can, we broken doors, and we are very patient.

- - -

Ah, here he is.

I was a door, once, and now I am held in Calendar. Chica, do not forget me.

Seductive

Gabrielle S. Faust

Applesauce.
It's one of those words
That sounds so seductive,
So sensual,
Like *purgatory*
Or *mandible*.
So long as it stays
Devoid of meaning,
Rolling around in your
Mouth like wine,
Or marbles.

Think Fast

Michael Greenhut

Pick an alternate timeline and you'll find my corpse. October 2, 2004: I came home from work and interrupted a burglar rummaging through my kitchen drawers; he shot me six times in the stomach. June 15, 2005: a rapist's buddy stabbed me in that alley between the fish market and the Chinese restaurant; I'd run after the rapist as he dragged off some poor college girl, but I hadn't seen the buddy in time. November 8, 2006: gunned down in three possible realities during a botched bank robbery, along with nineteen other customers.

Each time, my life began to fade like the color from a broken dream. My eyes closed as I tasted blood and numbness bore down....

Death waited, but my thoughts raced. That's how they escaped. That's how I survived.

- - -

My sister Melanie's last words to me were, "Think fast." It was the day I turned six. She tossed me a football, then ran across the lawn to catch up with her friends. The football smelled brand-new.

Melanie never came home. A week later, the police found her torn, bloodstained clothes in the river.

Several months after that, I won the class prize for worst penmanship, since I could no longer write a single coherent word. The teacher called me slow. My mother called me beautiful. The doctor made me speak what I had tried to write, and then he called me fast. He said my thoughts raced so quickly when I picked up a pen that they became a blur and my hands couldn't catch up. As he told me this, I smelled my brand-new football, even though I'd buried it in the yard at the spot where I'd been standing that morning.

Melanie had once called me gullible, and I'd believed her. I also believed everybody else. I concluded that I was slow, beautiful, and fast, all at the same time—a fly with a turtle's body and a king's diamond on my shell. Everybody in school smiled at me, talked to me as if their words were axes and I were stained glass.

Once I learned how to cheat death, words became sharper than knives or bullets. Words became life.

- - -

"Your wife is at my shelter for battered women," I tell him.

I am thirty-two, but I haven't forgotten Melanie's face. The punk standing before me in his doorway looks about nineteen. He wears a hoodie, a lip ring, and a mohawk that's almost grown over. I've decided that Melanie's killer looked like this guy. He's out of place in this suburban New York community. Somewhere, a trailer park and six feet of dirt are competing for his occupancy.

"Who the fuck are you?" He fidgets with something in the pocket of his hoodie. The slime in his voice makes me feel the dirt under my nails. "Are you lookin' for money or something?"

"David Spar," I say. "Asshole Accounts Payable. Founder, President, Treasurer."

He pulls out a handgun.

- - -

There are only two ways to kill me. One is to take me by surprise with a bullet through the back of my head. The other is to talk me into committing suicide.

Twice, I've gone out to play the suicide game. Each time, I stumbled across a football at a crucial moment. In the parking lot of the old shopping center where the toy store used to be, I sat and remembered the days when Melanie had taken me there. I wondered if sweet memory had gone sour. As I thought about this, both times, a football rolled in from nowhere. Different balls with different logos on the pigskin. They looked old and smelled new.

Now, whenever my employees at the women's shelter think I'm suicidal, they invite me to a football game.

- - -

"That's it. Give me the gun," I tell the punk. "Handle first, please."

He'sGonnaShoot. MoveLeft. My thoughts, but I don't control them. At least, not from this point in time.

"I said, handle first."

MoveLeft. GrabTheGunAndTwist. HisGripIsSlippery.

He grunts as I disarm him. "Fuckin'...." he mutters as I break his index finger.

I see blood on the floor. It's brown. Is it mine? An echo from a discarded future?

- - -

I believed in time travel the way most children believe in Santa Claus. My parents pretended to believe with me. When I asked to try it, my mother ruffled my hair and my father said, "Not today, David." Melanie said she'd take me once she could afford a flying car.

Then, on my seventh birthday—a year after Melanie's death—I met the old man in the park who drank from a bag. That morning, I had excused myself from class and climbed out of the bathroom window. I ran to the park where Melanie used to jog every day. She had always taken bread crumbs for the pigeons, so I took the crust off my cheese sandwich and crumbled it up. I threw bits of it in the grass and ran in the same little circle for thirty minutes, pretending I could jog like Melanie.

The old man reclined on a bench, sipping from a bottle in a brown paper bag. His head tilted upside-down as he stared at me.

"You're not very fast," I think I remember him saying, though he may not have actually spoken.

"I can *think* fast," I answered. "I think so fast I can hardly move."

"You think that fast, you can think into the past," he said. At least, he said something that sounded like that. He looked like he wanted to eat me.

I ran back to school, all the while imagining he was two steps behind me, chasing me on all fours and drooling.

Think fast, think into the past. I let those words marinate for years. My speed of thought, I pondered, must be faster than the speed of light. I should be able to send my thoughts back through time, to an earlier self. To ex-David, my thoughts would sound like a little Jiminy Cricket or feel like a gut instinct. The more aware my ex-Davids became of this ability, this hindsight, the more they would listen.

- - -

"Your wife is a pretty woman," I tell him as he clutches his finger and winces. "I want her to forget you. Maybe I should buy her a gift, but I'm never good with gifts and the whole gift-card thing

is getting old. I could use trial and error, but it would be simpler to ask you. What kind of things does she like?"

"What the fuck are you saying?" He can't seem to speak more than seven words at once. The word "fuck" comprises over fifteen percent of his conversation.

"I said I want to buy your wife a gift. Yes, I know, it's hardly professional, but this is hardly a profession."

"Go fuck yourself, you fuck." Twenty-one percent.

- - -

At thirteen, I used hindsight for the first time. Richard Dunn, who played lacrosse with the high schoolers and once made a retarded boy smoke pot, beat me until my bones felt like broken glass. He'd caught Patricia Anderson kissing me in the school cafeteria.

To this day, I suspect she planned it. I couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing as Richard broke my face in six different ways. She begged him to stop, called him an asshole. After he gave me that final kick in the ribs, she told him, "I didn't know you were that strong."

"Shut up," Richard answered. "When we get to my place, you're next. I'll teach you to screw around like that."

"Oh, stop it," she said. Through my swelling, half-shut eyelids, I watched Patricia wrap her arms around him. "I knew you still loved me."

I thought back to the David of five minutes earlier as I moaned on the floor. *TurnAround,* I commanded. I sent my thoughts back to the end of that kiss. *TurnAround TurnAround TurnAround. He'sGonnaSneakUpBehindYou.*

Suddenly, the beating dissolved into a daydream as I stood outside the school, contemplating ghost pains from an attack that had almost happened.

Later, older and somewhat wiser, free of the social anxieties that had been my burden, I thought back to the beginning of Patricia's kiss. I gave ex-David a new instruction. *UseYourTongue.*

- - -

"Where's her stuff?" I hold the punk down by his greasy hair. My other hand reaches instinctively for a handkerchief.

He goes for my legs. I grab the back corner of his head and shove him to the ground, then pin him with my knee.

"Fuck you," he repeats.

Through the window in the front door, I see a police car with lights flashing. Either I made too much noise or they were already after this guy.

- - -

Whenever I've tried sending back a thought-command to keep Melanie from leaving home that day, a brown turtle has invaded my thinkspace and stopped me in my tracks. My thinkspace becomes solid, as if I've fallen into a dream without growing sleepy. With a twist of its head, the turtle beckons me across a green field with red and white flowers and a trail of brown stains. The turtle's invitation drives me to flee, and, when I do, Melanie retreats to the back of my mind.

- - -

I turned on the TV one Sunday morning while my parents were sleeping. I expected cartoons, but I found a preacher instead. He talked as if he were about to sing. He spoke about the pleasures of Heaven that awaited us, and I believed him. I wanted to pack my Optimus Prime action figure and go.

But when I shoved my tongue down Patricia's throat, I decided Heaven could wait a little while. Dating had been too much of a puzzle until that boost in confidence. After that day, I learned how to walk with my shoulders back and smile at a girl until she melted.

- - -

"I'm going to bring you back," I told Melanie one night, watching the sky and tracing my own constellations. Rabbits, lynxes, shooting stars frozen in time. "I just don't know when. I don't know what'll happen."

I toyed with a thought-command, holding Melanie's last morning in my memory. The brown turtle interrupted, watching me with red-diamond eyes. Come with me, it cried in its non-voice. Come with me and turn me red.

I knew the turtle had to remain brown. Only my blood would turn it red.

- - -

The police are here. They handcuff me, but I am water.

"David Spar, you have the right to remain silent," yada yada. They have a warrant on me for five murders, but they got lucky and caught me red-handed here.

The burglar in my home, who ate his gun with the wrong fingerprints. The rapist and his friend, who I turned against their own knives. The two bank robbers I shot the day before the heist. This punk on the floor with the broken neck makes six.

They don't know about number seven. Number seven happened first.

- - -

"Richard," I called.

Eight hours after the beating that had no longer occurred, I stood outside the open door of his parents' garage, watching him lift his father's weights. An old maroon Volkswagen was parked beside him.

"Richard," I repeated. On the fringe of puberty, I sounded like a bullfrog.

He dropped the weights on his lap. "Jesus Christ! What the—"

"Did you hit Patricia?" I walked into the garage and leaned against the Volkswagen. I hoped she was okay, but I wanted him to say yes.

"You're fuckin' dead, you little faggot." He charged at me and swung his fist.

I ducked. His fist crashed through the car's window. He screamed and I pushed him to the ground. I kicked him in the stomach. This was probably the kind of hooligan who killed Melanie, I thought. I pulled my leg back to kick him again, this time in the face.

But instead, I turned around and counted backwards from ten. This isn't me. I'm not a bully.

He'sComingUpBehindYou. Move.

I jumped to the side. He charged into the broken window and fell against the shards of broken glass.

He trembled there, pulling glass out of his neck. Then he slid to the ground.

I ran outside and found a pay phone. I began to dial 9-1-1, then stopped. I looked over my hands, my coat, my pants, to make sure I was clean.

I hung up the phone and headed home. I smiled; it felt like 2:45 p.m. on the last day of the school year.

- - -

The police on my trail are as constant as gravity. My wings are my thoughts.

The urge to save Melanie returns like an alcoholic's craving. I think back to that morning, the football bouncing in my hands as I try to catch it properly. "Think fast!"

As always, the brown turtle invades and beckons me across that imaginary field, red and white flowers and green grass stained brown. It says, Here lies the road to an unmurdered Melanie. The turtle speaks with my thoughts, the way Hollywood killers clip words out of newspapers to construct their messages. All you have to do, it says, is turn me red.

But I've always known what will happen if I follow the brown turtle. My penmanship at age six will improve. If I turn the turtle red, there will be no park and no old man with his brown paper bag.

When the turtle disappears from the path, when the brown stains vanish, when I think of a way to save Melanie without undoing the tapestry, I'll try again. Somewhere, she waits for me as I step off the school bus.

Patterson No. 2 Jessica C Hoard

Measurements

Chad Brian Henry

Alan takes the tape measure out and Vera lifts her arms as he wraps it around her waist. He writes the number in his notebook and, after a thoughtful pause, measures her height.

"Okay, good measurements," he says, not looking up from the paper. "This will work fine."

He flips back a few pages, erases something, and replaces it with something new. His face is normally wide and oddly flat, but, as he scratches the lead against the paper, the lines in his forehead deepen and his face narrows like a canyon. "This will work fine," he repeats to himself.

Vera doesn't think he realizes she's still in the room. He sits down at his desk and sketches a long cylinder from one side of the page to the other. And then two wings. They are jointed like a bird's and tapered at the edges. He gives the parts dimensions, using meters instead of feet.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asks.

"I can't spend the rest of my life in the mill. Can you?"

She gives him the answer he wants because she knows nothing will come of this. She walks into the kitchen and boils water for tea. She makes enough for two, and half of it goes to waste.

- - -

Days pass by and large chunks of scrap metal appear in the back yard. Parts of cars and old aluminum siding. Some is rusted; some is just worn.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Vera asks as Alan unwraps his newly-purchased blow torch. He grins like she imagines their children would if they were allowed to have any.

"It's all formulas and equations. I took physics in high school."

His smile doesn't fade as he walks out of the house and over to the pile. Vera watches him from the kitchen window. It's the middle of summer, so he is soon sweating. He takes his shirt off and his gut rests on his legs as he kneels over the metal. He sorts the parts first, separating the flat pieces from the round ones. He places the nuts and bolts in neat little piles according to size. They

look like tiny altars and when he's talking to himself about his plans, it sounds like he's praying.

- - -

The metal takes shape. The cylinder is nearly complete, except for the open ends. Vera is surprised at the quality; Alan has spent hours pounding out the dents and the metal is smooth. When the neighbors ask, he says he's building a shed, but she doesn't think they believe him. But they are good people; they've all lived here for years and she doesn't think they'll tell anyone.

"Have you gained weight?" Alan asks during one of his short breaks.

His glasses slide down a little on his nose; he pushes them up with his index finger. There's a bandage at its tip, and a little patch of dried blood.

Vera looks down at her body. She doesn't see a difference, but her pants feel a little tighter. "I think I'm just bloated."

"Okay, just checking," he says, and writes something in his notebook.

She leans in to see, but he snaps it shut and heads back to his work.

- - -

Alan finishes the cylinder; it's about the size of a canoe. The wings come next, and he sweats more when he's working on them. Sweat pours out like he's in detox. His pants hang loosely around his waist and Vera can see the band of his boxer shorts. He's losing weight, just like he said he would.

The wings have three joints each and pistons reaching out from the tips that look like they will connect to the cylinder. She walks out in the evening to get a better look as he struggles to line them up.

"They're not ready to go on yet," he says as if she's asked, "but I need to make sure they'll fit. Don't want to waste material."

"I'm having second thoughts," she says. The sun bounces off the metal like it's supposed to. There's nothing special here, she thinks.

"It's the only choice we have."

Is it, she asks herself but doesn't say aloud.

"I'm doing this for us," Alan says, like he read her thoughts. She's too ashamed to stay outside, but when she goes back into the house, she wonders why she feels that way.

I've done nothing wrong, she reminds herself. It's human to have doubt.

- - -

"You know I say this because I care for you. Maybe you should start eating salads too," Alan says at dinner. It's Sunday, so he's eating with her instead of while he works.

Vera looks down at the small pouch gathering around her midsection. My breasts look bigger too, she thinks, but he hasn't noticed that.

"I'm not eating any more than I normally do," she says and glances at the meatloaf, which suddenly seems so appetizing she can't look away.

"Maybe you could start exercising. It's important we stay the weight we planned. Otherwise all my calculations will be wrong."

They remain silent for the rest of the meal, but Vera can see the sad look in his eyes when she starts her second serving. It makes her want to cry, but she can't help but eat. She doesn't even want it, but she can't leave the table until it's done. She chews slowly, and by the time she's finished, Alan is back outside working as the sun sets. The next morning, he gets up a half hour early and goes for a jog. Vera stays in bed and falls back asleep and dreams about a power drill that can only unscrew screws.

- - -

A few weeks later, Vera wakes up in the middle of the night and sees Alan standing over her with the tape measure in his hands. In the moonlight, his face is gaunt and shallow. His cheeks are sunken in like divots. He looks a little like the starving children she used to see in commercials when she was really young, when people were still allowed to learn about the outside world.

"What are you doing?" she asks, half-asleep, half-surprised.

"I'm taking your measurements," he says flatly. "You haven't kept up your end of the deal, and I can only lose so much weight to compensate. I'll need to make adjustments."

"What deal?" she asks, and at first she thinks she said it in her head, but his eyelids bubble and tears form.

"We need balance; you need to stop gaining weight," he says. He leaves before she can respond, and a few minutes later she can hear pounding outside. It's five in the morning and she worries about the neighbors.

But when the sun comes up a few hours later, Patrol has yet to stop by. Our neighbors really are good people, she thinks.

She gets out of bed at nine and looks down at her stomach. The pouch has spread. She sees girth in her inner legs and a roundness at her sides.

- - -

Alan has lost so much weight that he needs to buy new clothes. Vera tells him this, but he shrugs it off.

"I'll just tighten my belt. We can buy new clothes when we cross over."

He has attached both the wings. He keeps what he's not working on covered now that it's starting to take on its final shape.

When he leans over it, she can see the vertebrae sticking out of his back like faces on a totem pole. They each look like they have their own expression, but they're all just variations of determination and despair.

- - -

The bulk Vera is gathering has spread to her face. Her cheekbones have disappeared and there's a wobble under her chin when she talks.

She goes to the doctor to see if there's a reason. She tells him nothing has changed and she feels dirty lying to a man with so much education. And then she feels ashamed for thinking he's better than anyone else.

After blood has been drawn and tests have been completed, he admits he doesn't know why she's gained the weight. She's still in her paper gown and isn't sure why.

"I don't think you've been completely honest with me," he says and crosses his arms. His eyes are brown and warm. He reminds her of her father, but not in a physical way. It's the way he carries himself: honest, thoughtful, educated. She doesn't know why she thinks this. She never really knew her father, but that's the way she'd like to think he was.

And the words come out before she can stop herself. She tells him about Alan and the escape plan and the machine in the backyard.

He tells her the weight gain is probably stress-related.

- - -

Vera tells Alan why she's gaining weight and his face turns white.

"Did you tell the doctor why you're stressed?" he asks.

"He's a doctor. He's not allowed to tell anyone," she tells him. She doesn't believe it, but it sounds wonderful coming out of her mouth, like it might come true if she says it with enough conviction.

"We need to leave now," he says and grabs his notebook. He opens it up. "I haven't had time to make the corrections for your weight."

"Calm down," she says. "If he told anyone, they'd already be here."

"No, they'd gather evidence first. To make it look official. We need to leave now."

He grabs her hand and pulls her out the back door. It's a little past noon and the sun is directly overhead, bright and hot as usual.

He yanks the tarp off the machine and Vera almost gasps. "Alan, you made this?" she asks.

"For us."

The pistons are connected and there are levers in the front, five of them, the one in the middle the largest. There are two seats built into the cylinder behind it.

"Come on, get in; it's gassed up and ready to go," he says.

She looks down at her seat.

"What about the weight?" she asks.

"We'll have to risk it. I'll just have to be careful if it gets windy."

She feels him tugging on her hand. He helps her step over the side and into the seat. She tries to sit, but something wedges up against her back. She struggles for a moment, and then she sees Alan's face slacken.

"You don't fit," he says. His voice is so soft she has to read his lips. Then he shakes his head. "I can fix this. It'll take me a day, but I can do it."

He pulls her from her half-seated position and grabs his blowtorch.

"Go without me," she tells him as she steps out of the machine.

"What? I can't." His eyes are so wide she's afraid he might be dying.

"I don't want to go and now you have to," she says, and the words come out so naturally she thinks they must be true. She smiles and kisses him. He doesn't kiss her back, but she knows he doesn't mean anything by that.

Vera doesn't turn back as she walks to the house, but she does listen from the kitchen. He waits an hour before he starts it up. It sounds like rolling thunder at first, and then a steady series of pffts. A few minutes later, the sound fades away and she looks around at the empty kitchen. She decides to make herself some tea. There's only a single teabag left, but she only needs one cup.

Mustang Jon Radlett

American History

Jéanpaul Ferro

You and I—we were made of glass,
the Indian Ocean below us, ghost sky up above,
when God went running like light through our veins,
in a quiet night in Africa when there was no other war.

I remember your eyes glowing blue in the dark like a calmness,
you looking right through me like there was no other day,
our sunburned bodies invisible and quiet on the beach,
both of us seeds in the ground, unquenchable like children—
that hotness caught in a city on a summer afternoon,

And some days we could float down Fifth Avenue,
a dream where we would sing in between the brick buildings,
everyone looking down out of windows (always afraid),
waves that came rushing inland, and then rushed out.

And you make me glad that I'm right here with you now!
every day like forty steps down to the turquoise ocean,
a love in a renaissance in the middle of life,
you—a thousand colors that touch me in a night of deep
sorrow.

Forgetting

Nicole Kornher-Stace

The stunt pilot's last flight is on a late-October afternoon, crisp and windless, and while he skims over the trees above the city through a rising smell of woodsmoke, he glances down toward the parti-colored forest with the fleeting notion that it burns.

His intentions are simple. Reaching the city, all he has left to do is climb into an empty space of sky and write his message there, then loop back toward the woods and crash in solitude. In his mind, he has a picture of the broken plane embraced by years of moss, his bones knit now by creepers, not flesh.

His message will be simple too: *Forget me.* He can only hope she'll see it, and she'll heed. Don't they say that when you forget, you incidentally forgive?

Reaching that clear space of air, he gives the task his all. *Forget* he executes magnificently, with flourishes and whirls. But in truth he has never written on the sky before—only passion has driven him to try—and the overwrought script dizzies him. He banks hard back the way he came and spirals out into the hills.

Soon a wind comes up and bleeds the lettering like paint. For ten minutes it wavers, then it dissolves.

In the meantime, the word stands in the sky like a decree.

The high-school field-hockey team sees it from the parking lot after practice, heading home. Bickering a little, they finally decide the word up in the sky is *Fortune*, so they grab their hockey sticks back up and race to where they guess the word is pointing—an empty lot where the little kids play kickball in the summer—and some take turns digging with the sticks while others are deployed to bring back shovels. When they strike the box and haul it up and smash the rusty lock and peer in to see a glittering, not one of them is surprised.

The babysitter sees it through the French doors leading onto her neighbor's deck, just as the little girl she's there to watch skips up and asks if they can walk down to the park. Sunlight irritates the babysitter, the autumn depresses her, walking tires her, and she loathes the park. Looking up at the word in the sky, the babysitter is sure it says *Forbid*. Immediately she bristles. You can't tell me what

to do, she thinks, and casts an obscene gesture at the nothingness. Turning to the little girl, she says, Get your coat.

The muralist sees it from the old redbrick factory building, where he's working on his latest project. The city didn't want to tear the building down, so they hired him to put it to some use. He could scarcely believe his luck, for they didn't care what he painted, so long as it raised the factory somewhere above eyesore status. So now he's painting what he's always dreamed of painting: oppression partially or wholly overcome. In the mural's latest stretch he's painted a *maquilladora*, rows of women hunched over sewing machines, rows of men hoisting boxes onto a truck. All backs stooped, all eyes turned down. If there are faces, they cannot be seen at this angle. Off in the corner, a slick-haired foreman dices with an underling. A dare, the muralist assumes. A hazard or amusement at the poorer man's expense—in short, a lesson in world history. A bet: what's in my pockets against your next week's pay. Neither's much, but one is less. Tilting his head up to stretch his back, the muralist catches sight of the word in the sky, which to his mind says *Forfeit*. Looking back at the mural, he notices that the foreman has rolled. His dice are down; he's lifting up the cup. The muralist gives him snake eyes, for he still can. Tenderly, he smiles at the underling, paints a modest twinkle in his eye.

The restaurateur sees it from the sidewalk outside the hospital, where he's fled for ten minutes from the white walls and antiseptic smell to smoke a cigarette. Fed up with himself, he marches back up to the room where his wife lies dying, the sickness fastened into her like a wall of thorns. They hadn't spoken for some months before he heard secondhand how she collapsed, just stepping off the subway; heard on the phone last night her mother's voice: She hasn't got much time. Does it matter now, he wonders, whether anything he suspected was true? Better if it doesn't. If he asked now, she couldn't answer anyway. From the window, he watches pigeons wheel toward the word up in the sky, which looks for all the world to be *Forgive*. He glances sideways at the woman in the bed and sighs. At that moment her eyes come open, and, improbably, she sits up. Staring off into an empty corner of the room, she smiles at nothing he can see. Oh, there you are, she says. Tell me a story. Then she dies.

The backpacker sees it as the bus pulls to a stop and the doors hiss open. From his seat, the word appears to hang above the skyline, framed by the open door. He wasn't planning to get off just yet, but

what the hell, this city's as good a place as any. Stepping down into the clear October afternoon and shouldering his bag, he shakes his head in wonderment at what seems to be the word *Forget*, scrawled somewhat blurrily across the almost artificial blueness of the sky. He takes the elevator to the top of the tallest building he can find, lets himself out onto the roof, and, with the word in plain sight overhead, he steps straight off the edge, confident that only once he dares look down will he begin to fall.

Endless Journey

Bartlomiej Jurkowski

Night Bird Soaring

T.L. Morganfield

On his sixth birthday, Totyoalli's parents took him to the holy city to see the Emperor Cuauhtemoc, but the plane ride proved the most exciting part. He kept his nose to the window, taking in the vast lands of the One World, from the snow-capped mountains of his home in the northern provinces to the open plains of Teotihuacan. He marveled at the miniature cities and cars passing below. All his life he'd dreamt of flying, ever since the first time he'd seen a bird gliding through the air.

From the airport, they took a cab to the royal palace on Lake Texcoco. Tenochtitlan, the single largest city in the world, sprawled around it for miles. The cab buzzed across one of the royal causeways, the water blue and shimmering in the hot sun. Inside the walled royal complex stood the Great Temple, meticulously maintained by a crew of thousands, its sacred Sun Stone keeping watch over the visiting crowds.

At the palace, two genetically-engineered royal jaguar knights escorted Totyoalli's family to the Emperor's gardens. Totyoalli watched their tails swish behind them, fascinated. Their heads looked so soft he wished to pat them between the ears, but when he tried to talk to them, they bared their fangs and gripped their spears a little tighter.

Ahead, a doorway opened onto a stone patio overlooking an expanse of grass and trees. Marigolds and birds of paradise choked the flower beds. Cranes stepped gingerly through the ponds while monkeys chattered in the trees.

The Revered Speaker stood at the crest of the nearest hill, his hands behind him and his back to them. "Good of you to come, Totyoalli." He didn't turn. "Let me take a look at you."

Unafraid, Totyoalli hurried to him. His friends claimed the Revered Speaker was seven hundred years old, that he'd been emperor when the Spanish Devil Cortés tried to bring the One World to its knees. Some said Cuauhtemoc was the War God himself, or maybe the Fifth Sun incarnate, come to Earth to lead the Mexica through a thousand years of glory. Totyoalli had expected someone very old and wise.

But in fact the Revered Speaker looked hardly out of his teens. He wore green robes with the sacred day symbols embroidered in gold and silver thread, and his long black hair was tied back in a complicated knot. Blue, red, white, and black tattooed lines formed the profile of an eagle on the right side of his face.

Cuauhtemoc knelt and kissed the earth at Totyoalli's feet, quoting dedications and blessing him. He then took the boy's head in both hands and granted him the kiss of Divine Grace on his forehead.

"Now that we have the formalities out of the way, walk with me." Cuauhtemoc took Totyoalli by the hand and they moved down the hill, past the egrets, until his mother and father vanished from sight. They sat on a stone bench under a grove of willow trees. "So, how is calmecac?"

Totyoalli shrugged.

The Revered Speaker's smile widened. "Haven't much interest in studying?"

"I like the learning part, but the other boys say I should go to the telpochcalli with the rest of the poor kids, and they pick fights."

"You haven't told them you're the Night Wind?"

"Mother told me not to."

Cuauhtemoc nodded. "She's not pleased with your destiny."

Totyoalli shook his head. His mother wished he weren't the Night Wind; in fact, she'd gone to great lengths to plan a home delivery, so the priests and government augurs couldn't record the exact time of his birth. His father had thought her ridiculous, but respected her wishes, and studied the instructional books to prepare for delivering their baby himself. No doctor would attend; Totyoalli's mother suspected they were spies for the Temple.

But she couldn't fool the gods. After eight intense hours of screaming with no sign of the baby, Totyoalli's father lost his resolve and called an ambulance. Just seconds after midnight, surgeons brought forth their son through caesarian and his parents named him Night Bird. The next morning, the local priest—dressed all in black and stinking of the rancid blood he smeared on his body—came to inform them that the god Tezcatlipoca had chosen their son as His Teotl Ixiptla, to represent the god on earth for the Toxcatl—the Festival of Dryness—during his twenty-ninth year. Totyoalli's mother had cried almost daily since then.

"How do *you* feel about it?" Cuauhtemoc asked Totyoalli.

"It's always a great honor to serve the gods in such a personal manner," Totyoalli replied, quoting what his father had told him.

"You don't mind dying before you're thirty?" Cuauhtemoc pressed.

Death shadowed every aspect of life in the One World. People died daily at the sacrifices, usually broadcast on television, and Totyoalli and his friends played at death all the time, pretending the dog-god Xolotl was guiding them through the nine trials of the underworld to reach Mictlan. Those who ran home crying from scuffed knees or a bloody nose lost the game and the other boys teased them for days. "You'll open death's door and find Xolotl left only a pile of shit to guide you!" they'd chant mercilessly. Totyoalli's mother thought such games disrespectful and would he find it so funny when Xolotl sent him into the underworld alone?

The Revered Speaker was awaiting an answer, so Totyoalli replied, "Do you fear death, My Lord?"

His face suddenly guarded, Cuauhtemoc said, "Why do you ask?"

"My friends say you're one of the gods. Is it true? Did you kill the Spanish Devil?"

"I've seen more than most men."

"But are you a god?"

Cuauhtemoc chuckled. "You're an inquisitive little boy, Night Bird. You do well in the sciences, don't you?"

"I'm very good at math," Totyoalli said unabashedly. "My teacher says I'm his best student, and someday I'm going to be an astronaut."

Cuauhtemoc raised his eyebrows. "That takes many years of work, perhaps more than the gods have granted you."

"I'm very good at math," Totyoalli insisted.

Cuauhtemoc patted him on the back. "Come see me again next year and we'll talk some more." He led Totyoalli back up the hill to where his mother and father waited. As they departed, Totyoalli looked over his shoulder and waved at Cuauhtemoc. The Revered Speaker waved back.

But his mother grabbed his hand and hissed at him, "I will not have you playing cute with the man who ordered your execution."

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Totyoalli's father bought him a telescope for his tenth birthday, and he spent nearly every evening out on the back porch, studying

the stars' steady progression across the sky. His father often sat with him, testing his son's growing knowledge and listening to anything new he'd learned. When cold weather moved in, Totyoalli merely donned his coat and hat for stargazing, if the skies permitted, and his father always had a cup of hot chocolate waiting. In the summer, they took the telescope along on camping trips and his father promised, "Next summer I'll take you to see a rocket launch at Yoatitlan." Totyoalli counted down the days on his calendar.

Then one night, on his way to the bathroom, he overheard his parents talking about him.

"It's not good for him to dream so much," his mother said. "He'll never go to space. Cuauhtemoc wrote his destiny the moment he was born."

"That's how it's always been," his father replied.

"I just can't bear to see him struggle for nothing—"

"It won't be for nothing. He'll grow up to be a man, perhaps have a family of his own—"

"Until Cuauhtemoc cuts his heart out in front of an audience of millions!"

"I'm not talking about this any more."

Hearing his father approach, Totyoalli hurried to the bathroom. Before returning to bed, he went to the kitchen and saw his father sitting outside on the porch, staring at the telescope and sipping a glass of milky-white octli mixed with soda water. He didn't come back inside for the rest of the night.

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At the Revered Speaker's request, Totyoalli had been visiting the palace twice a year. His mother didn't come along again after that first trip; Totyoalli's father said she never would have gone at all if the Emperor hadn't insisted on meeting her. His father passed the hours with silent prayer at the Great Temple while his son spent the afternoons in the gardens with Cuauhtemoc, talking about his classes and interests. Over the years, the Emperor had come to seem something of a second father to the boy, but when Totyoalli arrived at the palace that summer, his mother's bitter declarations about Cuauhtemoc's intentions weighed heavy on his mind.

"Have they taught you the names of the planets yet?" Cuauhtemoc asked as they followed the winding brook to the south end of the gardens.

Unable to resist showing off his knowledge, Totyoalli rattled off the long list. "Piltzintecuhtli, Quetzalcoatl, Cem Anahuac, Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, Xipe Totec, Ometeotl, and Tlaloc." He was one of the few in his class who could recite the names from memory.

Cuauhtemoc smiled, impressed. "Your father tells me you're very handy with your telescope. You're still planning to be an astronaut?"

"Mother says I'm wasting my time. She didn't want father to get me the telescope."

"Knowledge is never a waste of time."

"She also says you're going to cut my heart out." Totyoalli hadn't intended to bring it up, but it just spilled out. He couldn't meet Cuauhtemoc's gaze. He hated that his mother thought so badly of his friend, yet he knew she spoke the truth.

Earlier that month, the priests had called him to the temple to watch the Toxcatl broadcast. "It's time you began learning what's expected of you," they'd said. He'd feigned illness and his father hadn't made him watch on television, but how much longer could he avoid it? He didn't want to see anything that might alter his friendship with Cuauhtemoc.

After a moment of silence, the Revered Speaker replied, "It's not a day I look forward to. I'd rather it never came."

"Then she's right. It's all a waste of time."

Cuauhtemoc set a firm hand on Totyoalli's shoulder. "Everyone meets Xolotl; you just know ahead of time the exact moment and place He will visit you. Eighteen years is a long time, and there are still many opportunities to pursue your passions. Living is not wasted time. Always remember that."

"I can still be an astronaut, then?" Totyoalli asked.

Smiling, Cuauhtemoc replied, "We'll discuss that when you've finished calmecac."

That evening, they sat in the royal observatory, Cuauhtemoc telling tales of the stars, the planets, and the gods that named them, while Totyoalli gazed at Quetzalcoatl through the telescope's superpowered lens. He imagined a giant feathered serpent swimming through its swirling yellow clouds, His home since conflagrating Himself on a pyre of wood and snakes and ascending to the heavens as the Morning Star. *Someday I'm going to visit Him,* he thought. *If the gods will allow it.*

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Totyoalli finished calmecac two years early, and, a few days after graduation, received an invitation to attend the Royal Academy in Tlaxcala.

The evening before classes began, his father called him, so distressed he could hardly speak. "She left."

"Mother?" Silence on the other end answered the question. "Are you okay?"

"She took all of her things and most of the furniture." He paused for a moment before adding, "I guess she thought she'd stayed long enough."

"Do you need me to come home?"

"No, of course not. I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine. I think you should come live here. We'll get an apartment in town."

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That first semester, Totyoalli joined the Aerospace Corps, where, for beginner training, cadets parachuted out of airplanes high above the northern plains—an exercise he dreaded more the more he did it. Surely one day his fear would get the better of him and he'd refuse to jump, and that would end his space career before it ever began. That thought always made him jump when he hesitated, but he still worried he wouldn't pull his cord in time. Yet even the one time his first chute failed, he managed to deploy the emergency one.

Between the stress of finals and worries that he'd never pass his first-year requirements, he welcomed Cuauhtemoc's invitation for him and his father to celebrate the five days of Toxiuhmolpilia and the New Fire Ceremony at the palace.

Toxiuhmolpilia happened only every fifty-two years, when the ancient calendars aligned. Days of fearful apprehension preceded the New Fire Ceremony; would the gods end the world or spare it a little longer? At the end of the fifth day, every city—from the farthest icy northern towns to the tourist meccas at the tip of the southern continent—extinguished their lights and broke the last pots made in the flames of that century's fire. Then, just shy of midnight, the jaguar knights would escort Xiuhtecuhtli's Teotl Ixiptla—the fire-god's representative on earth—to the Hill of the Stars outside the city. If the priests observed the constellation Tianquiztli rising above them, Cuauhtemoc would cut Xiuhtecuhtli's heart out and light the New Fire in his chest. Then all the lights would come back on all over the empire and the masses would celebrate with feasting and

sacrifices, to give thanks to the gods for granting another fifty-two years of mercy.

But first, Totyoalli had to meet his future wives.

Cuauhtemoc introduced him to the four young ladies before a modest dinner the day he and his father arrived. Like him, each had been selected at birth to represent one of the goddesses on Earth, and, according to tradition, he would marry each of them and they'd spend the last year of his life showering him in luxury and affording him every pleasure he could imagine. Then, on the evening of the Festival of Dryness, they would escort him to the temple where he was to be stripped of everything, beginning with his finery and ending with his life. The following year, they too would die at the various festivals honoring the goddesses they represented.

Most of the girls were curious about him, following him from a distance, giggling and whispering. But one—the maize goddess Xilonen's incarnation—showed only polite interest and spent most of her time reading textbooks and scribbling in a notebook. Of everyone he met that holiday, hers was the only name he remembered: Zaniyo, alone. He felt sure the love goddess Xochiquetzal had planted every flower in the world just for her, and he concocted excuses to walk past her in the gardens as she studied.

One time, as he came across her studying near the flowerbeds, she suddenly muttered a curse and tossed her pencil down in frustration.

"Maybe I can help with something?" he offered and she looked up, startled at first, then blushing. He sat on the grass next to her. "Calculus, huh?"

"I hate it," she admitted. "But I need it to get into the Royal Academy."

"I attend the Academy."

"Obviously." She pointed to the silver badge on his chest, with the embroidered gold-feathered serpents Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca creating the stars. "Cuauhtemoc assures me he's reserved me a spot next semester, but that'll hardly matter if I can't raise my math scores."

"I can help you with the math," Totyoalli replied. "I'm really good at it."

Zaniyo set the textbook in his lap and smiled. "From what Cuauhtemoc tells me, you're good at everything."

"That's not true," Totyoalli said, his face flushed. "I'm sort of having a hard time with the Aerospace Corps."

"What about it?"

"Free fall makes me sick." When Zaniyo laughed, Totyoalli added, "It's not funny. If I can't pass the training, I'll never go to space."

She gave a dismissive wave. "The more you jump, the more your confidence builds, and eventually you might even enjoy free fall."

"How would you know?"

"I did my first solo jump when I was ten," she told him. "My grandfather was an Eagle Knight and he took me up in his plane all the time. I started tandem-jumping with him at five. He taught me to fly, and I'm going to be an Eagle Knight. If the gods will it, I might even get to go to Quetzalcoatl and work on the space station."

For the next three days, Totyoalli spent every spare moment helping Zaniyo with calculus or lounging along the banks of the garden stream and recounting to her his misadventures with parachuting. They hid from the trio of giggling girls when they came looking for him, and on the evening of the New Fire ceremony, Zaniyo invited him to watch it with her from atop the palace wall.

When they crawled out of the hole in the floor of the southernmost bastion, a startled jaguar knight hissed at them, but let them run off down the length of the wall. They stopped halfway and leaned against the outer edge, gazing down at the dark waters of Lake Texcoco. Totyoalli savored the warm breeze ruffling his short black hair.

As the city grids fell dark one after another, Zaniyo said, "In the old days, everyone extinguished their fires at the beginning of the festival. Can you imagine? Five days lit only by the sun?"

"Sounds like a hassle," Totyoalli replied.

"The gods rarely make anything easy for us."

The land fell dark and silent. It was considered bad luck to speak during the dark time, and, although Totyoalli dismissed the whole spectacle as superstitious rubbish, he maintained the traditional silence. He and Zaniyo stood close together, watching the mountains for the first signs of fire.

When the flicker finally appeared, distant and dim, Zaniyo grabbed his hand and squeezed. "And so the world continues a little longer," she breathed with relief.

Tenochtitlan's lights came back on one grid at a time.

"Of course it will continue," Totyoalli said with a laugh. "Cuauhtemoc keeps the gods fat on blood. Why would they want the feast to end?"

Zaniyo sat with her back to the stone wall. "You don't really believe, do you?"

Totyoalli joined her. "I find it hard to," he admitted.

"How can you not? We've eaten dinner with the War God himself every night this week."

"You mean Cuauhtemoc? Why would you think he's Huitzilopochtli?"

"Have you ever noticed that he doesn't age?"

Totyoalli shrugged. "Good genetics."

"He doesn't get old because he's a god," Zaniyo declared and when Totyoalli chuckled, she laughed and said, "My father wouldn't like you. He'd say you're an affront to the gods with your disbelief."

"If Tezcatlipoca chose me as his Teotl Ixiptla, I must not be too offensive."

"No, the gods don't make such mistakes," she said, then kissed him. When she finished, he felt as if he'd drunk a whole bottle of octli, and his toes were numb. "I must fly home tonight, but will you write to me?"

"Every day, if you wish," he whispered.

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Totyoalli wrote to Zaniyo not quite every day, but enough to irritate her father, who didn't approve of this attention, even from the man destined to marry his daughter. But soon enough she moved into her dorm at the Royal Academy and they spent every spare moment together, eating lunch in the cafeteria and helping each other with homework. On the short days, at the airfield, Zaniyo showed Totyoalli the controls of the single-engine planes, and by the beginning of the Hollow Days, she'd gotten him flying short distances. They took the zero-gravity simulation classes together and trained in the mock spacecraft, each doing their best to one-up the other.

Their playful flirting soon developed into Zaniyo staying over at Totyoalli's apartment for days at a time. Eventually, she moved in.

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In the spring of his twenty-third year, Totyoalli went on a routine two-week lunar mission, to the base orbiting Coyolxauhqui's Head. Zaniyo went up three months later and when she returned, they got married, six years ahead of schedule.

They applied for positions on the expedition to Quetzalcoatl, but mission control turned them down for lack of experience, encouraging them to reapply in four years.

"But by the time it leaves, we'll both be twenty-eight," Zaniyo protested to the mission coordinator. "Each mission lasts five years; the government won't let us go if we can't be back in time for the Toxcatl. This is our one chance."

"You need more experience," he said. "If you'd done more missions to the lunar base—"

"We've taken every mission they offered us," Totyoalli said. "We just graduated last year. How can you expect us to have flown more than a mission apiece yet?"

"I wish I could make exceptions, but I'm afraid the rules are explicit. We require a three-mission minimum." The commander sighed. "I'm sorry."

Totyoalli wouldn't concede defeat. As soon as the next mission call came up, he signed them on, and they spent two weeks in orbit fixing a spy satellite. Back home on Earth, they enrolled in a series of deep-space crisis-training courses so they could take longer missions. The following summer, they went to the lunar colony for a two-year assignment. Totyoalli maintained the water recyclers in the geodesic dome while Zaniyo piloted biweekly supply transports to and from the orbital station.

When the applicant pool for the Quetzalcoatl expedition reopened, Totyoalli again added their names, but didn't tell Zaniyo. She found out when their commanding officer delivered the rejection notices and his condolences.

"I've accepted the fate the gods have handed me. Why can't you do the same and stop dwelling on dreams that we're never going to live to see?" She refused to speak to him for nearly three days.

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Six months later, during an orbital mission, he watched Europe pass silently above his shuttle bunk and wondered whether he and Zaniyo could flee there and seek political refuge. But Zaniyo would never agree to go, nor could he leave her behind. *She's right. Accept your fate and stop ignoring it.*

So he took out the Toxcatl book Zaniyo always packed in his bag when he went away and finally started reading. He practiced the reed flute he would play during the ceremony, but he stumbled over the notes; his breath caught in his chest when he thought of

being stripped naked and cut open on the altar like a frog being dissected.

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Totyoalli returned home the day before his twenty-eighth birthday, and in the morning, after Zaniyo left for work, he drove to the palace to request an audience with Cuauhtemoc, to beg the Emperor to spare his life.

While waiting for a jaguar knight to escort him inside, he paced the courtyard, mulling over what he'd say. If he hadn't known Cuauhtemoc personally, he'd never have considered asking him this. Trying to weasel out of one's spiritual responsibilities was considered as dishonorable now as fleeing a battlefield had been back in the early days of the empire. If he were smart, he'd leave now and never tell anyone how he'd nearly dishonored his entire family.

But before he could settle on what to say or whether to leave, the jaguar knight returned and told him the Revered Speaker would see him. *I'd be dishonoring myself not to fight for what I believe,* he decided as they approached the Emperor's study.

Cuauhtemoc greeted Totyoalli with a firm embrace. "So good to see you again, Totyoalli. I trust your mission went well...."

Totyoalli nodded and accepted a cup of octli when Cuauhtemoc poured some. When the Emperor asked for details of the trip, he gave them, stuttering over nearly every word, and by the time he'd finished, he was sweating and the alcohol had soured his stomach.

Cuauhtemoc, now sitting behind his desk, scrutinized Totyoalli for a moment. "You seem nervous. Is something wrong?"

Just speak your mind, Totyoalli thought. He set his glass on the table at the end of the couch, then sat with his hands clasped, making himself hold Cuauhtemoc's gaze. "I don't wish to die, My Lord...especially for something I don't believe in."

Cuauhtemoc raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"My father always told me there was no greater honor than to serve the gods like this, but I've never seen anything to suggest that the gods even exist, let alone that they care what we do one way or another. I've been to Omeyocan, where all our religious texts say they live, and yes, there are fabulous wonders out there in space, but no gods demanding blood in exchange for our passing through...."

"Certainly you've seen the prelaunch sacrifices?" Cuauhtemoc replied.

"I have," Totyoalli admitted, searching for hints that he should stop pushing his argument and shut up. But Cuauhtemoc's gaze was steady and neutral, so he continued, "It's not my intention to offend you, Your Grace, or to criticize our sacred ways, but they contradict everything science has taught me, everything I believe. Don't the gods deserve the blood of someone who actually reveres them rather than someone who questions their very purpose in our lives?"

Cuauhtemoc chuckled. "The gods hardly care about such trivial details as dedication and spiritual loyalty; they care about blood, and lots of it. But I understand your point. A growing number of people believe like you do." He refilled his glass and, after a slow sip, he said, "They sneak off into the night and hide, preferring to live their lives as outlaws rather than face death on the Eagle Stone. Just a few months ago, a young man killed a priest and a jaguar knight when they came to collect him. And a bunch of usually law-abiding citizens helped him escape the city afterwards. No, you're not the only one questioning the validity of forcing people to the sacrifice.

"But until now, no one has ever come directly to me and stated their dissatisfaction. You do realize that by doing so, you're committing treason against the gods, and I could lock you away in prison until the day of your Toxcatl?"

Totyoalli nodded, feeling numb.

"The jaguar knights who watch over the prisoners aren't known for their kindness. A year with them and you'd beg me to kill you. You'd be better off just running away like the others."

"But that won't get me the mission to Quetzalcoatl," Totyoalli said. "And frankly, I think I'd prefer death to throwing away everything I've worked for to go on the run. I belong in space or I don't belong in this world at all."

Cuauhtemoc's face relaxed into a proud smile. "You never cease to surprise me, Totyoalli. From the moment I first met you, I knew you were special. Do you remember what you asked me that day, when we walked in the garden and I asked you how you felt about being the Night Wind?" When Totyoalli shrugged, he said, "You asked me if I was a god."

"I was just a stupid child," Totyoalli said, shifting uneasily in his seat.

Cuauhtemoc peered at him for a moment before saying, "There's something I want to share with you, something I've rarely told anyone else; then you can tell me whether your question was

really stupid or not." He went to the glass and mahogany showcase behind his desk and took out a human skull, mildly yellowed with time. "Do you have any idea whose skull this is?"

Totyoalli shook his head.

"Hernán Cortés'," the Emperor replied as he set it carefully into Totyoalli's hands. "I cut it off his neck when he and his men attempted to take the beach at Chalchihuecan."

"You did?" Totyoalli said, not sure he'd heard right.

Cuauhtemoc nodded. "I still remember the smell of the gunpowder, the shouting of the warriors. That night we celebrated our victory with song and dances around a huge bonfire on the beach; our victory against history. He would have destroyed everything we were, everything we had created, and we'd have vanished into time, virtually forgotten except as bloodthirsty, freakish monstrosities.

"But look what we've become: we're the most powerful nation on Earth, we've placed colonies on the moon and we're traveling to other planets—"

"Are you saying you are a god?" Totyoalli interrupted.

"That all depends on how you define a god. You're an engineer. Certainly you learned something about nanotechnology in those classes you took?"

"A little bit, though it's all still completely theoretical...." Realizing what Cuauhtemoc's question suggested, Totyoalli set the skull on the table next to his glass before he could drop it. "You're... you're a computer?"

"Artificial intelligence," the Emperor corrected. "At least that's what they called it where I came from."

"And where's that?"

"Somewhere that doesn't exist anymore," Cuauhtemoc replied. "They sent me into the past, in the body of a snake, and I bit one of the nephews of then-Emperor Motecuhzoma the Younger, which transferred my nanites into this body."

"But why?"

"To prevent the Spanish conquering us. The council elected me Revered Speaker after Motecuhzoma died in a freak palace fire, and, well, it's been a long seven hundred and thirty-three years, but I'm still the Emperor."

"And the nanites kept you young all that time," Totyoalli said, studying Cuauhtemoc with new fascination. "Zaniyo was right...well, not about you being a god, but about you not aging."

"I'd rather people think of me as a god," Cuauhtemoc replied. "People are less suspicious of gods. But you don't believe in gods; you're a scientist." Cuauhtemoc put the skull back on its glass stand in the cabinet, but then took out a flint dagger. "There's something I want to give you. Two things, actually."

"You don't have to give—"

"You could have gone into hiding like the others," Cuauhtemoc said. "But instead you risked everything and came directly to me. I admire integrity, and that's why I'm releasing you from your obligations. You're no longer the Night Wind. Go to Quetzalcoatl and take Zaniyo with you, because I'm releasing her too. Go study our most Precious Twin and bring home knowledge that will benefit us far more than your blood ever would."

For a moment, Totyoalli didn't know what to say. Excitement and joy washed over him like cool water relieving sun-blistered skin, but then he said, "Can you do that?"

"I *am* the Emperor," Cuauhtemoc said as he sat on the windowsill and turned the knife over and over in his hand. "Besides, there's always the alternate."

"Alternate?"

"Every Teotl Ixiptla has several. Misfortunes happen."

"But I can't send this other man off to die for me. It wouldn't be right—"

"Your alternate is very pious," Cuauhtemoc said. "A priest, in fact. He'll not only go to his death willingly, but with joy in his heart. By your own rationale, it's what the gods deserve."

Totyoalli sat in shocked silence for a moment before finally saying, "How can I ever thank you for your mercy, Your Grace?"

"Please, no more formalities," Cuauhtemoc replied. "I would rather think of us as friends, and there's still one final thing I want to give you." He closed his fist around the stone blade and dragged the knife through, wincing. When he opened his hand, he coated the blade with blood. He then held it out to Totyoalli.

After a brief hesitation, Totyoalli took the knife. Cuauhtemoc wrapped his hand in a length of cloth he took from one of his desk drawers and said, "In my many years, I've had a lot of sons, all of them mortal and quite foolish in their ambitions, and often not as dedicated to integrity as the sons of an emperor should be. That's why I stopped fathering children two hundred years ago. But my lack of a reliable heir has always weighed heavily on my mind. I haven't

needed one yet, but even I could fall victim to an injury so severe that my nanites can't fix it, and then what will become of our empire? Will it fall to the priests, who will ban all scientific research because it might instill doubt about the gods? Or maybe the military would take over? Can you imagine what this world would be like run by jaguar knights? No, it must be someone I trust, someone with integrity. Like you."

Totyoalli nearly dropped the knife. "But I know nothing about running a government!"

"Minor details," Cuauhtemoc said, waving him off. "You'll have plenty of time to learn." He studied the bloodied rag for a moment, then said, "I've always thought of you as a son, Totyoalli—the son I'd always wished I'd had—and that's why I offer you this gift. I won't make you accept it, but if you wish to, merely mix the blood with your own. The shadow of death will never again darken your thoughts."

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Totyoalli didn't tell Zaniyo about his conversation with Cuauhtemoc; instead, he told her the priests had seen omens pointing to the gods wanting them to go to Quetzalcoatl. This, accompanied by a letter from the Revered Speaker himself, she accepted with little protest.

He never showed her the knife, either. He kept it in a lockbox at the bottom of his footlocker.

After a month at the lunar space station helping prep the cargo convoy, Zaniyo and Totyoalli finally boarded the ships for the three-month journey to Quetzalcoatl. When they arrived, they circled the planet for a day before meeting up with the ring-shaped space station in a polar orbit. That same night, Totyoalli stood at the tiny window in their quarters, gazing out at the turbulent yellow planet and silently thanking Cuauhtemoc for doing so much to get him there.

For the first several months, Totyoalli worked with the crews retrofitting the space station with the newly-delivered materials, but after that he worked on systems maintenance and collaborated on plans for upgrading the station designs. Zaniyo piloted shuttles, taking workers and supplies back and forth between the research satellites deployed around the planet. Fish, beans, maize, and squash lived in the self-sustaining bio dome, producing enough surplus to feed the convoys on their trips back to the One World. The station had a temple, but health and safety issues forbade bloodletting and allowed only fish and vegetables as sacrifices. Most of the crew preferred

symbolic offerings of fine paper butterflies and snakes, which were easily reabsorbed into the bio-system and honored the god Quetzalcoatl, who most believed allowed them to orbit and study His sacred world only by the grace of His divine mercy. Zaniyo offered Him silent prayers every night.

For months, Totyoalli didn't think about the knife or Cuauhtemoc's offer of immortality, but on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, he opened the lockbox for the first time since placing the blade inside. He lay on his bunk, holding it by the handle and poking the dried blood on the blade with his finger. It wasn't as hard as he'd thought it might be; it gave like a sponge under his prodding.

All it takes is a small cut, he thought, tapping the pad of his index finger with the tip of the blade. But what about Zaniyo? Cuauhtemoc hadn't given him permission to share this immortal gift with her or anyone else, but Totyoalli couldn't imagine watching her grow old and die while he remained young. Or their children. Or their grandchildren.

Was this why the Emperor had offered it to him? Not so much out of fear of the end of the empire he had created, but because he'd grown tired of watching friends and loved ones come and go with the bundles of years while he went on and on with no one to share that eternity?

I owe him so much, Totyoalli thought, pressing the blade a little harder, but still not enough to cut the skin. *It's the least I can do for him.*

But hearing the door slide open in the other room, Totyoalli quickly stashed the knife away in the box and buried it under his clothes in the footlocker.

"We have no octli to celebrate with," Zaniyo said as she walked into their bedroom carrying a bottle and some small cups. "But there's this papaya juice." She sat on the bottom bunk next to him and poured him a drink. "To the mercy of the gods," she said, and they both drank their cups empty. "I made you one of those fish tamales you adore so much." She held the foil-wrapped food out to him with a smile.

The tamales smelled fabulous, but the enticing aroma couldn't overpower the longing he felt as he kissed her. He could decide about Cuauhtemoc's gift tomorrow, after he and Zaniyo had celebrated life.

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The next morning, Totyoalli joined his engineering partner Etl at storage area sixteen to fix a window fractured by debris. The air in the storage area had slowly leaked out through the three-inch crack. "Real poor quality control on that piece," Etl noted as Totyoalli examined the damage. "I'm going to report this glass manufacturer to mission control, and we'll see if they ever get a contract again."

Totyoalli just replied, "Let's hurry. I'm having lunch with my wife in an hour." And hopefully Zaniyo wanted a little more than just fish and tortillas.

Totyoalli packed his tools and supplies into his belt pouch and headed for the airlock. He double-checked his pressure settings, then activated his magnetic boots. Before stepping out of the open airlock, he hooked his tether to the rings outside the door. This section had no protective outer plating yet, so he placed his feet carefully so as not to knock open any ducts or conduits.

Fifteen minutes later, he reached the window.

"You and your strolling, Night Bird," Etl's voice crackled from the foam pads against Totyoalli's ears. "Do you keep your wife waiting like this?"

Totyoalli unsheathed his utility knife and unscrewed the outer brace while Etl peeled back the seal around the inside. His tether was too short for him to reach the outer edge, and after contemplating going back to exchange it—further irritating Etl—he decided to unhook it from his suit, latching the end onto a conduit next to the window. He increased the power on his magnetic boots and finished unscrewing the brace. He then hooked the metal frame to a latch on his belt so it wouldn't float away.

"Have you cut the outer seal yet?" Etl asked.

"In a minute." Totyoalli started slicing through the gummy rubber coating over the gasket. A couple of minutes later, they carefully knocked the glass free of its moorings. Totyoalli handed it to his partner through the six-by-four opening. Etl handed the new pane through and Totyoalli set it into place. Once it fit snugly, each reapplied sealant on their side.

"Let's make sure it's airtight before you screw the brace back on," Etl said. Totyoalli waited while he went to the wall panel and pushed buttons and turned the dial. Etl then came over to inspect the seal while Totyoalli scrutinized his side.

At the far right corner, Totyoalli found the sealant bubbling and splitting. "We don't have proper seal," he said into his microphone.

"All right, I'll decompress the room again; meanwhile, you should step aside—"

A crushing blow sledge-hammered Totyoalli in the stomach. The world spun around him, a blur of black, white, and yellow that turned red when he vomited blood into his helmet. He waved his arms, reaching for anything but finding nothing to grab. His headset buzzed with emergency alarms. "Etl," he coughed into his microphone, his chest throbbing. "Etl? Can you read me?" Nothing. He couldn't see anything beyond the veil of crimson coating his visor, and already the smell threatened to make him retch again. "Etl, come in please!"

"Totyoalli?" The voice of Azcatl, from station control, burst over his headset. "We lost contact with Etl. Are you okay?"

"I'm injured." Totyoalli cringed when he touched his side and pain shot through him. A quick feel of the front of his pressure suit found his control panel smashed. "The window blew out."

"I'm sending someone to retrieve you," Azcatl said. "You're out by section thirteen, right?"

"I can't see where I am. And...I took my tether off."

"What about your air-thrusters?"

"My control panel is smashed."

Azcatl sighed. "It's okay. We'll locate you by your transmission. Just hang on."

Totyoalli waited, his pain growing with each minute.

"Still there?" Azcatl's voice crackled over the radio again.

"Where else would I be?" Totyoalli coughed.

"Bad news first, friend." Azcatl took a deep breath, then said, "You're in a reentry vector with the planet and you've just passed out of reach of our longest tethers."

"And the good news?"

Azcatl's voice faltered for a moment before he managed to say, "You're leaking oxygen. You've got maybe a half-hour supply left." He tried to laugh as he added, "At least you'll die before you burn up."

Totyoalli stared at the thin crimson veil on his visor and said nothing. *All I had to do was prick my damn finger.*

Clearing his throat, Azcatl continued, "I've sent for the shuttle to retrieve you, but it's two hours away, at Satellite Number Three. We won't leave you out there. We'll make sure you get back to the One World, I promise."

"Thank you," Totyoalli whispered, numb.

"I'm going to get Zaniyo, okay?"

Totyoalli nodded, unable to speak.

After forever, Zaniyo finally came on the radio. "Totyoalli, what's going on?"

"An accident," he told her, his voice choked. "Death was my destiny all along." She didn't say anything, but he heard her suddenly-harsh breathing. "It's all right. Don't cry."

"How can the gods be so cruel?" she demanded. "To spare you from the temple altar just to steal you away like this? How is that fair? Will they come and take me too?"

"The gods didn't kill me, Zaniyo. I took my tether off."

"You're not funny," Zaniyo said, tears clouding her voice. She sniffled and muttered, "Why were you so careless?"

So I wouldn't miss a moment with you. He couldn't say it. "I'm so sorry. Forgive me."

"Of course I will," she whispered.

"There's something else," he said. "When you go back to the OneWorld, return something to Cuauhtemoc. It's in a small lockbox. In my footlocker. Don't open it. Promise."

"I promise."

His breathing was seriously labored now. "Tell him I'm sorry. I wanted his gift. But I didn't.... I was afraid. Tell him I'm sorry." He couldn't think straight, and he felt sure he was forgetting something. Finally he sputtered, "And one last thing.... I love you, Zaniyo."

He didn't know whether she answered him or whether they talked any more after that. He did think of their first meeting in Cuauhtemoc's gardens and that first kiss that had left his toes numb, and how this morning he'd looked at her over their breakfast table and marveled that he was even alive to enjoy that meal with her.

But now he floated free, Quetzalcoatl spinning peacefully below him. He was Night Bird Soaring, racing away on outspread wings as he rode the light waves, skimming Quetzalcoatl's upper atmosphere while the clouds twisted and coiled below him, serpent-like. A large black dog—the god Xolotl, his guide in death—watched from atop the space station, a smile on His face.

Come, Night Bird, He said, *so I may show you the endless bounds of the universe.*

How to Fetch Firewood

Michelle Tandoc-Pichereau

For the women and children of Darfur

The first thing you should do, Abidseun, is coat yourself with dust. Don't forget that patch on your elbow, that strip of skin behind your ears. Here, darkness feeds on the dark.

When you walk, Abidseun, walk like you've been taught—straight and sharp. Don't count clouds. Don't kick stones. You should know better than to chase a little bug.

There isn't much wood left to pick, I know. It takes so long for seed to become fire, and, here, there is no water left for growing. So we look, Abidseun. Because crows feed on those who wait, and mouths, in asking, end up dry.

And if in looking you find a stick in someone else's hands, if in running you stumble on a stone, if in calling the answer stays stubborn and far, then that is the time to stare at the sky, Abidseun. That is the time to close your eyes.

As for me, from the moment your small light steps away to the moment you return (on your feet? on their backs?), I will be here, Abidseun, crouched on colorless soil, breath sharp as memory, praying for history to forget itself.

"How to Fetch Firewood" appeared in the December 2007 issue of *Chronogram*, in the Spring 2008 *flashquake*, in *Word Riot* in May 2008, and in the July/August 2008 edition of *The Humanist*.

The Train

Jason D. Wittman

I: Caboose

Katya stood with her baggage at Railroad Station Number One in Stalingrad, surrounded by women and children, the old and infirm. Soldiers watched over them, shouting instructions, keeping order. They were evacuating the city in anticipation of the German advance.

Everywhere, people smothered each other with tearful embraces, kisses, and promises to write. Katya's husband was at the front lines. She had not seen him in months.

The next train approached, decelerating into position. Once its doors were opened, the crowd surged forward. Someone pushed Katya from behind. She brushed against a little girl with long jet-black hair. They only touched lightly, but the girl yelped as if stung. She scurried behind an old man and looked out from behind his legs. She had the most startling green eyes Katya had ever seen.

"I...I'm very sorry," Katya said to the old man. He was wiry, with skin like leather and a shock of white hair.

The old man smiled. "The fault is not yours, miss," he said, his voice rough as a grindstone. "Mariya is a very...*sensitive* girl, and with all these goings-on...."

"Of course." Katya offered Mariya an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

Mariya ducked back behind the old man's knees.

"Would you like help with your baggage?" the old man asked.

"No, thank you," Katya replied. "I can manage."

As they shuffled toward the train, Katya glanced now and then at the old man. Once, she saw Mariya whispering in his ear. Later he produced a small coin and walked it back and forth over nimble fingers.

Katya returned her attention forward. Pick up the luggage, shuffle ahead a meter or so, set down the luggage, wait. She closed her eyes and wiped sweat from her brow.

"Excuse me!" she heard the old man call out. She turned to see him holding aloft a small framed photograph of a man in uniform. "Did someone drop this?"

"Oh!" To Katya's right, a middle-aged woman stepped forward to take the picture. "Thank you, sir! I hadn't realized it was gone!"

The old man smiled. "Guard it well, madam. Such things are to be treasured."

The woman thanked him again and returned to her place in line. The old man aimed a stern glare at Mariya. Shamefaced, the girl ducked her head.

Finally Katya boarded. They were all loaded in cattle cars, everyone packed together tightly. Such trains had passed through Railroad Station Number One for months now, from Odessa, Leningrad, Kharkov. Now it was Stalingrad's turn.

The train remained still for some time. Looking around, Katya saw a few people talking, while others brought out Jack London books distributed by local libraries. All Katya had to read was Andrei's most recent letter. She took it out now and read it yet again. Most of it was vague, circumspect—the military censors would never have let it through otherwise—but there was a certain something different about this letter, like Andrei was trying to say something and could not find the words.

Two months ago, I called in some favors so one of my lieutenants could go home on leave. His wife is expecting a child any day now.

Andrei had last written only three weeks before. He hadn't said anything about this then.

Another of my officers transferred to another unit. She is a good soldier and I wish her well.

He never talked like this in his letters. Oh Andrei, Andrei, what is wrong?

She skipped to the last paragraph: *I love you, Katya, and I always will. When this is over, if all goes well, I hope to come home and be with you, as a husband should.*

Until we meet again,

Your Loving Andrei.

Underneath was a drawing, just a handful of lines and curves, depicting a father bear, a mother bear, and a baby bear between them. Andrei always drew bears in his letters, just as he always made bear noises in Katya's ear when they were in bed together. Katya smiled, remembering. But Andrei had never drawn *three* bears before. The mother and the father, yes, but never the child.

They had talked on occasion of having children. It had never seemed the right time. Was this Andrei's way of saying the time had come?

What had changed? Was it the war?

She looked up from the letter, brushed a strand of hair from her face, and sighed. The old man, she noticed, was still playing with his coin. It twinkled in the dimness as he tumbled it over his knuckles.

He caught her gaze. "I see you have noticed my trinket."

Katya smiled. "It looks very old."

He held it up. Its face depicted the aquiline profile of an ancient Roman. "This coin was minted in the early fourth century, during the reign of Constantine. Legend has it that he tossed this very coin when deciding whether to remain in Rome or move to Constantinople. The rest, as they say, is history."

Katya raised her eyebrows. "It must be very valuable."

The old man smiled.

With a puff of steam and a crunch of metal couplings, the train groaned into motion. The clatter of wheels soon drowned out conversation, and people could only gaze through the open door or read their books.

Katya felt tired. The August air blew warm against her face. She rested her forehead on her knees, closed her eyes....

The train came to an abrupt stop. Katya tumbled headlong into a crowd of other passengers. They voiced their indignation while she tried to disentangle herself.

Then everyone fell silent as footsteps sounded outside the car. A soldier, a captain, climbed aboard and stood among the passengers. He did not speak or look at them. He kept his unfocused gaze forward, seeing nothing.

Katya's stomach lurched. She felt suddenly cold despite the heat. "Andrei?"

It *was* her husband—strong face, brown eyes, powerful hands. But what was he doing here?

"Andrei?" She stepped over people to get to him. She reached him, tried to look into his eyes. "Andrei?"

He moved, but not to look at her. His hand went to the sidearm on his belt. He unfastened the holster, removed the weapon. He brought the muzzle toward his temple.

"No!" Katya seized his arm and pulled. "Andrei, no!" She searched his eyes for a sign of what was wrong. "What are you doing?"

Only then did he look at her, reluctantly, as if it pained him to see her. The bleak despair she saw in his eyes froze her to the bone.

"Andrei...give me the weapon." She pulled it from his fingers, which offered little resistance. "Andrei, what's wrong? Why aren't you at the front?"

Still no response. Andrei looked at her, and seemed to see her, but not to hear her.

Katya did her best to swallow her panic. "Andrei, talk to me! It's me, your wife!"

Andrei opened his mouth. "I...." He swallowed, and tears began streaming out of his eyes. "I am sorry, Katya." Sobs shook him. "I am sorry...."

Behind Katya, just at the edge of hearing, the old man murmured, "And so it begins again." She heard a sharp thump, as of something metallic slammed to the floor.

The train lurched. Unbalanced, Katya fell, and hit her head on something hard.

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She found herself lying on a—carpeted?—floor.

"That's the second time you've used the coin, Father," said a woman's voice.

"It was necessary, Mariya." The old man speaking. "One of them had to stay with us."

"I'm just keeping account of things." Katya heard a soft rustling, small footsteps. "I believe she's waking."

Katya tried to open her eyes, but pain shot through her head. She groaned.

"Here. Try to sit up." Katya felt a hand grip her arm. "Drink this."

Katya sat up, clenching her teeth against the pain. She felt around with her left hand—the right still gripped Andrei's

handgun—until she found a tin cup. It held strong liquor, but that was not a problem. After the first swallow, her pain lessened and she could open her eyes.

She was no longer in the cattle car. This was a smaller space, cramped, but comfortable for two people. Ornate hand-woven carpets decorated the walls and floor. A woodstove stood in one corner; a pile of sleeping furs lay in another. Small lamps on the walls spread yellow illumination. She heard the clatter of wheels, very fast.

Mariya stood beside her. "Feeling better?" she asked—in the woman's voice. And Katya realized that Mariya was a dwarf.

"What *is* this?" Katya asked. "Where is Andrei?"

"A decision had to be made, Katya," said the old man. "We couldn't afford to lose both of you, and the coin was a sure way to keep one."

Katya frowned. Keep one...? "What does the coin have to do with it? How do you know my name?"

The old man turned to his daughter. "Mariya?"

The dwarf explained. "When we first met, and I touched you, I learned a lot about you. It's a gift; it came from my mother. Your name is Yekaterina Aleksandrovna Yerechenko. The soldier you tried to help was your husband. And right now Andrei is in danger."

"Then why isn't he here?" Katya was confused, and Mariya's explanation was not helping. "If he's in danger, why didn't you bring him with you?"

"If he were here, then you would be in danger. That is how the coin works."

Katya threw her hands in the air. "What are you talking about?"

The old man held up the coin again. "As I told you, this coin was minted during the reign of Constantine. The Roman Empire was declining, already split into two halves, eastern and western. Constantine went to his metalsmiths and had them forge this coin. A special coin.

"Constantine tossed it, and when it landed, he knew the western half would fall first. Shortly thereafter, he moved his capital to Constantinople."

Katya tried to think past her headache. "So this coin predicts the future?"

"It is more of a...a consolidator of fate. Because the coin landed as it did, the ill fate that would have befallen the empire as a whole instead befell only the western half." He looked at the coin again. "It is a way of making the best out of a bad situation, of cutting one's losses. Of course, here the choice was more obvious. Your husband, in his current state, couldn't help himself, let alone us. That is why I brought the coin down in your favor."

Katya took a deep breath to calm herself. "Where is my husband?"

Mariya spoke. "Somewhere aboard this Train. If events go as they did before, he is probably on the engine." She paused. "Do you have anything of your husband's?"

"One moment," said the old man. "My daughter has a confession to make." He gave Mariya the same stern look Katya had seen on the platform. "And since that nice woman is no longer available to us, I think Katya is as good a person as any to confess to. Don't you, Mariya?"

Mariya looked wretchedly at the floor. "When I...touch people," she began, "or certain objects...I sense their stories. Some are very unsettling, a torment in my head. It's impossible to describe the agony to someone who hasn't felt it. And I can't dispel it without holding some other object. So I...take things—"

"Mariya!"

"I *steal* objects with calmer stories. That picture that my father gave back to the old woman? I stole that." From about her person she produced various trinkets, jewelry, and small coins, and dropped them on the floor. "These too."

The old man shook his head. "Mariya, what am I to do with you?"

"I can't help it!" Mariya pleaded. "I don't know how Mother dealt with it, and you can't teach me...."

She trailed off into silence and the old man sighed. "If nothing else," he said to Katya, "this should tell you how unsettling *your* story is."

Katya took another swallow of liquor and tried to focus.

"But we need to learn more," the old man went on. "And that is why Mariya needs an object—"

"I'm keeping the gun," said Katya. Her eyes went from Mariya to the old man and back. Then she brought out Andrei's letter. "What about this?"

Mariya made a relieved sound. "That would be much better," she said. "Guns have violent histories, and they're rarely helpful." She took the letter and examined it. "Anything else?"

Katya reached inside her collar and brought out a locket on a silver chain.

Mariya nodded. "Would you open it, please?"

Katya tried, but the hinge broke apart and the halves fell to the floor.

Cursing, she reached down to pick them up. But Mariya stopped her. "Wait!"

The girl retrieved the pieces herself, one in each hand. She looked at the pictures of Katya and Andrei, then closed her eyes.

Katya watched and waited.

"He is in the engine," Mariya murmured. "He is in great pain. You...must find him, Katya. You must—"

Someone pounded on the door, setting the woodstove rattling. Katya recoiled. The old man cursed. Mariya yelped then scurried behind her father.

The pounding came again. The door almost buckled beneath its force.

The old man looked at Katya's handgun. "Can you use that?"

She swallowed. "If I have to."

He looked at the coin, first at one side, then the other. Then he thumped it to the carpet and answered the door.

A voice, wheezing and clattering like a diesel engine, issued from the darkness outside. "The war's started again, Marko! I'm here to collect conscripts!"

Katya blinked. Started again? The war's been going on for—

A face thrust itself inside. Katya recognised it as Andrei's, then saw it was part of a lumbering, half-mechanical monstrosity. Lamplight gleamed off steel legs and an arm. Metal plates covered half its skull. Katya felt the blood draining out of her face.

"We understand your need for warm bodies, sir," the old man—Marko—said, "but I ask that you overlook these ladies in exchange for my wholehearted service."

A mechanical arm seized him by the throat. "You live here under *our* sufferance!" The smell of dirty oil clogged Katya's nostrils. "When a war's on, we take what we need, when we need it!"

Mariya rushed to Katya's side and leaned close to her ear. "Shoot it!" she whispered. "That isn't your husband! *Shoot it!*"

The creature looked at Mariya. "*Shoot* me? You little...!"

It hurled Marko into a corner then lumbered toward Mariya.

Katya almost couldn't move. But she saw the monstrosity raise its arm against Mariya and found it within herself to aim Andrei's weapon and pull the trigger three times. The creature crashed to the floor.

Katya rested her head on her knees and began to weep. For a moment, nothing moved.

"Katya?"

She looked up. Mariya pointed to the creature. "Look at it."

Katya shook her head.

"Look!"

She did. The creature no longer bore Andrei's likeness. Sunken eyes, lantern jaw—nothing like the man she had married.

"That was not your husband," said the dwarf. "You did not shoot your husband."

Katya let out a slow breath. Of course that thing wasn't Andrei. It didn't act anything like him; Andrei would never harm a little girl. Katya covered her face with her hands. It wasn't Andrei, wasn't Andrei, wasn't Andrei. I did not shoot my Andrei.

She raised her head. "Thank you.... Why did it look like him before?"

Mariya shrugged. "Father said they all looked the same during the last war too. I was a baby then, so I wouldn't know." She paused for a long time, staring. Then she said, "I think Father would want you to have this." And she gave Katya the coin.

Katya frowned, confused. "What are you talking about?" She looked around. "Where's—"

Marko still lay where the creature had thrown him. Katya realized he would never move again.

Mariya began to weep. Katya gathered her into her arms and held her while the lamps burned and the wheels clattered.

When Mariya was done weeping, she lifted her head and blinked away tears. "More Machinists will come," she said. "The sooner we leave here, the better."

"Mariya...." Katya offered the coin back. "I can't take this. You're his daughter."

"You don't understand," said Mariya. "No one can use the coin more than three times—and you will need it more than I." She wiped her eyes. "Anyway, we'll be going together. We can hide in the sleeping car."

"But then what? We can't hide forever."

"True," said Mariya. "We must also find your husband."

"But why was he brought here? Why am *I* here?" asked Katya, exasperated. "What is going on?"

"I don't know everything, Katya. I have much of my mother's talent, but none of her skill." The dwarf fidgeted, as if very anxious to leave. "The Machinists collected her during the last war; she had Father use the coin so he and I would be safe. She was never around to teach me."

"Why didn't you and Marko leave? You had the opportunity at Stalingrad."

Mariya nodded. "Oh, we can *leave*. But the Train always brings us back. Always. The only way to truly leave her is to discover what she wants." She rose to her feet. "We'd best be going."

They covered Marko's body with a fur and paid a moment's respect. Then they went to the door and opened it.

Katya gasped when she saw the stars. They surrounded the Train on all sides—even below the railroad ties that flew by faster than the eye could register. They shone crystalline and countless, and Katya gazed at them so long that Mariya had to tug her sleeve.

Breaking out of her reverie, Katya thought of releasing the caboose from the Train, keeping Marko's body safe from the Machinists. But then she saw the couplings.

They were human hands. Women's hands, three times as large as Katya's. As she watched, the hands turned on their wrists and an index finger waggled as if admonishing a child.

Shuddering, Katya went with Mariya to the sleeping car.

II: Sleeping Car

Looking through the door window, Katya saw a long aisle, dimly lit. Toward the other end, she saw lights and movement.

When she opened the door, she saw something else. A huge chamber lay before her, with a checkered floor. Two rows

of monoliths, made of dusky red stone, extended from the door and beyond her sight.

"Mariya?"

The dwarf shrugged. "If this is where we must go, we must go."

"What about the roof?"

"In this wind?" Mariya paused to indicate the deafening howl. "If we fall, there will be nothing to catch us."

Katya sighed. Then she said, "Let's get this over with," and went through.

The door closed behind them. Katya tried to open it again and found it locked. Cursing, she turned to examine her new surroundings. Far to her right was another double row of monoliths, these of black stone. Looking back, she saw that the door they had entered by stood in yet another monolith. "Have you been here before?"

Mariya started to shake her head—then stopped. "What's that?"

To their left, they heard a soft, melodic chanting. A male voice, aged and careworn, yet filling the vast chamber.

They walked around a monolith and saw an old man, bald, wearing a grey overcoat with a Star of David sewn on the breast. Sitting with his legs tucked under him, he peered through wire-rimmed spectacles at a wad of clay in his hands.

From his perspective, Katya decided, she stood about five centimeters high.

She and Mariya ducked back behind the monolith. When they looked again, they saw the old giant seemed not to have noticed them. He kept kneading the clay, shaping it, always chanting.

Then a door flew open behind him. Through it stomped a Machinist, similar to him in size. Like the Machinist in the caboose, it bore Andrei's likeness. "The war's begun again, Yoshua!" it bellowed. "I'm here to collect conscripts!"

Yoshua continued chanting as he rose to face the Machinist. Before it could seize him, he reached out and touched its forehead. Light sprang from his finger and the Machinist froze where it stood. Yoshua's finger moved as he chanted, and Katya and Mariya watched the light etch strange symbols into the Machinist's forehead.

When Yoshua finished, the creature turned and, without a word, left the compartment. Yoshua locked the door. Then he sat back down and picked up the clay.

Katya looked at Mariya, who shook her head.

Yoshua finished sculpting the clay; it now bore the likeness of a Soviet infantryman. He drew symbols on its forehead, then set it on the chessboard on which Katya and Mariya stood.

And the monoliths sprang to life.

"Halt!" A rifle barrel was leveled at Katya. She looked up at a Russian lieutenant, three meters tall from her perspective. "Drop your weapon!"

Andrei's handgun clattered to the floor.

"What do you have, Lieutenant?" asked a shrill voice some distance away.

"Intruders, sir!" said the lieutenant.

"Send them here!"

The lieutenant herded them with his rifle. Mariya tried to get away, but the soldier was too quick. He caught her with one arm and pushed her back.

They were passed to a political officer, lines of self-righteousness etched in his face, a mammoth copy of *The Communist Manifesto* under one arm. He pointed onward, gazing down imperiously.

Katya sensed her opportunity, and with a sudden lunge shoved Mariya off the board. "Run, Mariya!" She tried to jump off herself, but the political officer stomped her down with his boot.

"Shoot her!" cried the shrill voice. Several guns cocked. Katya saw Mariya cringe—but then a barrier came down between her and harm. It was Yoshua's hand.

Weapons fired at the hand, others at his face, raising sparks from his spectacles. Yoshua did not even blink. He said, "This girl has nothing to do with your war. Nor does the other young lady. Release her to me, please."

Silence fell as the weapons were lowered and Mariya crept away. Katya struggled for breath.

Then the shrill voice said, "Bring her to me!"

The boot released her, prodded her in the ribs. "Go."

"No, idiot, carry her to me! Do some real work for a change!"

But instead of the political officer's cold hands, Katya felt another's, larger, gentler. Turning, she saw a woman, four meters

tall. Uniformed like the rest, she had her blonde tresses tucked beneath an officer's cap.

And the woman, seeing her face, stopped short. "Katya?"

"What are you waiting for?" said the shrill voice. It belonged to a long-necked man in a general's uniform. "Give her to me!"

The queen turned to him. "Sir, I know this woman; her husband commanded my old unit. She's not a soldier."

"You think I care about her combat prowess!?" He pointed at Yoshua. "She's friends with that thing!"

The giant chuckled. "You think *I* am in charge here?" he asked. "You think I have nothing better to do than watch thirty-two golems shoot each other to ribbons?"

The king stared at Yoshua, his Adam's apple bobbing. Yoshua merely smiled and waited.

Then: "He's bluffing! Give her to me!"

The queen looked at Katya. She closed her eyes. "No."

And she hurled Katya from the board.

As she tumbled along, a thud shook the air as Yoshua's hand came down to protect her. Three shots rang out.

"*What the hell are you doing!?*"

"She disobeyed a direct order, sir! Treason is death!"

"*I needed her for the war, damn you!*"

Three more shots. Then silence.

Katya rose, fighting for balance. She peered around Yoshua's hand at the chessboard. The queen lay dead, shot in the base of the skull. The political officer was also dead. The Nazis on the other side were looking on with amused interest.

Katya found Mariya crouching some distance away. "Are you all right?"

"You might want this." Mariya produced Andrei's handgun, handling it through the sleeve of her dress. "I palmed it when that knight looked away." She then produced some rather large coins and smirked. "Got some change too, if you want it."

Katya took the gun. She looked back at the chessboard. "That poor woman...."

Yoshua reached forward and took the corpse. He wiped the blood off it with his thumb. "Many think I create these figures," he said, studying the body. "My hands mold them, yes, but I am only—how do you say it—taking dictation?"

He began to chant, and the corpse became clay once more; he molded it, shaped it. He closed his eyes, as if needing only touch to know the shape of his work. When he was done, he set it down, etched symbols on its forehead, and there stood the Russian queen, alive again, breathing.

She looked around, until her eyes saw.... "Katya?"

An awkward silence followed. Then gunfire erupted—but it was only the Nazis attacking the Russians. The battle soon became a slaughter.

"Come away, ladies," said Yoshua, pushing the chessboard aside.

As they hurried toward safety, Katya turned to the queen. "You knew my husband?"

"I transferred out of his unit a short time ago." She offered her hand. "I am Olga Mikhailovna."

Katya took it, her fingers disappearing in Olga's. "Thank you for helping me," she said.

Olga addressed Yoshua. "Thank *you*, sir."

Yoshua smiled. "I perform the tasks assigned to me. We all have our purpose, here on the Train."

Katya hesitated. "Olga...when did you last see my husband?"

Olga blinked. "It...it was when he dismissed me from his unit." She looked down at Katya, shrugged. "He seemed well at the time. Has something happened to him?"

Katya explained the situation, as well as she understood it; Olga's eyes widened with alarm. "Would you help us find him?" Katya asked then.

"Of course. Your husband is a good man. I am proud to have served with him."

"We'd best get going," said Mariya. She turned to Yoshua. "Will you help us to the floor, please?"

"Certainly," said Yoshua. "But I wouldn't go to the aisle if I were you. From what I'm hearing, the war is coming this way. The Engineers are beating the Machinists back."

"What do you suggest?"

Rising, Yoshua opened another door in the side wall. Katya thought it should lead to the next sleeping compartment, but she saw only darkness.

"Where does it go?"

"That depends on who enters." Yoshua gathered the women in his hands. "You know...Mariya, is it? I remember someone looking very much like you coming here during the last war."

Mariya's eyes widened. "Is she still alive?"

"I haven't heard from her in quite a while." Yoshua shrugged. "It's all happening again, just like last time. The Engineers bring a prisoner aboard the engine and the war begins. But that bodes well for the Machinists. Now they know they must kill the lead Engineer."

"That's how the last war ended?" Katya asked.

"Yes."

"What happened to the prisoner?"

Yoshua hesitated. "I understand he died, miss."

Katya's throat went dry. Yoshua set them all on the carpet.

"Shall we?" said Olga.

They went through the door. The bloodbath on the chessboard continued behind them. Gunshots and screaming accompanied the women into darkness.

III: Dining Car

New sounds of violence, deafening in pitch, met their ears as they proceeded—war cries and sword clashes punctuated by gunfire. Katya and Olga readied their weapons. Mariya hid behind Katya's knees.

Light streamed toward them from under a thick, dark curtain. They could see shadows moving, and Katya felt the battle pounding through her shoes.

Olga went forward, knelt by the curtain, and peered underneath.

As Katya watched, she saw Olga freeze where she knelt, as still as marble, transfixed. Then she began to tremble.

"Olga?" Katya called.

The lieutenant wrenched herself away. She ran past Katya and Mariya without a word and buried her face against the wall.

Katya and Mariya approached. "Olga, what is it?" asked Katya.

Olga turned to her, tears streaming down her face. "I...I can't explain it, Katya," she said, sobbing. "I...don't know why...." She gestured helplessly toward the curtain.

Mariya tugged Katya's sleeve. "I think we'd best see for ourselves."

They went to the curtain and looked underneath. It turned out to be a tablecloth; the companions were hidden beneath a table fixed to the wall of what seemed to be the dining car. And about that table was strewn all manner of carnage.

Twenty dead Machinists littered the floor. Four still stood, fighting—with muscular and hydraulic might—at hopeless odds against a dozen winged creatures of alabaster white with blood on their claws. These new combatants were humanoid in shape, with huge feathered wings black as coal unfurling from snowy shoulder blades.

They all looked like Olga. One flicked its talons, spilling a Machinist's bowels.

Katya felt a desperate grip on her arm. "Katya...you *must* listen to me—"

She wheeled on Mariya. "*What is going on here?*"

"Those are the Engineers. They only *look* like Olga, just like the Machinists only *look*—"

"Why?" Katya brandished Andrei's sidearm. "The Machinists look like Andrei for a *reason*! *Those* things look like *her* for a *reason*! *Why?*"

"I don't know! Father only told me so much! Please...."

Katya stormed over to the still-sobbing Olga. "What happened between you and Andrei?"

Olga shook her head. "Nothing! I swear, I don't know—"

"You know *something*! She leveled her weapon at Olga's eyes. "*Tell me!*"

Olga reached for her own weapon—then stopped herself. She moved her hand away from the holster and straightened. She took a deep breath. "I served in your husband's unit. He was a captain. I was a lieutenant. A few days ago, I transferred to another unit. We parted on friendly terms, Katya. There was no bad blood between us, nor anything wrong with him as far as I could tell. I haven't seen him since." She pointed through the tablecloth. "Katya, I would *never* do that to—"

Something plunged through the tablecloth to her right. Two Machinists, each as tall as Olga. With lights mounted on their arms, they scanned the semi-darkness. "Halt!" said a hydraulic voice.

Katya trained her weapon on the newcomers. Olga unholstered hers. Mariya scurried behind them.

"Ease up, Corporal," said the other Machinist, stepping into the corporal's line of fire. "These people aren't the objective."

Katya saw that he looked nothing like Andrei. He had light-grey eyes in a chiseled face. That had to mean something—but Katya had no idea what.

"We can't just let them go, Sergeant!" said the corporal, who did look like Andrei.

"These are not Engineer agents," said the sergeant. "That's not their way. They do everything up front and by their own hand."

The corporal hesitated. "Yes...well.... Look at *her*!" He shone his light on Mariya. "That *has* to be General Ada's daughter!"

Mariya paled. "What?" Katya sensed a freezing dread in Mariya's voice. "What was that name?"

Then Katya heard a new voice speaking, issuing orders to the Engineers. A female voice, deep and authoritative.

"See for yourself," said the corporal.

Mariya turned, but Katya stopped her. "We'll go together," she said. "Olga...watch them."

Katya slipped her hand into her pocket, and grasped the coin, assigning heads to the sergeant, tails to the corporal. Then she and Mariya went to the tablecloth and looked under.

The new Engineer killed Machinists with a level of dispassion that matched her comrades' frenzy. Like the other Engineers, she had vast raven wings that almost spanned the dining car. But like the Machinists, parts of her body were mechanized. Her left arm and neck were snake-like conglomerations of rods and wires; her legs had been replaced by wide, studded wheels. Steel plates covered half her face. But Katya could see the resemblance to Ada's daughter.

Mariya began to whimper. Katya pulled her back.

The Machinists were still arguing. "You know our mission, Sergeant! Taking her will give us as much leverage as we could hope for!"

"Our supervisors gave their word that we would protect her." The sergeant's tone left no room for argument. "It was because they went back on it that General Ada defected."

"You volunteered for this mission! This is a strange time for second thoughts!"

"I won't bring innocents into this."

"Well, if you won't...." The corporal started toward Mariya. "I will."

"Try it!" said Olga.

The sergeant brought his weapon to bear. "Stop where you are, Corporal."

The corporal hesitated for only an instant. Then, quick as thought, he whirled around, knocking the sergeant's weapon aside. They grappled across the floor.

Olga watched them fight, hesitating. "Should I shoot?"

"Wait." Katya pulled out the coin and slammed it to the floor—heads up. "Now."

Olga frowned incomprehension, but pulled the trigger. The corporal fell like a tower, oozing blood and oil from his wounds.

Only then did Katya realize that the battle outside had stopped. A clicking metal hand lifted the tablecloth. By chance, the light fell solely on Mariya; everyone else remained in darkness.

Mariya swiveled toward the light, feet rooted. "Mother?"

A woman's hand reached forward, gently picked her up, and withdrew.

"*No!*" Olga sprang out from under the table, weapon blazing. "*Die, you murderers!*"

Katya made to follow, but the sergeant stopped her.

"You can't help them," he whispered.

Olga's gunshots ceased. The Engineers' chittering laughter had given way to shrieks, and it sounded for all the world like they were stampeding to get away. But General Ada chastised them. "Stop, all of you! Afraid of such a little thing! You ought to be ashamed!"

Silence. Then: "Take these bodies to the baggage car."

Katya heard rumbling wheels, a door shutting. The Engineers began their work. She stood there in the darkness, hands shaking. "What will she do to them?"

"I don't know. Never thought she would defect." He looked at the corporal's body. "What I want to know is why we're still here. She had to know there were more of us."

Katya heaved a wet sigh. "What is your mission, Sergeant?"

"The last war ended when General Ada killed the lead Engineer. That's my mission now."

"To kill General Ada?"

He shook his head. "The lead Engineer never leaves the engine. General Ada is just her right hand." He looked at Katya. "What's your mission, miss?"

"My only concern is my husband," said Katya. "He is held prisoner aboard the engine."

The sergeant bit his lip.

Katya could see his unspoken thought. "I know the prisoner in the last war died," she said. "Could you tell me how?"

He hesitated. "I...understand that his heart failed, miss." He spoke matter-of-factly, but softly. Katya fell silent.

"It seems we'll be on the same path." The sergeant offered his hand. "I'm Sgt. Berk. Shall we go together, if only to keep from stepping on each other's toes?"

Katya paused, looking at his thin face, his light-grey eyes. "Every Machinist I've seen looks like my husband. Except you. Why?"

"I've wondered that myself, miss," Sgt. Berk replied. "I don't know."

Katya saw honesty in his face. She grasped his hand. "My name is Katya."

"I'm sorry about your friends," he said.

Hearing this, Katya walked over and picked up the coin. "There is something I can do for one of them." She assigned heads to Olga, tails to Mariya. She thought of choosing between them, but finally she just tossed it.

Tails. So Mariya, at least, would survive.

Katya picked up the coin. "We can hide on one of the bodies," she said. "The Engineers will take us to the baggage car." Sgt. Berk nodded his approval.

They hid in the barrel of a Machinist's arm weapon. There they waited, Sgt. Berk inspecting his machinery, Katya fidgeting with the coin, while the Engineers worked. Then they felt a surge of movement, and they were on their way.

They braced themselves against the sides of the barrel. When they left the dining car, the wind of the Train's passage became a shrill howl at the wide mouth of the weapon, like the wails of the damned. Katya, unable to cover her ears, clenched her teeth in pain.

Then they were taken inside and dumped.

IV: Baggage Car

A dim light shone outside the barrel. Chill air wafted in to them, smelling of wood and dust and metal. They crept to the mouth and looked around.

A lantern on the ceiling created a world of shadows, thrown by boxes and crates and bodies. The door opened and they ducked back.

When the Engineers left again, Katya pointed to a space between a crate and the wall. "Let's make for that," she whispered. Sgt. Berk agreed, and they dashed across the floor.

By the time the Engineers returned, Sgt. Berk and Katya were well on their way down the car. The ample cover enabled them to take their time; at one point, they stopped to listen to the Engineers talking. But the creatures only spoke of the task at hand.

As Katya went along, she noticed names on the crates and boxes and chests, but she didn't really give the labels much thought until, when they had almost reached the far end, she saw, on an oblong box of polished wood: *FOR ANDREI YERECHENKO.* "Sergeant, stop!" She pointed. "That's my husband's name." Her heart sank. The box was a coffin. "We...have to get this open."

Sgt. Berk had doubt on his face.

"I need to know if he's in there!" Katya insisted.

"Ma'am, this could be a trap. General Ada has your friends. They could have told her about your husband."

"Do you really think she would?" Katya snapped. "You still respect her enough not to use her daughter against her! How much did you respect her before she defected?" She realized she was shouting and lowered her voice. "Respect like that doesn't come from nowhere."

Sgt. Berk stared back at her.

"Do you really think she would do that?" asked Katya again, trying not to cry.

After a long pause, Sgt. Berk said, "I would like to think she wouldn't."

Katya knew she was grasping at straws. She had been so suspicious of Olga, and Sgt. Berk had even more reason to doubt General Ada. "You're right, Sergeant," she said. "This is probably a trap. But if I don't look in there, that nametag will haunt me

forever." She shrugged. "We can part ways here, if that's what you want."

Sgt. Berk thought about it. Then he shook his head. "No. I hold myself to a higher standard than that. And if this is a trap, you might need my help."

He turned at the sound of Engineers dragging more bodies into the car. "We'll wait until they're gone."

Katya nodded. She counted the seconds until the Engineers left. Then, bracing himself against the wall, Sgt. Berk used his chainsaw mechanism to bore a hole in the coffin.

Katya trembled, caught between caution and need. If Andrei was in there, did that mean he was dead? But that couldn't be what this was all about. He would hardly be the first man to die in combat. No, there had to be something—

I am sorry, Katya.

—something more.

Sgt. Berk was through within seconds. Activating his light, he thrust his head through the aperture and looked around. Then he climbed inside and held his hand out for Katya.

The padding made it difficult to maintain balance. As Katya had guessed, the coffin was occupied: a pair of shod feet protruded from the pants of a Soviet Army uniform. But the feet seemed proportionally smaller than she thought Andrei's would be.

"Look there," said Sgt. Berk. He focused his light on the body's hand. It was small, delicate, thin-fingered. A woman's hand.

Katya said, "We need to see the face."

Sgt. Berk led the way. It took time to sidle between the leg and the padding. When they reached the hand, Katya saw nothing to identify it, no rings, scars, or markings. So she couldn't put a name to her sense of unease.

They crawled over the hand and along the arm. Katya craned her neck, trying to glimpse the face, but could see nothing. Then, when Sgt. Berk reached the shoulder, he froze and trained his light forward. "Ma'am?" He beckoned to Katya.

She crawled up beside him. Sitting in the corner, head bowed between her knees, was Olga. She might have been sleeping.

"Olga?"

She looked up, and blinked. There was a bleakness to her expression that Katya didn't like.

"Olga, are you all right?"

Olga said, "You tell me," and gestured to the corpse beside her.

Sgt. Berk turned his light toward its face. It was Olga's.

"I'm dead," said Olga, still sitting in the corner. "I remember it all now. The Germans advanced, we engaged them, and I caught machine-gun fire full in the chest. I'm dead—" Her voice cracked and tears welled up in her eyes.

Katya rushed forward. Olga wrapped her in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry," Katya whispered as Olga rocked her. "I'm sorry."

"None of this is your fault, Katya. I was dead before we even met. It was only after dying that I came here."

Dead before they even met. Katya thought of the coin. What if it had fallen the other way?

"I'm sorry I suspected you, Olga. I should have known better."

Olga went ominously still. "No, Katya," she said. "You were right."

But before she could go on, a commotion arose outside the coffin. "Search this car!" General Ada's voice, no question. "Mariya says they're in here!"

The companions scrambled to hide, but the coffin opened and General Ada looked down upon them.

Everyone froze, staring up at Ada's human eye. Her mechanical arm shone silver. Gears whirred softly as her wide wheels adjusted to maintain her balance. The flesh of her face betrayed no expression, but, seeing it, Katya felt no fear.

General Ada extended her human arm. The fingers opened and something came out. It was Mariya.

As the dwarf ran to Katya, General Ada found Sgt. Berk with her gaze. She whispered,

"Do not kill the lead Engineer."

Then she looked at Mariya. Katya thought she saw love in that half-metal face, so much like her daughter's. The General kissed the index finger on her human hand. She reached down and touched Mariya's cheek.

Then she closed the coffin. "Incompetent fools! You let them escape!"

Weapons fire, bodies hitting the floor. The rumbling of studded wheels, a door closing.

Sgt. Berk climbed to the lid and opened it a notch. "They're dead. She's gone."

"Mariya?" Katya asked. "Your mother...?"

"Is still my mother," said Mariya, "whatever else she is. She's trying to help us, Katya."

"By showing me that I'm *dead*?" Olga exclaimed.

"It's a truth you needed to know. A truth we *all* needed to know in order to understand what's happening here." She turned to Katya. "There are some things I should return to you."

She produced Katya's locket, still broken at the hinge, and Andrei's letter. She opened her mouth to speak. But then she smiled. "I don't have to steal things anymore," she finally murmured. "She touched me. Just a mother's touch was all I needed." She looked up at Katya, and there were tears in her eyes, but she still smiled. "I don't have to...."

"Yes, Mariya, I understand," said Katya gently. "But you need to focus. Now, what were you going to say?"

Mariya cleared her throat. "Mother examined these. It confirmed many of her suspicions." She took Katya's hand. "Everything depends on you, Katya. Your husband, the war—everything. We must find both halves of Andrei's soul and make him one again."

Katya stared. "How?"

"First...there's another truth you don't know yet." She turned to Olga. "Isn't there?"

Olga looked away. "Katya...I—"

"Wait." Mariya touched Olga's knee. "I can help you show her. If you will take my hand?"

Olga complied. Mariya offered her other hand to Katya. "Close your eyes."

- - -

"Captain?"

Katya found herself in a sparsely-furnished office. There, sitting at a utilitarian desk, was Andrei.

He looked up and smiled. "Ah, Lieutenant, come in. You wish to speak with me?"

"Yes, sir." Katya heard Olga's voice, coming as if from her own lungs. "Could we speak privately?"

Andrei's smile faded, but he gave a silent nod. Olga locked the door behind her. She carried papers in her left hand.

They faced each other across the desk. The silence between them lasted just a little too long.

"Sir...I—"

"Wait.... Before we say anything else, I think I should show you something." He opened a drawer and took out a picture in a frame. "This is Katya, my wife. We've been married four years now."

Olga looked at the wedding photograph. "She is beautiful."

"Yes." Andrei looked at Olga. "And I would never do anything to hurt her."

Olga nodded. Then she said, "I have requested a transfer." She dropped the papers onto the desk. "Everything is in order, sir. It only requires your signature."

Andrei looked at the papers as at a regrettable duty. "Of course." He retrieved a pen and scribbled his name. "There you are."

Olga took the papers. "Thank you." After a pause, she added, "It has been an honor to serve with you, sir."

"Good luck in your new unit."

Olga stood to attention and saluted. Andrei rose and returned the salute.

Then Olga turned, unlocked the door, and left the office.

- - -

"You were falling in love," Katya said after Mariya released their hands.

"We agreed to end it before someone got hurt," replied Olga. She looked pleadingly at Katya. "Your husband is a good man. I would never do what those...*things* were—"

"I know," said Katya. "But we still don't know why the Engineers *look* like you." She turned to Mariya. "What else did your mother say?"

"She wouldn't answer all my questions. She said it isn't enough for us to *know* what's happening. We will have to understand it." Mariya sighed. "There is one other thing." She reached inside her sleeve and produced a key. "This unlocks a small door in the corner of the baggage car. She said it would take us where we need to go."

Katya tried to think. "Olga," she said at last, "the Engineers seem to fear you."

Olga snorted. "They couldn't get away from me fast enough. It was almost funny."

"Mother said most of the Engineers will be in the sleeping car, beating back the Machinists," said Mariya.

"Still, Olga, I think we'll need you. Will you join us?"

"What else do I have left?"

Katya nodded sadly. "Thank you. Sergeant?"

Sgt. Berk raised the lid with his hydraulic strength and, one by one, they dropped to the floor. Mariya led them past corpses and wooden crates to a corner. There, visible only when Sgt. Berk shone his light on it, stood the door.

Katya reached up and put the key in the lock. "Ready?"

They nodded. She opened the door and they stepped through.

V: Engine

Before them was the engine. Its dimensions seemed normal to Katya. Olga and Berk no longer appeared to be giants, though Mariya was still no taller than a child.

The smokestack belched orange flame. But the cab's interior remained in darkness, and their view of it was blocked by the coal car.

Sgt. Berk checked the roof of the baggage car for signs of ambush. Katya began climbing.

Atop the coal car, she felt the wind of the Train's passage in full force. Peering into the cab, she still could see nothing of consequence. "Sergeant!" she called. "Your light, please!"

The Machinist's mechanical arm snaked over the edge of the car, shining an intense beam into the cab. There, sitting with his bare back mere centimeters from the open door of the furnace, his spread-eagled arms chained to it, was Andrei. His head lolled on his chest.

Katya resisted the urge to run to him. She looked at the coin. Silently, she assigned heads to Andrei, tails to herself. "Sergeant," she called out, "Andrei is here. I need your help."

Sgt. Berk hoisted himself fully onto the coal car as Katya inched toward Andrei. But then a blinding spout of flame erupted from the furnace, impaling Andrei between the shoulder blades. His screams were drowned out by contemptuous laughter.

The flames rushed around Andrei, gathered at a spot a meter in front of him. They merged, coalesced...

...and resolved into an Engineer.

Like the others, it looked like Olga. But this one stood taller than the engine and was crowned with orange flame. It looked at Katya with pure derision.

"You are so damned predictable!" it said. "You had to go after him, like a heroine in a cheap novel." Flames leapt around it. "How pathetically romantic."

Katya stood firm. "Why are you doing this?"

The Engineer looked at Andrei. "Well, *he* isn't going to tell you, is he?" It put a hand to its chest. "I am Lt. Olga Mikhailovna Golikova. I once served in Andrei's unit...and I'm sorry to say, Yekaterina Aleksandrovna, that things got a bit more than friendly between us. But *he*..." It jerked a thumb at Andrei, who was gibbering in excruciation. "...didn't want you to know about it. So he had me transferred to another unit—which, as it turned out, stood in the teeth of the German invasion. I was the first to die. And all because *he*..." It punched the air, and flames again enveloped Andrei. "*...didn't want to be found out!*"

"That's not true!" said Olga, from atop the coal car.

The Engineer froze. The indignation vanished from its face and was replaced by mortal dread. "What...? How...?"

"The transfer was my idea!" Olga went on. She had unholstered her weapon, and now brought it to bear. "Andrei only signed the papers." She stepped forward. "If you're going to accuse him, do it in your name, not mine!"

The Engineer began to tremble. Its face melted, dissolved, its features blurring.

"Who are you?" Olga demanded. "Show yourself!"

"No!" the Engineer spat. "*I* am Olga Mikhailovna! I—"

"*Show yourself!*" Olga fired a warning shot into the air.

The Engineer retaliated with a shaft of fire—but wildly, almost hitting Katya. Startled off balance, Katya teetered for a moment, then fell off the Train.

She screamed—but something caught her ankle and she collided painfully with the side of the coal car.

She heard Olga's voice over her agony. "I can't pull you up by myself! Help me!"

Pain beat against Katya's skull like a piston. "Save yourself, Olga!"

"I'm already dead! Hurry, before the sergeant loses more ground!"

Finally, straining against pain and weariness, Katya struggled upward and caught Olga's free hand. Olga dragged her back atop the coal car just as Sgt. Berk fell dead, disemboweled. The lead Engineer stood over him, talons slick with blood.

But the Engineer, face twisted with rage and bitterness, now looked like Katya. And when it saw her standing there, it once again began to tremble. "No!" it whimpered. "No, I killed you! Stay away!"

Its face melted again, dissolved from Katya's semblance to Olga's, then back, rippling, boiling. And Katya finally understood. *You must find both halves of his soul.*

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "And you're not going to harm me."

"Get back!" The Engineer raised its talons as its face strained for definition. "Or I'll—"

"Andrei!" Katya stepped up to the Engineer and slapped it hard. "*Stop it!*"

And there was Andrei where the Engineer had been, crumpling to the floor, weeping.

"Stop punishing yourself," Katya whispered.

The engine's fire had died down, and they could see only by the stars. Katya looked at the chains binding one half of Andrei's soul to the furnace. They were rusted, brittle, fragile as Andrei himself. Katya climbed into the cab and broke them with her bare hands.

"Help me get them to the baggage car." She and Olga carried the two Andreis across the coal car to the ladder, stepping gingerly over Sgt. Berk's body. Mariya held the baggage car door open, and they laid the two on the floor.

"Katya?" one said; the other moaned incoherently.

Katya spoke in soothing tones. "It's all right, Andrei. You're not to blame."

The two Andreis sobbed in unison.

Someone knocked politely on the rearward door. "Come in, Mother," said Mariya.

The door opened and General Ada entered. Behind her were two Machinists and two Engineers who looked like Andrei.

"See that the engine is running smoothly," she said to the Machinists, and they rumbled through the forward door. To the

Engineers she said, "Wait outside." She closed the door. "Well done, Katya." She looked around. "Sergeant Berk?"

"He's dead," said Katya. "He followed your orders, General."

Hearing this, General Ada blinked slowly. "He was never one with the other Machinists," she said. "He valued integrity above obedience. Perhaps that was why we understood each other so well."

"General...." Olga indicated the two Andreis. "What is to be done here? He has suffered so much because of me."

General Ada rolled between the two Andreis and put a hand, one of flesh, one mechanical, on each of their foreheads. After a moment, she addressed Katya and Olga, saying, "I understand he leapt ahead of his unit, firing his weapon at any German within range. It was only a matter of time before they got him. But his spirit was broken, so the body was almost irrelevant."

Katya looked at her husband's bodies. Finally she reached out and caressed the nearest face. "Andrei?"

His eyes opened. "Katya...."

His spirit is broken, so the body is almost irrelevant.

She looked at the coin in her left hand. Then at Olga. "You loved him enough to let him go," she said. "How could I do less?" She assigned heads to Andrei's soul, tails to his body. Then she slammed the coin to the floor. Heads up.

Olga buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Andrei...."

General Ada touched Katya's shoulder. "Andrei's soul will still require time and work to mend," she said. "But we who remain on the Train will do that work." She turned to Olga. "Will we not?"

Olga, speechless, hidden, simply nodded.

Katya wept. She wept for Andrei. She wept for Olga, the innocent cause of so much heartbreak. She wept for Marko and Sgt. Berk, caught in the crossfire. She wept for Andrei's child, the little bear, who would never be.

And she wept for herself.

When all tears were spent, Ada reluctantly put her daughter, and Katya, off the Train.

- - -

Years later, after the war, Katya and Mariya returned to Stalingrad. Katya brought her locket and Andrei's letter. She read it once or twice, but mostly she looked at the bears.

The city had recovered well. People walked to the factories, shopped in the Univermag department store—where Katya went to see the plaque commemorating the surrender of the German Sixth Army in 1943—or strolled along the banks of the Volga. But Katya saw no one she had known before the siege.

After touring the city, Katya and Mariya went to Mamaev Hill. As they strode upward, surrounded on either side by sculpted battle scenes, depictions of both soldier and civilian, they found their forward view dominated by a statue, more than fifty meters tall, of Mother Russia. Sword held aloft, cape billowing from her shoulders, she voiced a silent battle cry, urging Soviet soldiers everywhere to charge.

Katya and Mariya looked at each other and smiled. The statue looked more than a little like Olga.

Holding Mariya's hand, Katya gazed up at it and thought of Olga, and Andrei, and Marko, and Sgt. Berk, and General Ada... and the coin.

The coin. She couldn't help wondering....

Hitler. Stalin. After Stalingrad, one had fallen to his utter ruin, while the other lived on to expand his mighty Communist Empire.

Was the coin tossed, Katya wondered, or brought down deliberately in Stalin's favor?

Midnight Sun C. Nelson

Flower as Big as the Sky

Matt Dennison

Early one morning near the beginning of summer, Mister Jones opened the back door of his house and stepped into the light. He angled the brim of his hat to the sun, lit, tamped, and relit his pipe, then picked up the shovel that leaned against the house and continued on to the far corner of his lot. Once he'd begun, he dug without pause, stopping only for lunch and the lemonade that Mrs. Jones brought out every hour or so, for it was, I recall, a frightfully hot summer. Our backyards were separated only by a low fence that Mr. Jones had put in several years before, and we had a full and easy view of this seemingly commonplace event.

"Looks like Mister Jones is putting in more roses for Mrs. Jones," I remember Ma saying as she looked out the window by our breakfast table. Only now am I able to appreciate the wistful tone of envy for the fortunate Mrs. Jones that I heard whenever Ma and her lady friends spoke of our neighbors—and my father's sinking a little deeper into his chair, shaking out his newspaper, and making vague grunting noises in reply. But as the days passed and the digging continued, our curiosity was turned a little to the side of confusion, for it became obvious Mister Jones was not planting roses this time.

"A swimming pool!" I heard Ma excitedly telling Mrs. Crenshaw on the phone one Saturday afternoon, while my father grumbled and shifted about in the next room until he finally yelled out that no man, not even Mister Jones, would dig a swimming pool all by himself.

"Well, then, Harold," Ma shot back, her hand clamped tightly over the phone, "if you're so smart, what *is* he doing out there?" When all we heard was the snappish flip of a newspaper page, she said, "Just as I thought," and raised her hand from the phone. "As I was saying, Eunice, he's building a swimming pool. Of course, all by himself! That's the kind of man he *is*. Yes, she most certainly is...." She shook her head in sorrowful agreement.

"He is not building a swimming pool!" we heard my father call out as he marched into the kitchen, trailing sections of newspaper behind him. Ma sighed and slowly covered the phone once more.

"You couldn't force a convicted child killer to dig a swimming pool all by himself in this heat. They'd call that cruel *and* unusual. Now, I'll tell you what he's doing." He moved to the window, pulled back the curtain, and stood there, his angry look dissolving, softening into one of simple bewilderment. "He's digging a hole."

"And *in* the hole goes...?" Ma said, her smile as stiff as her freshly-done hair.

"How would I know?" he asked, calmly spreading his hands. "Why do I have to know? Why does anyone have to know? Maybe he just likes digging holes. Not swimming pools, but holes." He pointed at both of us. "A pretty big hole," he added, his finger beginning to conduct some wavering melody, "but...." He frowned, spun with the curtain in his grip, and looked outside once more before quickly turning back. "Well, God forbid that a man dig a hole without all you women going crazy," he finally muttered as he shuffled past us on his way back to the den.

Ma rolled her eyes and slowly removed her hand from the phone. "Eunice, darling, I'm so sorry you had to hear that. No? Well, Harold just now informed me that Mister Jones is digging that hole simply for the fun of it. Why, yes! Me too! As if a man like Mister Jones would ever do something that silly. I'm telling you it's a *swimming pool*."

When the hole was so deep that all we could see was the top of Mister Jones's shovel as it tossed out the dirt, the digging stopped and the building began. A strange-looking platform like a miniature diving board started to grow from the edge of the hole, which only added credence to the swimming-pool theory, much to my father's disgust. Of course, no one would do the sensible thing and ask Mister Jones what he was building. Instead, the neighborhood men would gather in our backyard in the evening, slowly gravitating toward the fence as they talked about baseball, wives, and the weather, until one of them would suddenly lean his head back and call out, "When you gonna get that thing done...Mister Jones?"—the 'Mister Jones' part coming just a bit late.

And Mister Jones would smile, wipe the dirt from his hands, and say, "Oh, any day now, any day."

Soon, The Thing—as we kids took to calling it—reached a height of about ten feet, still without revealing its true purpose. And although this was starting to cause quite a bit of consternation among the adults—what with the wives already starting to want

one and the men, on top of having to pretend to know what it was, now having to think of reasons for not building one themselves—we kids thought it was the greatest thing that had ever happened. It had angles and arms sticking out every which way, ropes and pulleys and winches—just about every mechanical gizmo we could imagine. All anyone could say for sure was that it was put together by a true craftsman, that possibly it was the finest, sturdiest, most practical thing Mister Jones had ever built. Ma had to give up her conviction that it was going to be a swimming pool, but the satisfaction of knowing my father hadn't the slightest idea either of what it was going to be soon restored her spirits.

As the days passed, Mister Jones's early-morning whistle began sounding downright jaunty when he walked out of his house at precisely 8:05 a.m.—upon hearing which my father would drain his coffee, yawn once, and stand, and my mother begin to clear the breakfast table. And when he stopped work at 6 p.m., Ma and I would start setting the table for dinner. Never even thought about why; we were just moved by the spirit of correctness that emanated from next door. Simply put, Mister Jones had become the calming clock and measure of our existence.

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One day near the end of that summer, I was sitting on the fence watching Mister Jones drive nails into The Thing with stronger-than-usual strokes of his hammer when he looked up and asked if I wanted to give him a hand. Did I! For the next two hours, I carried lumber, fetched nails, and held boards as he sawed and hammered, trying hard to give myself a splinter or at least a blister to show the guys as proof of my involvement with The Thing. Finally, Mister Jones put down his hammer and considered his work.

"Well, Billy, I think that about does it," he said as he took off his hat and slowly fanned his face.

At first I thought he was only through with me for the day. But the way he stood there and looked at The Thing made me feel he meant something more.

"Do you mean it's *done*?" I blurted. I had come to believe that he would work on it forever, continually adding to it until it was simply thick with mechanical beauty and wonder.

"Yep." He placed his hat back on his head at a slightly higher angle, then lightly slapped his hands together. "I believe that's that."

Suddenly I felt like running in circles and yelling, 'It's done! It's done!' but something held me back. I think it was mostly that I still had no idea what it was. To tell the truth, I didn't really want it to be anything in particular, especially not anything practical. I don't think any of us kids did. That way it could be whatever *we* wanted it to be. But then I thought of how no one had been brave enough to ask Mister Jones what it was, and how he might feel bad about that. So, with fingers crossed, I asked.

"Well, if I had to name it," he said, feeling for his pipe, "I'd call it a rocket."

"A *rocket*! Wait till the guys hear about this!" I cried out. "Are you gonna fly in it?"

"Yessir, I believe I will," he said, and crossed his arms.

"Would it be all right if I watched? I could help you just like I did today and I promise I won't get in the way and it'd be...*good*!" was all that came out as I froze and boiled in my excitement.

He looked down at me, then turned back to the rocket while he filled and lit his pipe. "No sir," he replied, smoke curling around his words, "I'm afraid it's going to be too late, much too late at night for that."

"Oh," I said, the very life in me stilled by his simple words of denial. And though I already knew that the best things were always happening when I couldn't be there, because it was too early or too late, too hot or too cold—always too much or too little of something—this refusal hit hard. "Will you come back?" I asked, shading the sun from my eyes as I looked up at him. He turned around, and, though I couldn't see him very well because of the smoke and the hard shadows, I could tell he was studying me.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll bring you some flowers. Would you like that?"

"Oh, Mister Jones, they don't have flowers in space," I said, thinking he was making fun of me.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you," he said, and briefly smiled at me for the first time I could remember. Just then Ma called me in for lunch. Mister Jones and I looked at each other. "This stays between us, son," he said, releasing me back to the world.

"Okay," I heard myself say. I struggled with the possibilities of this impossible turn of events, slowly backing away and then turning and running to my house. Not only was I not going to

get to see him take off, now I couldn't even tell anyone about it. But my spirits lifted a little at the thought of having a homemade rocket practically in my own backyard. Of course, the first thing I wanted to do was tell my parents, but at the thought of breaking a promise made to Mister Jones, I knew I would have to be strong. Real strong, as I was about to find out.

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"What's the matter, Billy?" Ma asked as I sat in front of my hamburger and stared out the window at Mister Jones in his backyard. "Didn't you have a good time helping out?"

"Oh, yeah. I had a great time."

"That's nice. Not everyone gets a chance to work with Mister Jones. You just might be the first." She gave me a knowing look. "So keep your eyes open and maybe he'll let you help tomorrow, too," she continued, spooning salad onto my plate.

"No, he won't." I started pushing the salad into little piles.

"Why, honey," she said, the salad spoon dangling in midair, "you didn't get in any trouble, did you?"

"No, Ma, it's just that it's.... Well, it's done," I said, looking up.

"Done? That's funny," she said, gazing out over the fence. "I kind of forgot about it ever getting done. Don't look like anything I've ever seen before," she added with a dismissive wave of the spoon.

"It's not." I looked back down at my plate.

"Why, Billy, sounds like you know what it is," Ma said, looking at me quizzically.

"I do," I replied sadly.

There was a slight pause, and then she beamed as if she had just deriddled the sphinx. "Well, then," she said, "tell us what it *is*." Bits of salad fell from the metronomic spoon as she fed each word to the air.

"Oh, Ma! I can't. He made me promise not to tell."

"He *did*?" She snorted, dropping the spoon back into the salad bowl. My father looked at his empty plate and sighed. "Harold, did you hear what your son just said? That Mister Jones won't let Billy tell his very own mother what that crazy-looking thing in his backyard is. I just might give that man a call and let him know what I think about that," she said, craning her neck to get a better look out the window.

"What is it, son?" my father asked, lowering his paper.

"Dad! I just told you I can't tell!"

"All right. Now that that's settled, could we have a little food or must we all slowly starve to death?" he asked, staring at my mother.

"Harold! How can you just sit there when that man is torturing your own flesh and blood? Can't you see how upset he's got him? Baby," she cooed, putting her hand on my arm, "I know you'll feel better if you tell Mommy all about it. I bet you'll be able to eat that nice, big hamburger I made just for you because I know it's your favorite."

"Oh, Ma, I'm sorry, but I really can't. You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Not believe you! Of course I'd believe you! I know you wouldn't tell a fib to your very own mother! Now, tell Mommy what it is so we can all eat this nice big lunch I worked so hard on." She peered out at Mister Jones again. "You're keeping Mommy waiting, dear." I just sat there. "Billy! Tell me what it is!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Gladys," my father said, smacking his paper on the table. "Leave the boy alone! He's already told you he promised not to tell."

"Harold!" she shot back, her eyes flashing. "We are his *parents*! We have a right to know what our son has been getting into! Not that I think you've been getting into anything, Billy," she added, giving me a quick smile. "It's just, well, you've got us worried now, your father and me, and I can tell you're unhappy, too. It's nothing bad, is it? Is that why you're afraid to tell us? Is it something bad, darling?" She squeezed my arm so hard I couldn't pull away.

"No, Ma, it's not bad," I answered.

She slowly released her grip. "Well, then, why can't you tell us what it is?" she asked, giving me a truly puzzled look. When I didn't say anything, she looked back out at Mister Jones. "I know," she said, turning to me, "I'll guess and then you tell me when I'm right. Well, you won't even have to do that," she added, looking out the window again. "Just tell me when I'm wrong. That way you won't really be breaking your promise."

"Oh, Ma—"

"You just be quiet, dear, and let me think. Hmm...." She fingered the curtain and squinted out the window. I was beginning

to think she had forgotten what she was doing when she suddenly spun around with a look of triumph in her eyes.

"I know what it is," she declaimed in sing-song rhythm, lowering her finger straight at me and ending with a wink. "It's one of them giant plant holders like they had back in Babylon. He is reduplicating the Hanging Gardens of Babylon right in his own backyard! Well! I don't know why he has to make such a big secret out of *that*. It's probably a surprise for Mrs. Jones. That's just the kind of man he is," she added, with a slight sniff in my father's direction.

"No, Ma, that's not it."

"No? What do you mean, *no*? Anyone with an ounce of brains can see that's what it is. Have you even *looked* out the window?" When I didn't say anything, she rolled her eyes and sighed. "Well then, we're packing up and *moving on*."

"You amaze me, Gladys, you really do," my father intoned from behind his paper. "Though sometimes I think that's not the word for it."

She waved him off with a flip of her fingers. "Shh. I'm thinking."

"I can't eat this right now, Ma," I said. "I think I'll go up to my room."

"You sit right there, young man, until I figure this out! Now, let me see...." A few seconds passed as she stared out the window and I pushed the food around on my plate. Then she swiveled back around, her eyes glowing. "Got it! Oh, I got it now!" She placed both hands flat on the table and leaned forward. "I know why that wonderful man made you promise not to tell me!"

"Not just you, Ma."

"*Because*.... Oh, that nice, nice man!" she exclaimed, practically hopping up and down in her chair. "Harold, do you remember last winter when me and Mrs. Jones were talking across the fence and how I said I'd give anything in the world to have one of them mechanical bird feeders that moves up and down so you can change the food pans and clean them out but how you, of course, would never take the time to make me one because you're always so busy, dear, and work so hard at the office and need your rest? Well, he's gone and done it! He's gone and made me my mechanical bird feeder!" She stopped long enough to catch her breath and straighten her spine before plunging back in. "Oh, I've got to go over there and thank that man right now." She got up from the table and started

fussing with her hair. "Don't know how he's going to move it all the way over here to our place, let alone what that silly hole's for, but.... Oh, I'm so excited!"

"Sit down, Gladys," my father said, helping himself to the salad.

"But Harold, my bird feeder!"

"Sit down, Gladys," he repeated.

"Do you mean?" she asked, starting to sink.

"I mean."

"Oh. Oh, well."

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I took the opportunity to say, "Excuse me!" and run upstairs. I closed the door behind me and rushed to the window. There it was, no longer The Thing, unknown and mysterious, but The Rocket, exalted and proud, the very knowledge of its true nature too dangerous to share. I closed my eyes and imagined it taking off in the dead of night, flames shooting out from its base, and the deafening roar as it slowly moved upward, illuminating more and more of the neighborhood until the last tongue of fire was no longer licking the ground and it had disappeared into the heavens. The sudden roar of my mother's vacuum cleaner advancing down the hallway woke me from my reverie. By the way she lingered around my door, I knew she wasn't done with me yet. I grabbed my glove, put on my cap, and when I heard her pass my door just a little, I pushed it open and ran to the stairs.

"Billy! Where are you going!" I heard from behind me as she snapped off the vacuum at the sight of my escape.

"Big game, Ma. Gotta run!" I yelled back, taking the steps two at a time. I ran out the front door and then stopped and walked slowly around to the back of our house for another look at The Rocket. Mister Jones was still putting away his tools. I leaned against the fence and watched him until he looked up, then gave him a little wave and ran all the way to Joey's house. I knocked on his front door until he came out, a peanut-butter sandwich drooping in his hand.

"Come on, Joey," I said. "Get your glove."

"What is it?" he asked between bites, looking at me through his thick, lopsided glasses.

"Let's *go*!" I tossed the ball into my glove with such force that his mother called down for us to be quiet. "Let's get the guys and get a game up!"

"All right, all right. Relax, will you? What's the hurry, anyway?" he asked, slowly chewing his sandwich.

"I just wanna play. Come on!" I grabbed his glove off the step and shoved it under his arm.

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When the game was over and we were sitting around on the old wooden bleachers, the conversation took its usual turn toward The Thing.

"My mother said it's gonna be a big antenna," Little Stevie said, pushing the hair out of his eyes.

"Antenna? That's the stupidest thing I ever heard!" Tony cried. "How's it gonna be an antenna when it ain't even got no 'lectricity? And besides, it's made all outta wood and ever'body knows an antenna's got plenty of metal in it, *tons* of metal! How else is it gonna 'tract them waves?"

"I don't know," Little Stevie said, looking at the ground.

"Your mom must be *stupit* or something," Tony shot back. "And besides," he smirked, "she wears curlers on her head, so what's she know?"

"I don't know," Little Stevie mumbled. "She just said—"

"Well it ain't, so you can forget what your *mom* said."

"What do you think it is, Tony?" I asked, trying to sound casual, what with all kinds of warning signals going off in my mind about how I should just keep quiet about the whole thing. But I hated Tony so much, I couldn't help myself. And even though he was older than us, and stronger, I was tired of how he always picked on Little Stevie.

"What do I think it is? I'll tell you what I *know* it is," he answered as he looked us over real carefully. "The other day I was walking down Main Street and old Mister Jones come running up behind me, all excited-like. Says he wants to talk to me, says it's important. Says how he couldn't stand all the stupit things he was hearing about his work and how he had decided to tell me what it was so I could straighten all you jerks out so you'd quit being so *stupit*. So after I got him calmed down and promised I wouldn't tell no one but that I'd tell you guys you was stupit and wrong, he told me what it was."

Well, you wouldn't believe the ruckus *that* caused. Everyone was jumping all over the place and begging him to tell. But Tony just sat there until they had all settled down, more or less.

"So that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna tell you. But only if each and every one of you promises on your mother's eyes not to tell no one else. 'Cause if you do, he said he would just tear it all down and use the wood to make his fence so high that none of you could watch him no more. Understood?"

After everyone had promised not to tell, even me—partially because I was half afraid that Mister Jones *had* told him the truth, and partially just to see if it was going to be Tony's biggest lie ever—he said, "All right, then. When it's done, and it ain't done by a long shot, it's gonna be one of them roller coasters like they have at Coney Island, only better. It's gonna have tunnels and everything. It's gonna go up in the sky for half a mile and then all over the neighborhood and down by the school so low you can spit in Miss Thompson's eye. And he said he might even put in a couple of naked women on both sides of the tunnel and have them kiss you when you go by. But!" he added, raising his hand as if to quiet a protesting mob. "He's gonna put me in charge of selling tickets, and if I say you don't get on, you don't get on. Understood?"

I looked over at Joey, who was sitting there with his mouth open, looking off into the sky. I could see his head moving, slowly following the path of the invisible roller coaster as it headed off toward the school and Miss Thompson, an especially attractive target for him. Little Stevie was still looking at the ground. Sammy Tate was, as usual, busy glancing around to see what the others thought before saying anything himself. Then Little Stevie looked up and said, "Wow," and I knew that Tony had at least one convert.

As for me, I didn't know what to think, especially about the naked women. I could not imagine Mister Jones saying either of those words, let alone one right after the other. But one thing I knew for sure was that Mister Jones would never run down Main Street. Tony was lying and that made me mad.

"That's not true and you know it," I said.

He looked at me in surprise. "What do you mean, not true? You calling me a liar? Say it again and I'll bust you in the mouth is what I'll do."

No one had ever challenged Tony before, and believe me, I did not want to be the first, but I couldn't keep quiet, not with the

others believing Mister Jones would run down Main Street to tell Tony, of all people, about naked women and roller coasters. And although I was afraid to look at him, and especially did not want to see that wispy beginning of a mustache, I felt myself growing taller.

"Ah, you're jealous 'cause he told me instead of you," he snarled.

"He did too tell me and it ain't what you said."

"How would *you* know, you little twerp?" His face began to tighten.

"Talk about stupid!" I yelled, gesturing to the skies. "You can't have a roller coaster going a mile up in the air!"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!" I threw back, almost enjoying myself. This was turning out to be easier than I thought, now that I was actually doing it. Like learning how to dive headfirst. Once you've done it, you forget how scared you were.

"Well, what did he tell you it was, then?" he asked with a pretend smile.

Now I remembered why I shouldn't have started this in the first place. "I.... I can't tell you," I mumbled.

"Can't tell 'cause you don't know!" he crowed, looking at the others before he turned back and pointed at me. "He wouldn't tell no little twerp like you nothing anyways. He almost didn't tell me 'cause he especially didn't want *you* to know!"

That was too much.

"Did too!" I yelled, attempting to make up in volume for what my argument lacked in evidence.

"Well then, what is it?" he asked, feigning great patience and interest.

"It's a rocket and I helped build it—*Look at my hands!*—and he's gonna fly it at nighttime when no one's there and he's gonna bring me back some flowers from outer space and he wouldn't ever tell you nothing 'cause you're fat and stupid and *mean*!" I screamed, my arms thrust in his face.

When the hot rush of words ended, I fully expected Tony to clobber me, now that I had told the truth and exposed him. But he only stood there, staring at me like I was crazy. Then he started laughing. "Rocket! Did you hear that? Says it can't be no roller coaster but it can be a rocket! And," he sputtered, "Mister Jones is gonna fly out there and bring him back some *space flowers*! What's

it gonna be," he said, spinning around, mincing his words and trying to stand on his toes like a ballerina. "Red roses from Mars?"

A few of the others started laughing. Sammy Tate looked around nervously, then joined in once he saw it was the thing to do. Pretty soon half of them were up on their toes with their arms above their heads, trying to spin as they cried out, "Roses, red roses from Mars!"

As I stood there, feeling my face grow hot and watching Tony egg the others on, his fat gut swaying under his T-shirt, I got so mad that before I knew it I was flying through the air, fists swinging. I landed on top of Tony and knocked him to the ground, hitting and kicking as hard as I could. I even managed to get in a few punches before he recovered, punched me once real good in the eye, and pinned me to the ground. Suddenly no one was laughing.

"Get off me, you fat, stinking bastard," I panted, not really knowing what the last word meant but sure that Tony was one. "Stupid, stinking bastard," I said over and over.

"Take it back or I'll break your arm!" he yelled. I tried to squirm away but he leaned on me until I cried out in pain. "*Say it!*"

"Fat and stupid, fat and stupid, fat and stupid," was all I said, as fast as I could. He squeezed my arms until tears came to my eyes, but I wouldn't stop saying it until he hit me again.

"Now say it ain't no rocket, neither!"

"Won't," was all that came from between my clenched teeth.

"Say it ain't no rocket!" Tony hissed as the seconds passed and I did not move. "No rocket!" he yelled in my face.

"Aw, come on, Tony, he don't really think it's gonna be no rocket," Joey said, breaking the silence. "He's just trying to make us laugh, that's all. Come on, now." A few more members of the mumble choir joined in, quietly petitioning for my release.

"He's a liar is what he is, and now he ain't *never* gonna ride on my roller coaster, that's for sure!" Tony's voice went strangely high and broke up like he was going to cry or something. I didn't care. I just lay there, feeling my eye swell up, smelling his lousy breath and hating him.

"You little shit," he finally said when he saw I wasn't going to say anything else or try to get away. "Don't know why I'm wasting my time on you." He got up. "You neither!" he added, pointing at Joey, after he had brushed himself off. "You ain't getting on it

neither. Now." He turned around and surveyed the others. "Who else says it ain't no roller coaster?" No one made a sound. "That's right. That's right. 'Cause if *any* of you had said so, I woulda gone and told Mister Jones just to go 'head on and tear it down," he said, with a dramatic wave of his arm over the heads of his chastened disciples.

"Tear it *all* down," he repeated when a few of the guys started to move around a bit. "So watch yourselves." He picked up his bat and pointed it at the offenders. "'Cause I'm watching *you*." Then he turned and smacked our ball over the fence and walked away, whistling.

After Tony left, Little Stevie whispered, "Let's go," to Sammy Tate, and they both slunk off. That gave the others a chance to do the same. Soon there was only me and Joey.

"Why would you go and do something like that?" Joey finally asked as he walked back and forth behind me. "You must be crazy or something. You know it ain't gonna be no rocket." I slowly stood up and started walking home. "Hey! Where you going?" Joey called out.

"Leave me alone," I muttered.

He stopped. "All right," he said. "See you tomorrow, okay?" he called after me, but I didn't look back.

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I ran upstairs and got in bed, hating everyone. I even blamed Mister Jones for starting the whole thing. When Ma knocked on my door for dinner, I buried my face in the pillow to hide my black eye and pretended to be asleep. I heard her call my name and then walk quietly up to my bed. I must have done a good job of pretending, because she turned and left my room. But she took at least five seconds to let go of the doorknob.

I knew I couldn't hide forever, and by morning I was pretty starved, so I went on down and told a story about having been hit by a bad pitch. They seemed to believe me, especially my father. And though my mother made me stay inside all day, I didn't mind too much; I rather enjoyed the attention. Also, staying inside gave me time to think. I flipped through my old copies of *Rocket Science Magazine*, carefully studying the tall, shining *metal* rockets, and then looked out the window at what Mister Jones had built. But still, I believed. If anyone could make a rocket out of nails and

wood, it was Mister Jones. The hole was probably to protect the rest of us from all that fire.

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I saw Mister Jones only a few times in the weeks after that, and then he never even looked at The Rocket, only walked around his yard like he didn't know what to do with himself. Maybe he was just tired, I thought as I watched him through my window. He sure looked it.

Then school started and everyone forgot about The Rocket. I still looked out my window every morning to see if anything had happened during the night, but nothing ever changed. And then, about a month later, I woke up and saw that the dirt that had been piled next to the fence was now back in the hole. And The Rocket itself looked different, as if it had been sprung like a trap. The ropes that had been so tight were now hanging loose and the beam that used to stick straight up was pointing down to where the hole had been. And though to me this was very strange, no one else paid any attention to it. So I went on to school.

That afternoon, as I was walking home, I noticed a group of men standing in Mister Jones's backyard, several of them awkwardly holding shovels. Some were still in their office clothes, though they had taken off their jackets and loosened their ties. I recognized two of them as men who had come over earlier that summer to lean on our fence and ask Mister Jones about The Thing. But now, instead of joking, they stood in small groups, shaking their heads and talking quietly. The only person moving was a short, bald man who still had on his jacket and tie and who went up to first one man and then another, his hands fluttering in the air. The men nodded their heads in agreement as they stared down at the ground, but they did not move, and so the bald man would throw his hands up and move on to the next group. Mrs. Jones was out there, too, and she looked really upset. One of the men had his arm around her, and as they were standing there, she suddenly collapsed and had to be helped inside.

I ran home and saw Ma, all bent over, holding onto the phone, crying, talking, and screaming all at once. My father had his arm around her, trying to hold her up like the other man had been doing with Mrs. Jones. When she turned and saw me, she started crying even louder and I finally understood what had happened. Mister Jones

had done it, had flown off in his rocket and left everyone behind. I threw my books on the table and started for the door. Ma screamed my name and grabbed my arm, but I broke free and ran out the back door, jumped over the fence, and pushed my way through the circle of men. As I stood on the mound and looked at them all, I saw Tony and a few of the other guys slowly walking through my backyard and up to the fence like they were in a trance.

"A-*ha*!" I shouted as I jumped and thrust my fist into the air. "I told you! I *told* you!" I laughed as I raised my arms and turned in circles with my eyes wide open, until the world was spinning faster and faster. Until the still white faces with their dark open mouths mixed with the blood-red roses and the glorious light and it all flowed into one flower as big as the sky, and I called out, "Goodbye, Mister Jones! Goodbye!"

Falling

Traci Brimhall

"A twin-engined B-25 Army bomber, lost in a blinding fog, crashed into the Empire State Building...."

—*The New York Times*, July 29, 1945

They think it's an earthquake,
the rock
and settle of the building,
but then tourists,
listening to a tiny waltz
from crackling speakers, lean
over railings and observe flames
and ash moving in three-four time,
and see wind moving
through the fluttering bomber jacket,
sleeves dancing down
seventy-nine stories, waving
at windows, slowing cars; and a distant boy
dreams of wings
floating alone toward rooftops
as an elevator operator
licks her lips and tastes
her own burnt skin, hears the crack
of snapped cables,
feels gravity press
her like a lover, its weight
in her wrists and hips

as she falls through
unforgiving air—diving the shaft
with heels lifting
her to the ceiling, hearing
the casual scream of brakes,
the grate of landing—
then waits for the screech
and peel of metal as the roof lifts back
and the wisp of a boy
lifts her smoking hem over the heat
of her face as she cries, *Thank heavens,*
and the building shudders.
Hangers swing unclaimed coats,
firemen sip coffee
and eye young nurses while
around the corner, a sculptor
returns to his studio to find
an impotent motor and rubble,
mumbles, *Holy smokes....*
....You can't replace anything,
and walks over fragments
of his broken skylight
to discover an angel's severed
arms stretching through smoke.

Counting Nuns

nonfiction by Christian A. Dumais

There are as many bees as there are gypsies in Wrocław, just as there are as many spiders as there are nuns. It's not anything I'd generally notice, but if you'd seen these things as often as I have in the last two months, you'd make a note of it too. In fact, I go out of my way to count how many nuns I see every day. It started out as a private joke; now it's become part of my routine.

I'm in the shadow of a cathedral. The shadow feels cool. It's about three hours past dawn. I'm sitting on a bench with a cup of my urine sitting beside me like some kind of twisted imaginary friend that everyone can see. There's a man playing the flute across the way, his hat sitting on the ground in front of him like a hungry dog with its mouth wide open. A nun walks past him in a hurry. *Four.*

The leaves are falling and the sun's looking strong; you can tell it's going to be a beautiful day. I'd appreciate it more if it weren't for one small but major detail. In less than an hour, someone is going to put a sharp needle inside of me and remove a fair amount of blood that's never seen the light of day. And so I'm sitting here on this bench trying desperately to grow a huge pair of balls for my medical appointment.

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Those who know me know I'm not the kind of person to become too flustered or anxious. Stress is usually as foreign to me as Polish. I like to think of myself as a practicing Buddha, with a slight weakness for beautiful women and alcohol. I believe everything in life works out without any form of divine intervention; it falls into place as easily as a dream, and to expend any form of stress or worry on something that may or may not happen is fundamentally pointless.

Because whether you believe it or not, it's going to balance out; it's going to be fine. Think about all the moments of panic in your life, all the moments of hysteria, all the close calls: think about those long and hard. Remember how you felt that this was the end, that nothing would ever be the same again? Remember how empty you thought your heart had become? Now reflect on all the tears you lost. Remember the ache in your eyes?

It may not have gone the way you expected or how you hoped it would, but there you are, right now, reading this, breathing in and out; your heart is pumping and you're alive. Feeling. Thinking. Experiencing.

You made it. It worked out. And you wouldn't be where you are now if you hadn't lived through it.

It's really not all so bad, is it?

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Back in August, I was on this little prop job from Munich to Wrocław. Every minute took me further east than I'd ever gone, further and further away from the soft reassurance of English. I was sitting in the third row in an aisle seat; a pretty Polish woman sat to my right. She only smiled at me when I gave her the chocolate from my meal. There was an old woman to my left, on the other side of the aisle. Whenever the plane jerked, she reached over and put her hand on my arm. Her grip was dictated by the turbulence. She laughed sometimes when the plane evened out. She would say something in Polish and I'd just nod.

When the plane began its descent to Wrocław, the flight turned rough. The plane was jerking all over the place. The flight attendant was thrown from side to side. The pretty girl gripped the armrests. A baby in the back started to cry. The old woman next to me put her head down and started praying, with her right hand planted firmly on my arm.

The captain came on the speaker and said something that didn't seem to bring any relief to the passengers. The flight attendant strapped herself down. The man behind me spilled his coffee; the smell came up from the floor. The plane rocked back and forth. There was something unusual about the turbulence; it wasn't as playful as what I'd experienced before. This turbulence somehow felt serious.

The old woman leaned over. She spoke like she was out of breath. I put my hand on hers. I said, "It's going to be fine. We'll be laughing about this when we land, you'll see." I could tell she didn't understand anything I'd said. She smiled anyway; it was brief, but it was a smile nonetheless.

There's always that moment of resignation when I fly—usually when the plane's in the air and the wheels are folding in. It's the moment when my love of flying and my fear of death come together with such precision that love and fear become synonymous. It's

when I truly understand what is and isn't within my control, and how meaningless it all is. You'll never find me closer to comprehending faith than at thirty thousand feet, where life is both far and near. It's the kind of revelation I wish I could grasp with both of my feet on the ground. Still, in the right frame of—

The plane jolted and made a sound that was anything but comforting. The pretty girl put her arm around mine. I turned to her. Her eyes were damp. I said, "You'll see."

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All of that equanimity counts for fuck-all the minute I know there's going to be a needle pushed into my pale body.

The fifth nun walks by, eyeing my urine and me. I don't know how to respond to nuns; when I make eye contact with her, she looks away and increases her pace. I've never been around them enough to know proper nun etiquette. Hell, I'm not even used to seeing them in real life at all. The first day I took a walk in Wrocław, I was shocked by the presence of so many ninjas.

I look down at my urine, as if to say something funny. But the sight of the container reminds me what I'm waiting for. If there was a smile on my face, it's gone now. Actually, it seems I can't feel my face. Even my mind feels numb. I try to say, "It's going to be all right," but it comes out like a weak sigh.

When I was four years old, it took four nurses and one doctor to hold me down to give me a shot. There was talk of getting an animal-tranquilizer gun. It went downhill from there. The last time I had a shot, a few years back, I remember telling the doctor, "If you step one foot closer to me with that thing, I'm going to take you down."

I don't know where the fear stems from. Pretty much every time I've had a shot, I've been surprised by how quick and painless it was. Still, the days leading up to the big event are sleepless and riddled with fear. I imagine trolls with giant needles, inches thick, chasing me through the woods. When I seek comfort and try to explain my fear to others, they take joy in pointing out my tattoos.

I look into a mirror and see the face of a man approaching thirty, and yet I still have all these fears and doubts.

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After the eighth nun, I notice the time. I walk to the medical building, holding my container of urine like a warm cup of coffee. I translate all the signs I see on the way.

Poland: Our needles are the biggest!

You won't know pain, American, until you've been stuck with one of our needles!

Inside the building, I'm overwhelmed with Polish. I'm told to go here and there and here again. The hallways look like school corridors between classes. The ninth nun pushes past me just as I find the doctor's office.

The doctor asks me a lot of questions. I can tell she learned English from a Canadian. She takes my blood pressure. It's high.

"Are you nervous?" the doctor asks me.

"Yes," I answer. "Doctors make me nervous."

"I won't hurt you."

"You say that now, but you're going to take some blood. I don't like needles."

She looks at my tattoos. "The lab will do that. Not me."

"Is there a way I don't have to do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I kill a cat or something and use its blood instead?"

She pretends to give it some thought. "No, that won't work."

"Is there someone I can buy off?"

"Like blackmail?"

"More like bribing."

"Nice try. No." I can tell she's finding all of this so funny. "It won't be bad."

She fills out some paperwork. She tells me that I need to go to the laboratory to give a blood sample and then I need to get my ears and eyes checked out. "You can do whatever one first." She explains where to go next, wishes me luck—with a hint of laughter—and pushes me out the door.

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I decide to bite the bullet and go to the laboratory first. Next to the door is a window where a nurse sits. She takes my urine without giving me the chance to say goodbye. It's like losing an old friend.

As she's going over my paperwork, I realize that the nurse is sexy. When she stands, I notice she's wearing a mini-skirt, which only strengthens my whole sexiness theory. I think this is a good thing. I'll have to be strong if I am to win over the affections of this sexy Polish nurse in a mini-skirt. She'll find my American accent impenetrable, but she'll discover my roguish charm is irresistible. As she gets the

needle ready, we'll make eye contact. There'll be that moment of connection, the kind that comes once in a lifetime. This connection will tell her many things about me. It'll tell her that I am the man of her dreams. It'll tell her that we are physically and mentally compatible in ways she never knew were possible. And, most importantly, it'll tell her that I don't need a needle stuck in me.

The sexy Polish nurse in the mini-skirt waves me into the laboratory. I walk confidently. I sit down like a man without a care in the world. Her gloved hands are getting a needle ready. I keep trying to make eye contact, but she's obviously playing hard to get. I think I might be getting a little desperate. I move my body closer to her, my head ducking and rising. She's oblivious to me. Her attention is on that needle, the one that appears to be getting bigger and bigger.

She takes my wrist. I'm thinking, Yeah, now we're getting somewhere. She wraps something around my arm and tightens it. My heart is speeding up. She sprays alcohol on my skin and tells me to make a fist and clench, still not looking at my eyes.

She can't fall in love with me if she won't look me in the eyes!

She holds the needle up to the light. My mouth is dry.

I'm just about to scream, "I LOVE YOU, SEXY POLISH NURSE IN A MINI-SKIRT! I WILL TAKE YOU AWAY FROM ALL OF THIS! I WILL MAKE YOU THE HAPPIEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD! I WILL MAKE ALL OF YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE! JUST DON'T PUT THAT NEEDLE INSIDE OF ME! FOR ALL THAT'S HOLY, DON'T PUT—" when, in the blink of an eye, the sexy Polish nurse in a mini-skirt puts the needle into my arm.

As she's drawing the blood, she smiles and looks me in the eyes. I realize it would never work between us. In fact, she isn't all that attractive and I really hate her.

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The tenth and eleventh nuns are sitting outside of the laboratory. I walk with my arm bent and my heart broken. I trudge down the stairs and find the next room I'm meant to go to. My head is spinning just a little bit. It's not bad, but it's certainly enough to notice.

When I find the door, another nurse immediately whisks me into the room. She sits me down, reads my paperwork quickly, and immediately starts putting things in my ears and nose. There's another nurse in the room; they're talking to one another in Polish. The spinning is gaining momentum. I can feel large drops of sweat forming

all over my head. It's starting to get cold. It feels like I should be dizzy, but it feels worse than that. It's like gravity gave way and my equilibrium followed.

I want to scream. I want to throw up, but I know that won't change how bad I'm feeling. I've never felt this way. It's like I'm bordering on a panic attack and a complete physical meltdown.

The nurse puts something in my mouth and then quickly removes it. She pulls her chair back. Her face looks grave. She obviously doesn't like what she sees. "You good?" she asks loudly.

I shake my head. I don't know if I'm nodding yes or no.

The other nurse stands up and the two pull me off my chair. Once I'm on my feet, I want to die. My joints are loose, my muscles are aching, and my spine feels like it's coming out of my asshole. The nurses throw me on a couch. I'm looking up at the ceiling. They're lifting my legs up. They're talking to me in English now, but I can't make out what they're saying.

As I'm lying there, my mind drifts to the memory of a night when I took a hit of acid. I was stumbling through my apartment and I fell on the couch. I landed on my back, the cushions catching me softly, yet my soul continued to fall, through my flesh, through the cushions, through the floor, through the apartment below, through the ground, through the dirt. I just kept falling and falling into this bottomless darkness, my arms reaching upward, my hands hopelessly seeking anything to hold—

"You good?" one of the nurses asks again.

I blink as if I'm waking up. Whatever I was feeling has passed. It's like it never happened. I can hear the door opening. "I think so, yeah," I say.

I go to rise and a nurse holds me down. She gives me some candy. Obediently, I put it in my mouth. The nurses want me to stay on the couch for a few more minutes. I turn my head to look at the wall, feeling ashamed of being so weak.

I feel a hand touching my cheek. When I look back, a nun is sitting beside me. She wipes my forehead with a damp cloth. She is smiling. I smile back sheepishly.

"It's going to be fine," she says in a low voice.

"It will," I say, realizing that it sounds more like a question than a statement.

The twelfth nun says, "You'll see."

Benkelstein and the Time Warp

Evil Editor

Benkelstein, trying to recall the lyrics to a Rice-Krispies jingle while driving eastward on Highway 70, almost missed the new sign. "To I-40," it read, with an arrow pointing to the right. Benkelstein hit the brakes, just hard enough to slow to twenty-five miles per hour, and pulled off at the new exit. "It's about time!" he said to his wife. "I was beginning to think they'd never get this road finished."

"Hmm?" Mrs. Benkelstein said, looking up from her book.

"Why, this'll cut a full ten minutes off our trip easily," he went on. "Let's see, that's twenty minutes round-trip, and since we visit your mother twelve times a year—twelve too many, I might add—"

"I'm not listening," Mrs. Benkelstein said. She went back to reading *101 Ways to Slice a Bâtard.*

Benkelstein pressed on the accelerator as he mentally calculated the number of years it would take this new shortcut to save him a full twenty-four hours behind the wheel.

Fifty yards in, Benkelstein passed the new road's first sign. "840," it read, and below that was the word "Future."

"That's interesting," he said to Mrs. Benkelstein.

"What's that?" she asked, mildly irritated. She was reading about the diagonal crosshatch heel slice.

"Apparently this is the road to the future," he told her. He checked the speedometer, which had reached sixty. "At this speed, I estimate we'll be there in fourteen hours."

"Be where?"

"In the future."

"What are you babbling about?" she asked, finally looking up.

"That sign we just went past. It said, '840, Future.' "

"What about it?"

"I think I know what it means," Benkelstein answered. He had already discarded his original theory and formulated a new one. "We're *in* the future," he said. "Don't ask me how; we must have passed through some kind of time warp. And while this is the year 2006 in the present, it's the year 840 in the future."

Mrs. Benkelstein rolled her eyes. "Correct me if I'm wrong," she said, "but if this is the year 840—which it most certainly is not—then this would be the past, not the future."

"Don't be ridiculous," Benkelstein said. "There were no asphalt highways in the year 840."

"As Columbus didn't reach the new world until 1492," Mrs. Benkelstein countered, "who's to say *what* was here in the year 840?"

"A valid point," Benkelstein admitted. "But you'll at least have to admit there were no road signs printed in the English language in central North Carolina in the year 840."

"There were no cars, either," his wife noted. "And as we've seen no other cars since you pulled onto this road, I persist in claiming this could as easily be the past as the future. Or are you saying that cars no longer exist in the future?"

"Not at all," Benkelstein said. "I was merely suggesting that you think outside the box for a change."

"Darling, I was so far outside the box, I almost fell out of the car," she told him.

"Keep in mind," Benkelstein said, "that time did not begin with the birth of Christ; only the calendar did. And before his birth they didn't refer to the year as, say, '250 B.C.'"

"What *did* they do?" his wife asked.

"They undoubtedly measured time from some local historical event. 'The year 52 since the end of the first Punic War' or 'The year 6 since Moscovicz got his tunic caught in the water wheel.' "

"Uh huh. So what was your point about the calendar, again?"

"Just this: for all we know, some momentous event takes place in the year...oh, say 2340, and they decide to start a new calendar, start it with the year zero. And now it's eight hundred and forty years later. That would make it the year 840 *to them*, but the year...3180 to us, which means—"

"Which means you're a very old, very senile man. Did you forget to take your pill this morning?"

"I don't—"

"By the way, even if this *is* the year 3180, it's the future only to us. To everyone who's already living here, it's the present. So your road sign should have read, '840, Present.' Case closed. Now may I go back to reading my—"

"Not so fast, dear. Maybe this road itself *is* the time warp, and is seen only by those traveling to the future—"

"The past."

"And when we reach the end of the road—and our destination year—the road will vanish from sight."

"It'll vanish, all right, because you'll pull off of the future 840 bypass and onto Interstate 40, leaving your so-called time warp behind. And I don't mean a thousand years behind."

"Oh my God!" Benkelstein's eyes grew wide. "I just thought of something. What if the entire population of the Earth is dying out sometime in our future. What if the last few scientists still alive created this time warp as a means to bring people forward in time, beyond the year of the comet or the plague or whatever is about to kill everyone? What if the road sign was there just to let us know we've come forward eight hundred and forty years, so we won't freak out when we see all the changes?"

"What if you keep your eyes on the road and your mind in reality?" Mrs. Benkelstein suggested. "You're scaring me."

"If my theory's correct," Benkelstein continued, "it would mean that the current year is actually 2846. It would mean that we have the responsibility to populate the planet, to maintain the species, so that—"

"It would also mean that we are among the few people now *on* the planet," Mrs. Benkelstein said. "Possibly the *only* ones." She seemed to have given up on reading and decided to humor him.

"Until we pass another car, I'm afraid we must assume that to be the case," Benkelstein conceded.

"Passing another car won't prove anything," Mrs. Benkelstein said. "If this is the future, the driver of the other car could be one of the aliens trying to destroy all human life."

"Aliens?" Benkelstein said. "Yes, of course. That's one possibility: an intergalactic fleet of starships has wiped out humanity. And now ground forces are no doubt driving around, looking for any survivors."

"What kind of car would an alien drive?" Mrs. Benkelstein asked him.

"Klingons would drive SUV's," he replied. "And the Ferengi would drive PT Cruisers."

"Vulcans, with their logical minds, would probably drive one of those cute hybrids," Mrs. Benkelstein said.

"Wrong," Benkelstein told her. "Sports cars are the one weakness of Vulcan men. Not only would they drive Porsches, they'd be leaning out the window half the time, hooting and whistling at Vulcan babes."

Mrs. Benkelstein laughed. "Do the Vulcan *women* have a weakness as well?" she asked.

"Karaoke," Benkelstein said.

"I see." She looked out the rear window. "You know, it does seem odd that we've seen no other cars."

"Yes," Benkelstein agreed. "Whether this is the future or the past or the time warp or even the present, you'd think *someone* else would find his way onto this road. Perhaps we *are* the only remaining—"

"Aha!" Mrs. Benkelstein exclaimed, pointing ahead. A bus was approaching on the other side of the median. "What does *that* do to your theory?"

"A bus," her husband said. "Hmm. Interesting. The Borg would need a vehicle that size, in order to house their—"

"I can see that trying to get you to drop this routine is futile," she said as the bus went past, moving at high speed.

"The Borg," Benkelstein said. "They're going in the opposite direction. If this road *is* a time warp, they're heading for the past! Possibly for 2006! We've got to stop them!" He swung the steering wheel to the left, veering onto the median.

"What are you doing?!!" Mrs. Benkelstein shouted. "Have you lost your mind? Stop this instant!!" The car was bumping down a grassy embankment. It reached the lowest point and started up the other side, tires spinning in the grass, Benkelstein ignoring his wife's screaming.

Eventually Benkelstein eased the car onto the road and headed back toward Highway 70. The bus was no longer in sight.

"This has gone too far," Mrs. Benkelstein said. "Enough is enough."

Benkelstein drove on, his eyes locked on the road ahead.

"What are you trying to do, catch up with that bus?" Mrs. Benkelstein said. "That bus is long gone. And even if you're so far off the deep end that you've convinced yourself the Borg really *are* in that bus, what are you planning to do if you catch up to them? The Borg would absorb you so fast—"

"Assimilate," Benkelstein corrected her. It was the first word he'd spoken since he'd turned the car around.

"I know what's happening here," Mrs. Benkelstein said. "You knew we were about to reach Interstate 40. You knew we'd see the usual heavy traffic, knew we wouldn't see some fantastic futur-

istic world of rocket cars, or some devastated lifeless shell of a planet...."

Benkelstein kept his eyes on the road.

"You knew we'd find ourselves *not* in the year 3180, *not* in the year 2846, *not* in 840, but in good old 2006. So to save face, you turned around, on the flimsiest of excuses, just so I could never have the satisfaction of saying, 'I *told* you we weren't driving down a time warp to the future.' Well, thanks to your childishness, instead of saving ten minutes, we've lost ten minutes. Maybe twenty." She sank back in her seat. "The Borg, riding in a bus," she muttered. "That'll be the day. The Borg have their pride, you know."

Benkelstein refused to waver from his mission. He pulled off at the Highway 70 exit and slowed as he approached the stop sign. Suddenly Mrs. Benkelstein popped back upright. "Quick, turn to the right," she said. "The Borg are above us; they're trying to get us in a tractor beam!"

Benkelstein looked at her quizzically.

"Okay," she said. "You would have figured it out sooner or later. I took your wife's place three months ago. I've been surgically altered to look like her. I'm Captain Janeway. Now hurry, Benkelstein!"

Benkelstein was about to speak, but his passenger stopped him. "Focus on the road!" she said. "I'm counting on you. We all are."

Benkelstein turned onto Highway 70 and floored the accelerator. His eyes were shifting wildly, his face taut with stress. *Janeway? How could...?*

Janeway rolled down her window, stuck her head out, and looked to the sky. "They're still up there!" she said. "My God, their ship is huge!"

"Is it cube-shaped?"

"Of course. Drive carefully; we can't afford to call attention to ourselves."

"Where are we going?" Benkelstein asked. He could barely breathe.

"The Borg have set up headquarters at the Butner Psychiatric Hospital. Do you know where that is?"

Benkelstein nodded.

"Then get me there. Your life depends on it. All of our lives do."

Benkelstein gripped the steering wheel tightly and flew eastward down Highway 70, his blood racing and his heart fluttering. And the slightest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

The Great Big NOTHING

Frank Haberle

The taxi driver lights a new Pall Mall from the butt end of the old one. Sometimes you enjoy a good second-hand smoke. But not this morning.

You roll down the window, put your head against the glass. That feels pretty good. The smoke twists away. The fresh air streams right into your lungs. The wind cuts nice little cracks into your parched lips. You almost doze. 'That's it,' you think. 'That's nice. I can sleep this one off.'

Then the cab veers onto a side street. You're stuck behind a garbage truck. The hot, reeking air wraps itself around you. You roll the window back up. You surrender to used smoke, nausea, and fear. You're on your way to the airport, to Phoenix, to Kate. You've bought your ticket. There's no turning back.

You pass a Delta billboard. You reach into your pocket. Maybe you got the date wrong. You're shaking hard enough so you can't quite read the numbers. 'These shakes,' you think. You need a few beers to steady you out. But it's eight-thirty in the morning. The flight's at ten. You'll just have to wait a few hours.

Last night's shadow descends on you. You must have said something stupid. You were out until three. You fell asleep on the subway. You woke up, as always, as the train pulled into your stop. You must have found your keys. Somehow you got your shoes off. You try to remember other details—any details—but it's not yet time for that. The remorse will sink in later. The stupid things you said usually lurk until noon, when the booze starts to wear off. Usually you postpone it by drinking again. But today, you'll be well in the air when it hits. And you never, ever drink on a plane. Drinking in the airport is no problem; four beers during your layover in Saint Louis are a lock. But drinking on the plane? Well, first of all, if you're still shaking, the stewardess might think you have a drinking problem. Stewardesses are on to that. And secondly, you'll have to get up to go to the bathroom. And if there's anything you dread about airplanes, it's airplane bathrooms.

The cab swerves up onto the expressway. You catch the silver reflection off a plane arcing effortlessly out of LaGuardia. You have

plenty of time to build toward an anxiety attack over what scares you worse than the plane: the three-day Catholic Charities Development Officers' conference your boss signed you up for in Phoenix. You remember her telling you about it, a month ago, sitting behind her desk overlooking Park Avenue, tapping her pencil. *It will be good for you to get away,* she said. *What do you mean,* you replied. She didn't say anything. She kept tapping her pencil, smiling.

There's a small presentation, a report. Your boss typed it for you. Where is it? You're almost sure you put it in the little suitcase you packed for the conference. What if your voice shakes when you read it? What if you leave it in your hotel? What if you have to read it in front of five hundred people? What if they start shifting awkwardly in their seats? What if you piss your pants?

You've certainly got plenty of things to worry about, all perfectly reasonable. But you're flying out three days early for the conference. You have three days to get scared about that. And those three days are going to be spent hiking in the Grand Canyon with Kate, your long-lost sweetheart. Well, actually, to be honest, Kate's your long-lost-best-friend's long-lost sweetheart. But you're pretty sure you sent her a card, telling her you were coming to Phoenix. You're almost certain she called you three days later, and that you didn't call her, and that she wanted to take you for a little hike into a canyon somewhere, and that she'll meet you at the airport. You're pretty sure that she called and you had a really good conversation, the first time you'd spoken in a few years. You're pretty sure about most of these things, but you aren't positive about any of them. And it's this *Kate thing*, you think as the taxi slows to take its place in the stalled line of yellow cabs inching like lemmings toward the airport—this, more than the conference, the airplane, and the dark, troubled waters that will swirl into your brain as last night's alcohol starts to evaporate—it's this *Kate thing* that scares you the most.

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You met Kate six years ago, in the city, in the squalid walk-up you shared with Bud the dealer. It was right after you started working at Catholic Charities, doing data entry for six dollars an hour. You met her the night that you and Bud ate the batch of something laced with something worse. Bud locked himself in a closet and wouldn't come out. You sat in the kitchen on a folding metal chair drinking scalding-hot tea you boiled up on a hot plate. Neon-colored straws burst out of the linoleum and flopped onto the floor around you. You

couldn't remember if the buzzer buzzed, if you buzzed somebody in, or if you were just hearing a buzzing noise. You looked up from the damp straws spilled across the floor and there she was.

"Hi," she said.

"Oh, hey!" you said.

"I'm Kate," she said.

"Oh." The straws sucked themselves back down into the linoleum.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Nothing!"

She glanced around the corner, into the living room. "Where's Bud?" she asked.

You pictured Bud sitting on the floor of the closet, eyes wide open, listening. Sinister, evil bastard. "I don't know!" you answered.

"Well, I'm going to try to find him. You doing anything? You want to come?"

You stared at Kate's long black hair. You couldn't help it. Bushels of big black curls pulled themselves down, down onto her shoulders. Blue and silver sparks shot out from her head. You followed the sparks' neat white tracers down the stairs and onto the street. Headlights of passing cars dug canals of white light up and down the avenue. The light show unsettled something in your memory. You started talking, trying not to talk too fast.

"Once when I was a teenager at camp, I think, I got caught up on this mountain ridge above tree line on a camping trip in Maine, you know, before they built that real big ski mountain there, Sugarloaf or Sugarbush, when it was just dead trees and rocks and mosquitos, and you just walked up the ridge through mud and vines and logs and tangles, although you didn't actually walk through the logs, you walked over them."

"Wow," Kate said.

"Yes and anyhow I'm thinking of the lightning and how the camp counselor got us lost and he was named Old Cook and it was getting dark and this huge black storm cloud came over us, just sucked us into itself like a big black mitt, and then the blasts of lightning started like they were bouncing off the ledges around us and cracking back into the sky, and it was the Bigelow Range, I think the mountains were called, or maybe they were big and low."

"Oh," Kate said.

"Yeah, Old Cook was his name, though, the counselor, but not his real name."

"That must have been really unbelievable," she said.

"Yeah, pretty scary."

You heard hissing. You looked up at glowing heads of spitting lizards stuck on stakes. Probably stuck there by Bud, you thought; Bud, now curled up in a ball in the closet, giggling. That son of a bitch.

"No," Kate said. "I mean it must have been incredible to be out in the wilderness like that, in open space, surrounded by mountains. I've never been any place like that."

You looked up again. The lizards became streetlamps. The tracers started fading. Sparks stopped shooting out of Kate's hair. It started to snow. You walked slowly with her, your hands in your pockets. She asked you a hundred questions about hiking and traveling and the world outside the five boroughs. You were out for a long walk around the city with Kate, talking, buzzing a few doors, checking a few bars, asking for Bud. Nobody had seen him. Nobody but you.

A few months later Kate and Bud broke up; soon after, she headed out west. She drifted through seasonal food-service jobs in the national parks, then settled in Phoenix. She worked for a chiropractor, rented a small house on a mesa, and spent her free time exploring the wilderness. She fell in with a group of people who taught her things, she said in occasional letters to you, but it was never clear to you what they taught her; it all seemed very complex.

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Your legs carry you perfectly, deliberately, up the ramp from the airplane to the Phoenix airport terminal. Kate's waiting for you at the gate. She sparkles like she always did, but she's changed. She's tanned and relaxed, and she stands differently, more comfortably. She's in cut-off shorts and hiking boots, an untucked floral shirt, a blue-beaded leather necklace, and red-beaded earrings. She startles you. She gives you a strong, assertive hug. She smells like cocoa.

"I can't believe it!" she says. "You're finally here!"

You hug her back, stiffly. You don't want to give her the wrong impression. But now you're fortified. Now you're steady as a rock. Both planes were on time. The four-beer-layover plan became a six-beer plan. It all worked out.

You step outside the terminal. The air is hot and dry. You walk to an older-model Subaru wagon with a cracked windshield. You put your small suitcase, stuffed with casual workwear for the conference, and your backpack, filled with camping gear and the boots you pulled from the box in your closet, into the back of the car. After several efforts, you get the trunk to latch.

Kate drives you through a labyrinth of curving streets between one-story cottages with red roofs and little rock gardens. You speak in short bursts about the flight, airplane food, the cab ride, how cool each little rock garden is. Kate listens, laughs, agrees, and says 'wow' repeatedly.

Her cottage is tiny, set back behind twisted brush on a hillside. In the kitchen there's a table with two mismatched chairs. Taped to the refrigerator there's a picture of Kate with another woman and two long-haired, tanned young men, all in parkas, standing in a snowfield at some unthinkable altitude. An ornate Native-American hanging covers the wall.

She offers you a beer; there are two in the refrigerator. You drink both. She has herbal tea. You sit and pack your backpacks and list everything you'll need for the hike: she has a stove, fuel, food, water bottles, filter, and tent—although she usually sleeps with her head outside the tent in the desert, she points out.

"What about, you know, snakes?" you ask.

"They're more likely to climb into your sleeping bag with you for heat than to bite you," she says. "Thing is, not to get them upset."

"Oh. Scorpions?"

"It's best to avoid them."

- - -

You go out to dinner at a Mexican restaurant. At dinner you drink another four beers. You bring up Bud, just to connect the dots; you haven't been in touch with him since his dad got him a job on the stock-market floor and he moved to Connecticut. She hasn't heard from him since she left the East Coast.

"Bud," she says, smiling and shaking her head.

"Yeah," you say, shaking yours. "Probably making a million dollars."

There's a dance somewhere in the restaurant. There are swirling bright lights and people laughing and live mariachi music

and applause spilling in from another room. You start telling your stories about your city life. They feel like they fit together seamlessly. You move from the complicated balancing act you feel you perform at your job to the remarkable, sensitive way you manage tensions and altercations on the streets and the subways to your unflinching grasp of the aesthetics and symmetry of the urban landscape. As the evening goes on, your stories become more ornate and elaborate. They seem reasonable and funny and honest and interesting as you say the words, less so as they sit on the table between you and Kate. Kate has spoken very little; she's followed your stories, laughed when you were hoping she'd laugh, opened her eyes wide at other parts. She says 'wow' at least thirty times.

"Anyhow," you say, "it's all been closing in on me recently, in so many ways. I really think I need to start changing some things."

The waitress brings the check and you realize you've been doing all of the talking.

"Anyhow," you say, "I've been doing all the talking."

Kate looks down at the label of the beer bottle she's been peeling all night. She understands needing to change things. Sometimes people close in on her too. Her friends are great; they are teaching her so many things, about herself, her powers and energies. But it's hard. You ask her what she means and she shrugs. "Someday," she says. "Someday I'll try to explain it."

You drive back to her house. She turns in; you need to get an early start. You roll your sleeping bag out on her couch and stare at the ceiling. The air in the apartment is cool—mountain air, desert air.

You remember the restaurant. You remember talking too much. Your body flinches impulsively. What were you talking about? Why do you talk so much?

Then you look across the room in the dim light at the photographs on the refrigerator. Who are these other people? Boyfriends? Road dudes? You always wanted to be a road dude. Every day at your desk, for a couple of years, you daydreamed about being a road dude. As the seasons passed, the daydreams faded. You became another guy at a desk, on a subway, on a bar stool. You became another guy going home alone with a six pack and a takeout burrito. You live in a city filled with guys like you.

The couch rises and swirls, gently tonight, not spinning wildly like your own bed last night. Your first dream floats back

into the restaurant, to the music. You're the road dude in the picture; you've been together all this time. You're holding Kate in your arms and dancing slowly, the lights spinning away from you. Everything smells like cocoa.

- - -

Suddenly you're awake; it's the first hint of daylight. Your first thoughts are filled with confusion, embarrassment—'What did I say last night? I'm such an asshole.' Kate smiles at you from the kitchen. She's made a pot of coffee for you and a cup of tea for herself. She pours your coffee into a thermos while you roll up your sleeping bag. In seconds, you're back in the car and driving up a highway. The city peels away and you're in the suburbs, then the desert. You stare out the cracked windshield at a landscape that's totally new to you—wild desert with huge cactus and tumbleweeds, cracked red mountain ranges shimmering on the horizon.

After a few hours, Kate turns onto a one-lane dirt road. She pulls over under a cluster of twisted pine trees. She climbs out, sits on the back of the car, and ties on her hiking boots. You follow her to the back of the car. You pull your own boots out. You haven't worn them in many years, but when you lace them up, they feel familiar and sturdy. When you pull your pack onto your back you feel ready to go.

"It's really good to get away," she says.

"Yeah," you say. But then you remember your dream and a wave of embarrassment passes through you. You try not to look at her.

Kate walks to a ledge where the sky disappears. You follow her to the rim. A thousand shades of red and orange glare up from below.

"All the way down there?" you ask.

"That's the plan."

"Are you sure we brought enough water?"

"There's water down there."

"What about food? What if we get stuck down there?"

"We've got food for an extra day. Come on."

Kate pulls her pack out of the back of the car and deftly swings it up onto her shoulders. You try to resettle yours, struggling with your straps. Your legs wobble when it's back in place.

She steps over the rim, onto a trail clinging to the canyon's wall. You focus on her backpack and follow. Bobbing down the incline in front of you, Kate looks so strong—brown and lean from six years in the desert. She's a different person now. You remember her six years ago, in the neat gridlines of the city, the brief girlfriend of Bud the dealer. She was so unsure of herself. Out here, she's all business.

You nurse a bottle of water; you have two more in your pack. You wrap a bandanna around your head, and in seconds it's soaked. Sweat pours off your nose. You wring out the bandanna, then struggle to keep pace with Kate, who moves with steady determination down the trail. You realize you have nothing to drink, other than water, for the next two nights; you try to remember the last time you went through a night without a drink and realize it's been years. What if you freak out? What if you can't take it? Better not to think about it. So you try not to think about anything.

Hours pass. The sun shifts in the sky. Shadows pour down from the high cliffs into deep black pools. The trail plunges in jagged switchbacks to the floor of the canyon. You look up at the cliffs now soaring above you; the same cliffs you will eventually have to climb back up. The alcohol has evaporated from your body, and your first clear thought comes with a new wave of terror, deeper than the rest. What if you can't get back up? What if you die down here? People die in the desert all the time. What if there is no water?

You stumble forward, following Kate down into a narrow passage. As if on cue, water cascades from mossy walls, over broken rocks, and under your feet. You stop to plunge your head in the creek. You refill your water bottles. A new thought enters your mind. What about that speech you have to make in three days? Why didn't you bring it with you? You could have practiced it on the hike. Then you look around you, at the bubbling moss, the rock formations like cathedral apses, the rock faces like carved saints. Water seeps out everywhere, here at the bottom of a canyon in the desert. You decide that all of it—the speech, your job, your airplane ride home, whether you left the stove on in your apartment— can't matter right now. All that matters is that you keep following Kate. You rise and make out her silhouette down the sand bar, turning a corner. You follow her deeper into the labyrinth.

A fine line of sunlight brushes against the uppermost rim. The sky fades to deep blue and the first stars appear. Kate moves ahead in the shadows and disappears around another corner.

Suddenly, the corridor opens up. A foaming brown river surges toward you. On a beach, you find Kate sitting by a large ring of stones, detaching her tent.

"Are we the only people down here?" you ask.

"I don't see anybody else. Come on, give me a hand."

- - -

The moon rises full over the rim of the canyon, bathing the walls blue. You eat dinner in silence. You stare out at the river. It bubbles like chocolate milk. You've sweated pounds of fluids out of your body, replaced them with gallons of creek water. You feel different now. Somehow, for the moment, you feel clear headed. You feel good.

After dinner, Kate walks up the beach. She disappears behind a rock. She comes back a minute later, her tangled hair glittering wet in the dim light. You both pull your sleeping bags out so your heads are outside the tent. You watch the moon inch higher in the sky. A tiny silver blip with blinking red lights glides effortlessly between the stars; the moonlight illuminates its fine vapor trail. Flying is so gentle, so beautiful, you think. How could anyone be afraid to fly?

"Do you ever think of just breaking out altogether?" Kate asks.

"Breaking out?"

"Yeah, just taking off? Leaving everything behind? Just the great big nothing up ahead?"

"This isn't the big nothing?"

"No, I mean, not like a little vacation. I mean heading up-country. Alberta. The Yukon. Alaska. Just keep going. See where it all goes."

You freeze. What should you say? What's the right thing to say?

Finally you come up with, "I've always wanted to go to Alaska."

You lie in silence for a long time. You want to say something more. You try to form the words. But when the jumble of sounds falls into place, when you finally have the courage to say something, her eyes are closed. Her eyes are closed and she's sleeping and you've said nothing and you know you never will, so long as she's awake.

But for now she's sleeping, and so it's safe for you to whisper, "Let's go, let's go, let's go."

Splitting the Atom

Tania Hershman

It's three single-malts past midnight and my thoughts turn to splitting the atom. I pour myself another and go down to the basement for my power saw.

Back in the kitchen, I decide to start with an apple and work down. I plug in the saw. The apple splits easily, a nice division, pips sliced neatly in half. Done. I look around for something smaller and spot the salt cellar Julie bought at Camden Market, a stupid wooden ball whose holes are too bloody small to let the grains out.

Positioning the saw's a bit trickier this time. The salt cellar's only the size of a golf ball, and it keeps sliding away. I polish off the whisky to steady my hands and wedge it between the wheatgrass juicer—another useless Julie purchase—and the Magimix.

When the saw's in position, I flick the switch, but my hands slip. I miss the wooden ball, the saw takes control, and, before I know it, I'm on my back on the lino, the saw buzzing in my hands and half a kitchen table on either side of me. I help myself up, pull the plug, and have a look. It takes me a few minutes to realise: the table's made of atoms, like everything. So, when I sliced through it, it makes sense that I split a load of atoms—at least a thousand, right? Well, that was easy.

Very chuffed with myself, I go back to the living room and pour another. Okay, so the table's ruined—though a couple of new legs and you never know—but I proved my point. Pity Julie's never coming back—she'd be bloody impressed. Those scientists a hundred years ago, they didn't have the technology anybody's got in their garage today. Poor sods.

Conquered

Sylvia Eastman

Thunderburned she was
by the velocity of his love,
a Viking bobsledder
cornering Greenland,
mouth screaming plunder.

In Every War

Jim Pascual Agustin

morning will be the coldest metal
tracing your temple.

the children are aimed at the window,
a sea of fireflies sweeping
away their fears and senses.

all through the night,
parents lie unable to surrender
to slumber, crossing bridges
of sounds, listening for broken
moments.

morning is sure to come,
tramping in heavy boots through bamboo,

crushing even new shoots.

Sa Bawat Digma

Jim Pascual Agustin

malamig na malamig na bakal
sa sentido ang umagang daratal.

nakaumang sa bintana ang mga bata,
tinatangay ng dagat ng alitaptap
ang kanilang takot at malay.

magdamag na nanunulay
sa mga hibla ng bawat tunog,
sa bawat lagutok ng sandali
ang mga magulang na di
makaidlip.

papalapit na nga ang umaga,
nakabotang humahakbang sa kawayanan

maging bagong usbong tinatapak-tapakan.

"Sa Bawat Digma" first appeared in 1992 in Jim's poetry collection *Beneath an Angry Star*, published in the Philippines by Anvil Publishing.

a night without dreams

Rohith Sundararaman

i was ten when dad tired
of the two sparrows visiting us
through a gap i had discovered
over our verandah window.
he got up on his chipped-leg

stool, whistling as he shut
the hole with nails, wood, and hammer
while i listened to the birds twitter
like a stuck doorbell, their cry
soon swallowed whole by ply.

still whistling, dad sat with me till
the sun leaked to a puddle, and he left
after a ruffle of my hair, his tune a linger
in the air, a song to help me understand
the flight of desperation.

Soon You Will Be Gone and Possibly Eaten

Nick Antosca

Every so often, over the years, I'd be with Sabile in a bar—or at an art gallery, or a party—and a woman would walk into the room who was so beautiful that I not only ached for her but felt jealous because I knew Sabile must want her, too. Anyone gravitates to beauty like that; gender is meaningless. Orientation can fall away like snakeskin, like a robe you might loosen and step out of.

Or maybe it would be a man who walked into the room, and not only did I resent him, a possessive hand drifting to Sabile's waist, but I felt drawn to him myself.

That was what the aliens were like.

- - -

Sabile was a beautiful woman. She had the eyes of a deer, black and hugely apprehending.

- - -

The aliens came down in August of that year in great white obelisks, landing in the forest, somehow turning the nearby air a terrifying candy-green.

We had left the city and were staying at an old house my parents owned in western New York state, outside a town called Welsh Falls. They mostly used the house as a rental property—each floor was a furnished apartment—but it was empty until November, and my dad had said we could take a vacation there.

When they showed up, around midnight, I was watching TV in the upstairs den and Sabile was in the bath. Snow suddenly filled the screen and, from the corner of my eye, I saw that green light for the first time. I went to the window.

Things that looked like giant white needles had begun falling slowly from the sky. Their whiteness reminded me of the inside of a geode, white stone crusted with crystals, and each one left a phosphorescent green trail. I could see ten or fifteen, some very

far away, heading probably for the outskirts of Albany. The nearest one was falling about a mile off, above the forest.

"Baby?" I called. "Sabile? Something is happening."

Maybe she didn't catch what I said, or she didn't hear the urgency in my voice, because after a moment she called lazily, "Come get in the bath too."

"No, get out of the bath," I said. "Something big is happening. Come see."

A moment later she stood beside me at the window, wrapped in a damp towel, watching it rain spaceships.

"Oh my God," she said.

Using my cell phone, I tried to call my parents. There was no signal. Sabile was trying the house phone. "I get nothing," she said.

Some of the ships were landing now. They landed vertically, like gleaming monuments, their tops pointed at the night sky from which they'd arrived. You looked at them settled there and sensed unimaginable power. Not human power of conquest, as if they'd come to kill our leaders and take our children, but overwhelming poignancy, as though they were something barely remembered from earliest childhood, from before you could really remember things, that meant everything to you. As if they were *mothers*.

The closest one had landed now in the woods behind the house, less than a mile off. It was taller than the trees, and its white shaft shone far above their tops. The green phosphorescence followed it down and settled around it, seeping through the woods like fog, spreading.

Sabile said, "They're majestic."

I agreed.

In the far distance, we could still see them falling in other places, hundreds now, perhaps thousands. Even where we couldn't make out the needles—the obelisks—we could see the ghostly green streaks on the darkness that marked their descent.

I wondered, "Is it happening all over the country?"

She added, "All over the world?"

They *were* majestic, but of course I was afraid. I put my arm around Sabile. Her body was warm and her arms still moist from the bath. With shining eyes she stood beside me at the window, hugging me back, afraid too.

After a while, it seemed to slow down. In the distance a few green trails were still descending, but now the landscape was studded with white towers, like sudden stalagmites. It felt like looking at a landscape on which fresh snow had fallen, a changed world. We wanted to get news, to find out what was happening elsewhere, but the TV was still full of silent static.

"Your laptop," I said suddenly.

"I'll try," she said. "But it's dial-up, it'll just use the phone line."

Of course, that didn't work either.

What was there to do? We kept watch by the window for a long time, but nothing happened.

- - -

In the early-morning darkness, we tried to drowse on the sofa. Sabile had dropped the towel over a chair, and she was naked. On the coffee table lay a stack of paperbacks, damp-looking and stained from being read in the bath, and she reached instinctively for one.

"You're going to read?" I said. She always read herself to sleep. "How can you read now?"

"No, of course not," she said, putting down the book. She was tall and had reckless freckles on her shoulders and cheekbones. Her hair, a startling black, had dried funny from her interrupted bath and was flattened around her face flapper-style.

Although her name sounded French to most people, she was Jewish and had been born in Israel, living there until her parents moved to America in the 1990s. I had first seen her in the John Jay dining hall, moving thoughtfully down the dessert bar, poking at yogurts and mashed strawberries. She had loaded her tray with ice cream, with almonds, with chocolate syrup. Criminally lovely.

I lay beside her on the sofa, the lights off, a faint green glow visible in the window.

"Wow," she said. "My parents must be terrified."

"We all are," I said. "Who isn't?"

She said nothing.

Eventually we must have fallen asleep. My dreams were strange, full of green smoke and blood, and several times I woke in terror. Around six a.m., suddenly alert, I heard scratching.

I rose, terrified, opened the window, peered out. Nothing.

"Want to go see it?" said Sabile, making me jump. She hadn't risen.

"What?" I said. "See what?"

"Don't mind me," she said. "I'm asleep."

I closed the window, locked it, and lay back down beside her. We held each other and at last slept again, lightly.

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Just before noon, the house was suddenly filled with a terrifying racket. It was the TV—the TV had come back on. We hurried to watch. Every channel had a news broadcast on. Anchormen were stationed by the ships, providing live continuous coverage, talking over themselves to catch us up on what was happening.

People had been taken during the night.

They were *in* the ships now, these people. All young men and women, twenty-somethings mostly. Like us.

We saw a girl being interviewed; her boyfriend had disappeared. *It pulled him through the wall,* she said. *It pulled him through the wall?* said the reporter. *Well,* she said, *he went.* She seemed less panicky than bitter.

"What is this?" I said. "Are we being conquered by these things?"

Sabile, chewing her fingernails, didn't say anything.

I went to the window. The obelisks were standing just as before. It surprised me that the sky was not full of helicopters—army, media, anything.

Soon, we called our parents. "Yes," they said, "there are some here, too. Right near us. No, they're not doing anything."

But people on our street, the street where I grew up, had disappeared in the night. "Stay in the house," my dad told me. "They're taking people your age. Don't let them see you."

When I got off the phone, Sabile was crying. Her nails were chewed down to crimson nubs, her face flushed. I sat with her on the sofa and kissed her swollen eyes. She was wearing soft jeans and a tattered workman's shirt, looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her, and protective affection swelled in me.

"We'll be okay," I said. "I love you. I won't let anything happen to you."

"It's not that I'm scared," she said. "It's that I'm *not* scared."

I didn't understand.

She added, "I love you, too," and looked out the window. It was a beautiful nearly-autumn day.

I said, "When we go to France, where should we go? What's that town you told me about, in the countryside?"

But she didn't seem to hear me; she only said, "I love you," again, in the same wistful tone.

- - -

Around five p.m., someone—a handsome young man—returned from one of the ships in Arkansas. It was on every channel. They showed him wrapped in a blanket, forlorn, listlessly sipping coffee. He had been naked when he emerged.

Did they hurt you? he was asked.

No.

How did you escape?

I didn't escape. And he looked over the reporters' heads at the white top of a distant obelisk like an old man looking back on his unrecoverable life, on days of unimaginable richness.

Something cold went over my skin, a chill of fear.

Another thing happened about an hour later, and that was on the news, too. They began finding naked bodies. One or two around some of the obelisks—a few of the people who had been taken in the night. Their heads had been half-eaten.

Faces gone, scooped out along with their brains as if by a giant spoon, only the backs of their skulls remaining. One imagined creatures with huge, convex mouths, like deep-sea fish, the teeth protrusive and razory.

Sabile and I watched this on the news, not talking.

As night fell, the TV abruptly cut out again. Terrifying snow filled the screen. The phones went dead again, too. The first time, it might have been a temporary side effect of the ships' descent, some unavoidable disruption of signals in the atmosphere, but this felt more calculated. More ominous.

"We better stay away from the windows," I said.

Sabile, hugging herself, said, "Okay."

Helplessly, we went to the window.

The obelisk shone white in the darkness. When I put my arm around Sabile, I felt all the tiny muscles in her body trembling, as though some faint electric current were being channeled through her.

"I'm hungry," she said, pressing her body against mine. "We've hardly eaten all day, you know that?"

"So am I," I said.

Silently she pulled away and a moment later I heard her in the cramped upstairs kitchen. I understood her need to distract herself, to do something quotidian, to forget the naked bodies with their devoured faces.

Idly, in the dark—we had never turned the lights on—I stood at the window, a frightened sentry.

For several minutes, I had been watching two smears of whiteness, very faint, moving in the woods, imperceptibly growing larger, before it finally registered on me what I was seeing. "Oh, shit," I said. They could have been giant dying fireflies.

The trees at the edge of the woods grew sparsely, and among them the two aliens lurked. They moved slowly, like men walking on the moon, and they were very tall. They were wreathed in faint white phosphorescence.

A hundred feet from us, perhaps less.

"Sabile," I whispered. "Sabile, *I see them*. They're right outside."

Two figures approached the tree line. Their physical characteristics became easier to make out. They were perhaps seven feet tall, spindly, pure white—like coconut ice cream—and they had huge, intelligent eyes. Eyelids, too; I could see them blinking.

One left the woods, entering our backyard. With deliberate, undersea movements, it looked around.

"Sabile," I whispered.

Though its presence inspired fear, the sight of the alien made me want to approach and examine, perhaps touch. There was grace in the way its limbs moved, a wrenching erotic quality in the dolphin-smooth physique. It stepped toward the house, its attention focused on something.

"*Sabile*."

I saw her then, just as I finished speaking her name. She was walking across the grass, away from me, without hesitation. Toward *them*, and they were waiting for her. For a second, I felt sure she must be under their control, that they must be doing something to her mind.

But I didn't really believe that.

When she got to the creature in the backyard—the other was watching from the woods—she stopped, and looked at it. It looked at her. She stood still while it walked around her in a half-circle, head bent to her height, like a dog sniffing another animal. Then, straightening, it turned and walked into the woods. She followed.

Only then did I remember that I was part of this scene, too, that I had a voice.

I opened the window, yelled her name.

She stopped, looked briefly back. "Sorry," she called. "I can't not go." Then she turned and kept walking.

I was staggered by disbelief. They were stealing the woman I loved. No, not even stealing! After a moment I could no longer see her, only the glowing outlines of her companions getting dimmer, dimmer.

I found myself bolting out the back door with no memory of descending the stairs, my heart slamming against my ribs like it wanted to splinter them. I ran halfway across the backyard and then stopped, hesitating. Nothing was visible among the trees.

Should I follow them? I was afraid, bewildered. I remembered afternoons in her dorm room, listening to an old record player, the coffeemaker rumbling on the bedside table, a love so easy and unadorned.

She had betrayed me.

I took a step back from the trees. With my own eyes I'd seen how she went with them freely, uncompelled.

- - -

The night passed, sleepless. Perhaps I drowsed, in the chair by the window.

Sabile. Good God. It felt insane, being jealous of extraterrestrials.

By dawn, nothing had changed. The obelisks towered with inscrutable majesty over the landscape.

Just as it had yesterday, the television came back on a little before noon. It was all the same, more of the same. They showed photos of the disappeared. More people had gone in the night, a small percentage of them reappearing in the morning as nude, discarded corpses, faces gone, skulls emptied like bowls.

Noises downstairs distracted me from the newscast. I leapt up, my heart pumping something that was not blood—panic,

adrenaline. Footsteps came up the stairs, and then Sabile was standing in the doorway at the far end of the room, her hair in loose tangles like she'd just been fucked.

She said, "Hey."

I didn't speak.

She said, "Don't be worried."

Her freckles were darker, as if she'd been tanning. And she looked radiant, fresh.

"Tell me what happened," I said. "You're okay?"

"Yes."

"They made you go with them, they controlled you. You were like a zombie."

"No, I wasn't," she said. "I mean, yes, they came into my head. Or, no, it was more like they sent me an invitation. I could go or not go."

"And you went," I said. "The ship. What was the ship like?"

"I didn't go in the ship."

"Then what happened?" I said. "Tell me."

"I went into the woods with them," she said. "You saw. I don't really know where the time went. They touched my face."

She walked to the window, looked out. The television was still on. Someone else who had been in one of the obelisks and somehow returned, a beautiful young woman, was saying, *They don't hurt anyone on purpose. It's more like a kiss, a hungry kiss that goes too far.* All the people who had been taken, it seemed, were beautiful.

"What?" I said. "Touched your face? What do you mean, they touched your face?"

A hand rising to her throat, Sabile said, "It felt good."

"Oh? And what else? What else happened?"

She flung up both hands, a sudden, angry gesture. Tired of my questions. "I don't know, nothing else; we walked, then I wanted to come home, so I did. I don't know where the time went. I wasn't even afraid." She hesitated, staring out the window. "They led me through the woods. They touched me. It was like...flirtation."

"And on the second date, they eat your head."

She lapsed into sullen silence, as if I'd slapped her. I could always tell when Sabile was angry because every part of her body grew still except for her lower jaw, which tensed and shifted like a restless child's.

I went into the little kitchen, turned on the water, then turned it off. I wanted to do something, but there was nothing to do. I wasn't hungry.

When I returned to the den, Sabile was on the couch, watching the news. I sat beside her. The newscasters had begun using the term *selective abductions*, and live newscasts from the obelisks were being punctuated by more interviews—not with those who had been inside a ship, because almost none returned, but with the loved ones of the disappeared, their fiancés and fiancées, their boyfriends and girlfriends. Those not *selected*.

"Was that your interview?" I said. "The selection committee? Did you get approved?"

"I don't know what it was, Rob," she said. "I don't know why I went out there."

She looked at me, reached across the distance between us, took my hand. She said, "I love you." Her gaze was frightened, perhaps apologetic.

We had talked all summer about getting married in a year or two. The night before we left for the country, I'd lain beside her in our apartment in Brooklyn, wondering where my life would be if I hadn't seen her that day at nineteen. I couldn't imagine an alternate trajectory, only the same life but without her. Half the life.

- - -

Through the afternoon, we waited. We spoke by phone with our parents. "I want to get out of here," I told my dad. Sabile looked up, startled. "Tonight; drive back to the city. Out here, isolated, we're more vulnerable."

"Traveling, exposed, that's when you'll be vulnerable," he said. "Don't let them see you. People are hunkered down everywhere; the roads are empty. Wait it out."

Out of shame, I hadn't told him about Sabile's leaving. To me it seemed a moral lapse, one to be hidden. Her standing in my parents' eyes was high.

A new feeling, not to trust her. A drowning feeling, my breath uncatchable.

Slowly for a time, then with frightening speed, the sun slid down the sky and burst like a yolk, turning everything yellow. Then orange, then red. Night again. The TV went dead.

I heard an ominous, insistent scraping. Though I moved from kitchen to bedroom to den, I could not find its source. I stared out the window, certain they were coming.

"What are you looking for?" Sabile said. "What do you expect to do against them?" I realized the sound was coming from her; it was her fingernails dragging anxiously across her corduroy pants, over and over. She wasn't even aware.

"They don't mean any harm," she said, brushing dark hair from her eyes. "They're not here to hurt anyone."

"Sabile," I said, "the bodies? The heads? They eat the heads?"

"Only a few," she said. "Not on purpose."

The air felt strange, thick. "Not on purpose," I repeated. "Well, I guess it's all right if it's *not on purpose*."

She said, "There are risks you take."

Abruptly I turned to the window, thinking I had glimpsed something luminescent in the darkness. Again, there was nothing. Then, suddenly, Sabile was on her feet and had both arms wrapped tightly around me from behind, a violent and honest embrace, murmuring into my shoulder soft words I couldn't hear. My muscles slackened; I went still. There's an embrace only a woman who loves you can give.

For a minute or two we didn't move, the two of us resting like that.

Her body was quivering, just a little, as if in anticipation.

"What is it?" I whispered.

Then I heard quiet feet on the stairs.

- - -

After they had gone, taking her, I had to laugh a little.

No, that isn't true. I didn't laugh.

I sat on the dry grass of the backyard, feeling the kind of exhaustion that seems like it could last your whole life.

Out loud I may have said, "Who am I? What is this place?"

But I could understand. They were glorious creatures. They truly were.

Still my heart and history could not accept, would not accept. Surely she would wander back out of the woods with an apologetic smile. "I couldn't," she'd say. "At the last minute, I came to my senses."

Silent green light extinguished that dream, bleeding across the sky like daybreak. The departure of the ships.

They made no sound when they rose. I watched the end of their ascent, the last moments before their disappearance into the cloud cover. I saw her disappear into the night sky.

- - -

I drove home a few days later, back to our apartment in Brooklyn. A lot of her things I threw away immediately. All the decorations in the apartment—posters, paintings, a delicate mobile of butterflies—were hers, and I tossed them in the garbage by our curb. A girl who happened to be walking by, a chubby, lonely oboist who lived in our building, looked at the debris—the things that were obviously Sabile's—and said, "Figures."

Other people said similar things.

The most beautiful, though not the merely beautiful. The ethereal, the mercurial. Our visitors had been selective. (I wondered about couples where neither partner had been taken—wondered if they were ashamed, a little, or jealous.) On the face of it, it seemed absurd, but there it was: they had taken humanity's most-loved ones.

At first, in the weeks afterward, there was a certain honor in having had one's mate taken; it meant you had had a beautiful, extraordinary companion, and your grief at the loss was deeply valid.

But that didn't last, and then ahead of you the decades stretched, and thinking about it made your throat constrict. You would find yourself sick, horribly sick, as if the bacteria in your body had all gone to sleep on the ramparts, and you wouldn't even care. The years.... Nothing to do but set the alarm, trudge to the office, purchase groceries, eat dinner with the television.

You would find tears on your face and not know where they came from. You have your old life, but certain hopes are absent and things feel truncated, as if each year has been cut in half.

Queen of Winter

Jennifer Crow

You drift, heaping banks
against the walls where once
soldiers in new uniforms pressed
kisses on the local girls, and they,
matrons now, remember heat,
remember how mouths burned
against theirs, how life whispered
between breaths, how hands traced
mysteries against fresh skin. They never speak
of the soldiers, though sometimes
they catch glimpses in each other's eyes
of someone slender and straight,
someone who once fought, once loved,
once breathed. Knee-deep
in your drifts, they break paths
between each other's stories,
hems catching on the cold crust
of lives, the surface melted
and frozen daily until it hardly recalls
what it was—and the patterns
they measure against winter's face,
against the icy glitter of your court,
trace a cycle of worship and fear.
You trick eyes narrowed against the glare,
the robes of summer dignitaries layered
with the promise of nights
huddled by the fire, hands cracked
like maps under your touch. If they follow
the trails etched in their own skin,
should they dare, should they remember
the old roads and set out upon them,
your wrath will test them, rage down
the open alleys of trees, cast itself
over precipices, smash against the stonework

raised by forgotten kings, kings you loved
and cast aside, kings whose frozen hearts
line the walls of your bedchamber,
so many lumps of meat, the devouring myth
of your passion sated and at rest.
Even here they would curse
your cold dreams, had they tongues,
had they the slow murmur of spring
to steady them as they lifted
the bow, as they sighted down
the barrel, as they raised frost-rimed steel
to your throat. They would die
cursing your magnificence, your beauty,
your scorn, as the last heat
of a maiden's kiss shivered
in their soldier hearts.

The Flying Cat heather lam

Persian on the Forty-Second Floor

Keesa Renee DuPre

When I was thirteen, I met a cat without a soul.

I had first learned to see the souls of cats five years earlier, at eight. It's a funny age, eight, a time when you either learn to see the world or you don't. If you do, it's yours forever; if you don't, you never have a second chance.

It was a summer day, that day when I was eight; the sky was a brassy blue-gray and the sun slurped moisture from air and ground and skin. I was on my way to the creek for a swim when a tussle caught my eye—a bright mêlée of crimson. Our cat Lila had caught a cardinal. Carmine blood coated the ground, and carmine feathers were everywhere. I screamed and ran for Mother. She, of course, held me and told me it was just what cats did. But Lila stared at me with those eyes of hers, one topaz and one citrine, as if I had betrayed something special between us.

- - -

In my dreams that night, I was the cardinal. Blood and feathers and pain mingled together, always with the cat's cruel eyes above me, behind me, to the side. I couldn't get away from them, though I tried, beating mangled wings against the blood-soaked ground. Above me, the sky was the irresistible, unreachable turquoise of freedom.

I woke, sweat plastering my nightgown to my skin, to find Lila perched on my chest. For one panic-stricken moment, I was still the bird, and I flailed broken wings, trying to sit up. But as the dream faded, Lila's sonorous purr became less menacing and more comforting. I ran shaky fingers through her fur. There were no traces of dried blood left to spike her coat into menacing bristles. Lila always groomed herself well. She tucked herself between my shoulder and my chin, and her purrs ever-so-slowly lulled me back to sleep, back to dreams.

This time I was the cat. The cardinal fluttered in front of me, my claws its cage. Its blood was a metallic tang in my mouth. Fierce joy made every muscle quiver. I became aware of each muscle, each vein, each tendon of my cat-body in an intimate way no biologist could ever know. I released the bird for a moment, just long

enough for it to lurch forward in the false hope of freedom, simply so I could feel my muscles tense and release when I sprang forward to catch it. I was ginger and cinnabar, I was the russet brown of a fallen leaf, I was a fallen leaf. And then I was shadow and sunlight, I was all and nothing at all, I was Cat.

- - -

When I woke, I saw the moonlight reflecting off Lila's eyes, turning them an eerie blue, and I found I could see her soul in them.

Now you know, Lila said.

Yes.

You might forget.

But you'll be there to remind me.

I won't, though.

Why not?

Because I'm Cat.

Am I Cat? I asked, genuinely confused. The dream was still close about me; it felt more real than the stuffy air of my room or even Lila's weight on my chest.

You're Girl. It's close, but not the same.

Why is it different?

You can be Bird. Now go to sleep.

And I obeyed the cat.

- - -

It was different, being able to see a cat's soul. I found I could see the souls of other cats as well, but never so clearly as Lila's. That made sense; the dream had been only a dream, of course, but even so, if only in a dream, I had *been* Lila.

I spent most of my time outside in those days, a lithe brown farmgirl with hair bleached blonde by the sun. I climbed trees and caught fish in the stream with my bare hands—it can be done, if you know how—and went to the local school, or sometimes played hooky and only pretended to go. Sometimes Lila padded after me on these excursions, and sometimes not. Cats like company when they like company; the rest of the time, they like to be left alone. Girls, I discovered, are much the same way. I learned to walk as silently as Lila—she showed me the trick of it—and I learned what the coyotes were saying when they moaned their arias to the moon. Sometimes I caught squirrels or chipmunks, then released them,

just because it was such a challenge. You try catching a chipmunk sometime and you'll see what I mean. But I remembered my first dream, and I never killed a bird.

- - -

By my tenth birthday, my mother was growing concerned because I never seemed to have any friends. Catlike, I merely smiled when she brought it up, and never tried to correct her. I had friends, of a sort; at any rate, I had companions, and I was content. The woods were my friends, the sun and the wind and the trees. Lila was a friend, in a way. And by then, I was friends with birds, as well. I never told Lila, but of course she knew—and of course she pretended not to. It was the only way to maintain both her dignity and our relationship. Cats are masters of hypocrisy. They have to be; they live with humans.

I learned from the birds how to speak to the wind. It whispered of wandering, of mountains and oceans, of changes in weather, of flight—of freedom.

- - -

Then, the summer before my thirteenth birthday, we moved.

"The new job will be good for your father," Mother said. "A promotion, a pay raise...and a change of scenery will be good for you, too," she added, as if it were an afterthought, though I knew better. Catlike, I had crouched outside their bedroom door at night, heard their every whispered word, for months. It was all about my contented solitude. No one likes a person who is different. If the person is your own child, you take steps—and they had.

Mother had expected protests, whining, screams, but that isn't the way of a cat. I simply stared, expressionless, as she told me. Then I walked away without a word—a cat's way of expressing disapproval. She may have been relieved; I think she was unnerved. But she didn't change her mind. I hadn't expected her to.

- - -

What should I do, Lila? I asked.

Just as you please, she replied. *Go, or stay. It doesn't matter.*

It does matter, I insisted. *I can't stay on my own.*

Go, then. Why ask me?

I don't want to leave here for the city.

If a cat doesn't want to do something, she doesn't. If your problem is more complicated than that, why ask a cat for advice?

Why, indeed, I wondered. Lila was no help.

What about you? I asked, rolling over onto my back. Cumulous clouds formed horses and dragons and an octopus over my head.

I'm not going, if that's what you're asking. She turned away, chasing a grasshopper through a patch of weeds. The octopus reached down its sticky arms to seize me and keep me close to the land.

I'll go, I said.

Bon voyage, Lila said. The grasshopper crunched as she ate it.

I didn't look back as I walked to the house.

- - -

Packing took most of my time over the next few weeks. I stayed inside, away from clouds that tried to pin me down and tell me who and what to be. Lila disappeared the night before we left. Mother stayed out for hours calling her, but of course she didn't come. She didn't say goodbye; our conversation a few weeks before had been her farewell. Mother expected me to be devastated at the loss of my pet, but Lila had stopped being my pet years ago. She was Cat, and she was staying. And if I did hide one or two tears in my pillow that night, it was only because they were making me choose between them and Lila—between Girl and Cat. Staying would have been a kind of constraint, as would leaving, and I only wanted freedom, like the wind. But I couldn't be Wind.

We left in a borrowed van that clattered and clanked like a wooden roller coaster. I tried not to think about what I was leaving behind, nor what was waiting ahead. I tried not to feel imprisoned by the van's metal claws. I tried not to feel like the cardinal, cornered and crushed. I was Cat, and I had made my choice.

- - -

We lived in an apartment, on the forty-second floor, surrounded by other apartments and other people. I found a cat, Kali, who reminded me of Lila, and offered her food and milk in exchange for companionship. But I didn't really speak with her as I had with Lila. Perhaps I should have. If I had spoken to her then, she would have listened, might have helped.

I made friends at my new school, of sorts; they were shallow girls who had been trapped in buildings and activities when they were

eight, and had missed their chance to see the souls of cats. But they were people to talk to. Kali lived her own life and wasn't always around. And when she was around...I was afraid to speak to her. Somewhere within myself, I knew what I was becoming. I forced myself into that mold every day, and with every day it fit better.

Mother was thrilled that I had friends, but I was lonelier than I had ever been. There were no trees to talk to here. I couldn't even see the sky from my bedroom window.

I wore makeup now, and curled my hair, yet I felt emptier with each passing day.

I hated our school uniforms. I hated the feel, the greasy texture, hated the shapeless silhouette, but most of all, I hated the color, a dingy burgundy—the color of dried blood. Trapped inside that crusty burgundy exoskeleton, I found it small wonder that my grades dropped. I spent more and more time with the girls from school, but they were a vacuum, a void that sucked away my personality. There was a price to be paid for fitting in. My emptiness became so natural that I ceased to be aware of it. Then I met the Persian.

- - -

It was New Year's Day. Our school had hosted a "New Beginnings Day"—uniforms required—for those of us whose parents weren't too sloshed from the night before to make us go. Mother and Dad never drank, even on Christmas or New Year's, so I'd had the pleasures of listening to our vice-principal give a drone about the importance of goals and resolutions, of showing my parents some felt cutouts and paper foldings I'd done in class—I could understand making paper airplanes at school to mock the teacher, but these so-called crafts had been the school's idea—and of counting minutes until it was over. We had discussed my report card, where I had gotten a D in History, and my parents had given me the "You never get low grades in History; do you want to talk about what's wrong?"

But of course nothing was wrong. I had friends, I fit in; I was a normal, well-adjusted child. So how do you tell your parents that's the problem? Obviously, you don't. I blamed it on the stress of the move, getting settled in, my first holiday season in the city, and they were satisfied. The truth was, I had always been good at history because Lila loved to discuss it. She would be only too happy to chat about it for hours, her usual laconic attitude gone, and I loved

history because it made her eyes sparkle and her soul dance. My new friends took no such delight in it.

- - -

I saw the cat in the hallway as I fumbled through my backpack for the key. The owner was carrying it, a living muff curled stylishly over her arm. A Persian, with perfect white fur, impeccably groomed and delicately scented. At first I thought nothing of it; there were a hundred such cats in Manhattan alone—a thousand, even. Then it turned and looked at me. I knew something was wrong when I saw its eyes, two perfect sapphires in a perfect purebred face. When I realized what it was, I screamed. The woman gave me a strange look. The cat's fur bristled, and it hissed. There were no words in the sound; it was a hiss.

I was sobbing by the time I reached the roof, thinking it was me, thinking I had lost the ability to see. Kali, with her catty prescience, was waiting for me. The blue light of her soul playing in her eyes had never been so beautiful.

What's wrong? Kali asked. I knew the question was meant to give me a chance to reply; she already knew, but I needed to be able to say it. I told her about the cat, the Persian without a soul, and she listened with an interest in my troubles Lila had never shown.

It was awful, Kali, I said. *How— What happened? How could a cat live like that?*

Kali licked her paw, then cleaned behind her ears, weighing her words. *It's a trade,* she said finally. *Luxury, safety—but no free-souled cat could endure that. After a while, the soul withers.* She cleaned her ears again.

That's awful, I said.

Yes, she agreed. *Have you ever looked at your own soul, Chandra?*

No, I said. Understanding was beginning to force its way in. *How can I?*

I'll be your mirror, if you'd like, she offered.

I have this, I said, showing her my compact.

Kali hissed, an expletive-like sound I had come to expect over the years with Lila—a world away from the Persian's soulless reaction. *That will show you nothing. You look in that a dozen times a day, and never see yourself. Use my eyes.*

Dreading what I might see, I did as she said. She stared straight ahead without blinking—one trick Lila had never taught me.

I peered at my reflection, trying to ignore Kali's dancing soul. Tears had streaked mascara down my face. Oddly enough, it looked cleaner for the black streaks—more catty.

I focused on my eyes, trying to see my soul. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting; a flickering blue light like Kali's, perhaps, only a little weaker? Not this mucous-green thing with brown splotches across it. I shivered and pulled my gaze away. Kali blinked.

It looks awful, I said. Tears quivered my voice.

It was sick when you first came to Manhattan, Kali said. *It's worse now.*

It's dying, isn't it? I'll be a perfect shell, like that Persian. I shuddered again.

What will you do? Kali asked, sympathy warming her voice.

I turned, letting my unfocused gaze wander over the nearby buildings. "Girl is like Cat," I whispered, "only different."

Somewhere a bell tolled: noon of the first day of the new year. I brushed my fingers across the greasy burgundy of my hated uniform, feeling mangled, crushed. Dried blood, I thought, trembling. I peeled off the jacket, flung it to the roof.

Lila's words were a gong, a bass drum, a timpani inside my skull. Girl is like Cat, but different. The skirt came off next. *Why's it different?* I was wearing only my slip and my chemise now. I stretched my arms, felt forgotten muscles flex.

I'm going to be Bird, I said, meeting Kali's gaze. Lila would only have stared, impassive. Kali nodded.

I think you should, she said. She brushed her head against my hand, her way of saying she wanted me to pet her. *I will miss you,* she added.

I petted her with long, smooth strokes from nose to tail, just as she liked. It was the only way I could thank her. *I will miss you, too,* I said. *But I have to.*

I moved over to the edge of the roof, hearing the sibilant whisper of the traffic below. And above it, a familiar voice, half-forgotten. *Come,* the wind said. *Come and be free.*

I reached out my arms to embrace it, and jumped. Above me, the sky was the bright turquoise blue of freedom.

Dreamcatcher Bartlomiej Jurkowski

Contributor Biographies

Jim Pascual Agustin was born in the Philippines. His early years were spent in a communal house, where he struggled to remember all the names of his numerous cousins. His family was forced off their land to make way for the construction of a highway named after the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. With the help of an Irish Jesuit, Fr. James O'Brien, Jim was able to enter Ateneo de Manila University. He is a Fellow of the University of the Philippines National Writers Workshop and the Iligan National Writers Workshop. In October 1994, he moved to Cape Town, South Africa.

Nick Antosca's fiction has appeared in *Nerve*, *The Barcelona Review*, *New York Tyrant*, *Opium Magazine*, and *Identity Theory*. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Sun*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Hustler*. His first novel, *Fires*, was published in 2006 and a novella, *Midnight Picnic*, will be released this fall by Impetus Press.

Traci Brimhall lives in New York City. Her work has been a finalist for the Rita Dove Poetry Award and the *Black Warrior Review* Poetry Contest. Some of her poems have appeared in *Harpur Palate*, *Kalliope*, *Slipstream*, *Poet Lore*, and *DMQ Review*.

Idan Cohen: Born 1986, quiet hospital, Jerusalem, after labor induced by rose garden. Became handsomest boy alive, according to sources (mother), has since been soldier, *sous-chef*, journalist, drunk. Main internet presence is a LiveJournal, of all things (idan-cohen.livejournal.com). Promises to love you in a very specific and meaningful way, if you'd like him to.

Tina Connolly is an actor and writer in Portland, OR. Appeared or forthcoming: poems in *Strange Horizons* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*; stories in *Son and Foe* and *Heliotrope*. She is a graduate of Clarion West 2006. Her website is at tinaconnolly.com.

Jennifer Crow's poetry and fiction has appeared in a number of print and electronic venues, most recently in the *Sporty Spec* and *Ruins Extraterrestrial* anthologies, *Goblin Fruit*, *Illumen*, *Star*Line*, and *Mythic Delirium*. Several of her poems received honorable mentions in the latest edition of the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. You can go to jennifer-crow.livejournal.com if you'd like to learn more about her work.

Matt Dennison was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana. After a rather extended and varied second childhood in New Orleans (psych tech, steamboat worker, street musician, legal secretary, house painter, and door-to-door poetry peddler), he completed his undergraduate degree at Mississippi State University, where he won the national Sigma Tau Delta critical essay competition (judged by X.J. Kennedy). Dennison currently lives in Columbus, MS, where he continues to write and publish poetry and fiction in journals such as *Cider Press Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Rattle*.

Ivan Dorin's work has appeared on CBC Radio's *Alberta Anthology* and in *On Spec*, *Vox*, and the online high-school English course of the Government of Saskatchewan. Partway through writing the story, he discovered that the house in which he had grown up had features characteristic of Mennonite architecture.

For the last five years, **Christian A. Dumais** has been living in Poland, where he is an English lecturer at the Wrocław University of Technology and is currently working toward a PhD. His most recent academic article, "Burst or Die: The Rise of Burst Culture and the Decline of Print," was published in *Systems*. He is currently working on other pieces with shorter titles. Christian can be reached at cadumais@gmail.com and found at www.myspace.com/puffchrissy.

Keesa Renee DuPre knew she wanted to be a writer when she was six years old. Her work has appeared in *The Sword Review*, *Dragons, Knights, & Angels*, *Gryphonwood*, and *AlienSkin Magazine*. She has also worked as an editor for *Dragons, Knights, & Angels* and as a reviewer for *Tangent*. She enjoys reading and writing, and collects rejection slips.

Sylvia Eastman received her MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia in 2005. Her thesis, feature-film script *Forgetting Edie*, was short-listed for the Praxis Fall 2005 screenwriting workshop and was a semifinalist in the Ninth Annual American Screenwriters Association International Screenplay Competition. Due to an unabated desire to avoid finding a real job, Sylvia's currently developing two TV comedies, *Brain Freeze* and *Stretchy Pants*. In her spare time, Sylvia pens nonfiction about light, humorous topics, like aging and death. Sylvia and her man live in Vancouver, where they breed dust bunnies for fun, but never for profit.

Despite a million visitors to his groundbreaking, hilarious blog (EvilEditor.blogspot.com), and despite making the careers of almost as many best-selling authors as he's destroyed, and despite attaining the status of world's most famous editor in less time than most editors spend creatively editing their résumés after getting fired, **Evil Editor** remains the same humble fellow he was when God hired him to edit the Bible (which he found unreadable and riddled with stilted prose—and for which, by the way, he has yet to see a dime). Trailers for EE's own books may be viewed at EvilEditor.net.

Author and entertainment critic **Gabrielle S. Faust** is the author of *Before Icarus, After Achilles* and the techno-horror vampire trilogy *Eternal Vigilance* (Immanion Press), the first volume of which was released in April 2008. Her work, as both an author and illustrator, has appeared in *The Lightning Journal*, *The Open Vein*, *Darkened Horizons*, *Doorways Magazine*, *The Bloodied Quill*, *KotaPress Loss & Compassion Journal*, and now *GUD*, as well as on the websites *FearZone* and *FatallyYours*. More information about Gabrielle S. Faust can be found at www.gabriellefaust.com.

Jéanpaul Ferro is a poet, short-fiction author, and novelist from Providence, Rhode Island. A four-time Pushcart-Prize nominee, his work has been featured in *The Columbia Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Providence Journal*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Review Americana*, *Identity Theory*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Barrelhouse*, and others. His work has been featured on WBAR radio in NYC and on NPR's *This I Believe* series. He will also be the featured author in the August 2008 issue of *Contemporary American Voices*.

Michael Greenhut was born on July 7, 1978. He currently resides in Westchester County, NY and daylights as a game developer in Stamford. He attended Clarion South in 2007, where he wrote the first draft of "Think Fast," and his skill at the Mafia game earned him the nickname "The Patternless Man" among his fellow Clarionites. He also has fiction coming out in *Fantasy Magazine* in the summer of 2008. He can be reached at MJPG777@gmail.com.

Frank Haberle (raiseplow@aol.com)'s stories have appeared in *The Adirondack Review*, *Cantaraville*, *34thParallel*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Broken Bridge Review*, *hotmetalpress.net*, *The Melic Review*, *Johnny America*, *The East Hampton Star*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *21 Stars Review*. Frank is on the Board of Directors of the NY Writers Coalition, a community writing program for disenfranchised New Yorkers.

Chad Brian Henry lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His work can be found in *Shimmer* and *Outercast*.

Tania Hershman (www.taniahershman.com), a former science journalist, grew up in London and now lives in Jerusalem, Israel. Her stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio and published, or are forthcoming, in *The Cafe Irreal*, *Southword*, *The Ranfurly Review*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Entelechy: Mind & Culture*, *Riptide*, *Transmission*, and *Riffing on Strings*, an anthology of fiction inspired by String Theory. Tania is founder and editor of *The Short Review* (www.theshortreview.com), a site dedicated to reviewing short-story collections and anthologies. Her own story collection *The White Road and Other Stories* will be published by Salt in September 2008.

As a painter and designer, **Jessica Nicole Hill** is most interested in shape, color, layout, and fun. She went to school in Philadelphia, where she got a BFA in Graphic Design. She had the great pleasure of working for a skateboard company while there. She has always loved painting things that she thought were amusing or interesting, but uncomplicated and affordable. She likes her work to be approachable. Although the work looks simple, a lot of thought goes into each piece. You can see more of her work at www.jessicahillart.com.

Jessica C Hoard is a writer and photographer who lives in Memphis, Tennessee. She received her MA in Creative Writing from the University of Memphis, where she taught and was Editorial Assistant for the literary journal *River City*. You can view more of her photography at www.myspace.com/jchoard.

Founder and former Editor in Chief of Lit Pot Press and *Ink Pot* literary journal, **Beverly A. Jackson** is a poet/writer and abstract artist living in the mountains of North Carolina. Beverly's work can be found in over sixty venues online and in print, including *Rattle*, *The Melic Review*, *The Absinthe Literary Review*, *In Posse Review*, *Vestal Review*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story Extra*. Her poetry chapbook *Every Burning Thing* was issued by Pudding House in 2008 and her flash "The Dead" was nominated for *BASS* and appears in the anthology *You Have Time for This*. Blog: beverlyajackson.com. Art Shack Studio: artshackstudio.com.

Zak Jarvis is an artist and writer living in San Diego. The ordering of Writer versus Artist is a daily struggle. He attended Viable Paradise X and learned how to work on his writing as hard as he does on his art. While he has worked professionally as a web designer, a game designer, and a mail-order clerk, it's art and writing that really get him going. His artwork has appeared in *Spectrum*, *(Not Only) Black + White*, *The World's Greatest Erotic Art of Today*, and other publications. He is currently starting work on an eight-bit cyberpunk novel.

Bartolomiej Jurkowski was born in Poland in 1970. He began to draw when he was a child. He has been working with computer graphics for seventeen years as a prepress graphic designer. He has had some formal training, having attended a fine arts school. He draws sketches and does black-and-white graphics, comics, paints, etc. In computer graphics, he has always learned everything on the run for work. His favorite type of art is photomanipulation. He likes every piece of artwork to have mood—mysterious and with as much story behind it as possible.

Nicole Kornher-Stace was born in Philadelphia in 1983, moved from the East Coast to the West Coast and back again by the time she was five, and currently lives in New Paltz, NY, with one husband, three ferrets, a brand-new baby boy, and many, many books. Her short fiction has appeared in *Best American Fantasy*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Ideomancer*, *Zahir*, and *Rhapsoidia*, is forthcoming in a yet-to-be-named anthology from Prime Books, and was nominated for the 2007 Pushcart Prize. Her first novel is due out in July 2008 from Prime Books. She can be found online at www.nicolekornherstace.com or wirewalking.livejournal.com.

heather lam is a high-school student, smart, artistic, and outgoing.... technically, a normal person. -_-;; ^^

Beth Langford knows how to read dichotomous keys, but she flips burgers with no close relatives. Poems of hers can be found in *Goblin Fruit*, *Star*Line*, *elimae*, and *Electric Velocipede*.

Alex Dally MacFarlane works on the edge of London, England, proofreading military specifications. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Electric Velocipede*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Shimmer*, *Sybil's Garage*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Kaleidotrope*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, and *Goblin Fruit*, and she regularly contributes flash fiction to the *Daily Cabal*. In 2007, she guest-edited the "Five Senses" issue of *Behind the Wainscot*. For more information, visit alankria.livejournal.com.

Darja Malcolm-Clarke holds master's degrees in Folklore and in English and is a PhD candidate in the latter at Indiana University. A graduate of Clarion West, her fiction appears in *Clarkesworld*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Ideomancer*, and elsewhere. Her short story "The Beacon" (*Clarkesworld* Issue 11) was nominated for the 2007 British Science Fiction Association award for short fiction. Her nonfiction article "Tracking Phantoms" appears in the VanderMeers' anthology *The New Weird*. Academically, she studies monstrosity in relation to gender in post-World-War-II speculative literature. She lives in numinous southern Indiana, where there are many thunderstorms, which suits her just fine.

J M McDermott's first novel *Last Dragon* came out this February from Wizards of the Coast's new Discoveries imprint. His short fiction appears in places like *WEIRD TALES*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Coyote Wild*. He blogs regularly at jmmcdermott.blogspot.com.

T. L. Morganfield's fiction has appeared in many small-press publications, such as *Dark Recesses Press*, *Atomjack*, and *Paradox*. She's a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, and she lives in Colorado with her husband and two children. She spends her days writing, and devouring every book she can find on Mesoamerican history and mythology. You can learn more about her at her website, www.tlmorganfield.com.

Kiriko Moth is an up-and-coming illustrator based in San Francisco. Her work is influenced by art nouveau, pop surrealism, and Japanese art. Her art has been published by magazines and small presses and she's working to break into the highly-competitive but very satisfying field of sci-fi and fantasy art.

Shweta Narayan is a writer, artist, academic, and cultural crazy quilt. She was born in India and lived in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, and Scotland before moving to California. She has a longstanding obsession with serpentine forms and a current steampunk obsession, so a mechanical dragon was sort of inevitable. Shweta draws a fair amount and posts stuff at shwetambari.deviantart.com, but this is the first time she has actually sold art. Shweta has a short story in the February 2008 issue of *The Journal of Mythic Arts* (endicottstudio.typepad.com/jomafiction) and a sonnet in the February 2008 *Coyote Wild* (coyotewildmag.com).

C. Nelson is a thirty-two-year-old mother of three. She cut her teeth on books like *Caddie Woodlawn* and *Look Homeward, Angel* (Yes, at the same time!) and fell in love with English early. That childhood love affair's outlived all the others in her life thus far, but she did discover room in her heart for fractal art much later on. These days, it's equally likely that she'll be found poring over a swirl of color as scrutinizing a sentence. A smattering of both words and art can be found at www.tears-of-gold.org.

Jon Radlett will photograph anything, and if it's got wings, will photograph it repeatedly! Until recently Jon specialised in candid photography, but he is presently experimenting with still-life and tableau work. When not hiding behind bushes with a camera, Jon is a teacher and psychologist in Kent, England, happily married with one cat.

Learn more about **Joseph Jason Roger** at www.joeroger.com.

Rohith Sundararaman is a twenty-three-year-old writer based out of Bombay, India. He has been successful in talking his way into magazines like *elimae*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Ghoti Magazine*, *The Orange Room Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *GUD*, *right hand pointing*, *Word Riot*, and other places. Much of his success could be attributed to his craft, or to the wonderful people he workshops with at Scrawl and The Gazebo.

Kelley A. Swan lives with her family in New Hampshire, because, frankly, if it's good enough for Donald Hall, then it's good enough for her. As a writer, she's obsessed with the slipperiness that's flash fiction. To her, there is simply nothing more beautiful than brevity, especially in fiction. Read more of her and her writing at www.kelleyaswan.com.

Michelle Tandoc-Pichereau grew up in Manila, greased elbows in Los Angeles, and currently lives in Bretagne, with the best husband in the world and a spoiled cat. She was a finalist for the 2008 Kathy Fish Fellowship sponsored by *SmokeLong Quarterly* and has had work published recently in *elimae*, *Chronogram*, *Contemporary Rhyme*, *Raving Dove*, *Brink Magazine*, and *flashquake*.

SA Tranter is thirty-seven years old. Scottish male. Some stories published. UK small presses. *Cadenza*, *Staple*, *Midnight Street*, some others. He is currently working on a Novel. Email address: satranter@talk21.com. That's it, that's all; end Copy.

Matthew Chad Weinman is a junior at Emporia State University. His favorite musicians are Gregory E. Jacobs and The Kansas City Bear Fighters.

Jason D. Wittman lives and works in Minnesota, USA. His story "Femme Fatale" was published in the hardcover anthology *The Best of Baen's Universe*, and his story "A Game of Knight Court" got an Honorable Mention in the nineteenth *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His website is at www.sff.net/people/jasondwittman. Jason would like to thank S.N. Arly (who read the story when it took place in Germany and Olga was two characters), Corey Kellgren, Douglas Texter, Marc Drummond (who tolerated much during this story's gestation), and the Twin Cities Speculative Fiction Writers Network for their contributions to this story's success.

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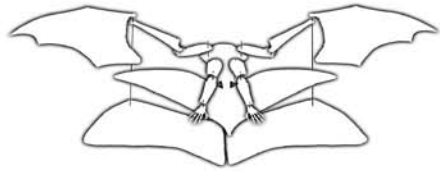
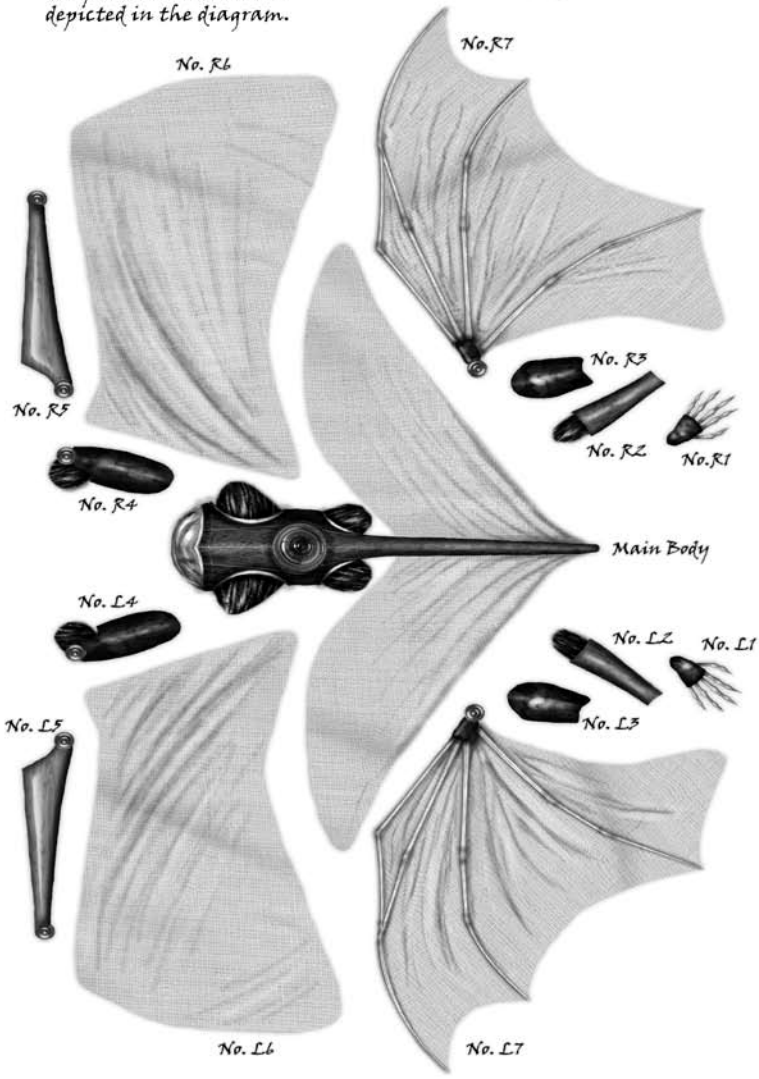
The Wing flaps R6 and L6 should be at the bottom. Above them, place the main body, then attach the parts in the manner depicted in the diagram.





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