

May/June 2019

Issue Twenty-Eight

Uncanny



Bear ♦ Caldwell ♦ Chu ♦ Hvide ♦ Klages ♦ Osborne

Bond ♦ Dara ♦ Due ♦ Goss ♦ Hurley ♦ Lu ♦ Martine ♦ O'Brien ♦ Reed ♦ Trotta

Edited by Lynne M. Thomas & Michael Damian Thomas, and Michi Trota

uncanny

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Elizabeth Bear interviewed by Caroline M. Yoachim

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Managing Editor/Nonfiction Editor: **Michi Trota**

Assistant Editor: **Chimedum Ohaegbu**

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Edited by Lynne M. Thomas & Michael Damian Thomas

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About Our Cover Artist: *Galen Dara*



Galen Dara has created art for Escape Artists, *Uncanny Magazine*, 47North publishing, Skyscape Publishing, Fantasy Flight Games, Tyche Books, *Fireside Magazine*, *Strange Horizons Magazine*, and *Lightspeed Magazine*. She won the 2016 World Fantasy Award for Best Artist and has been nominated for the Hugo, the Chesley Award, the Locus Award, and

the Spectrum 24 Award. When Galen is not working on a project you can find her on the edge of the Sonoran Desert, climbing mountains and hanging out with a friendly conglomeration of human and animal companions. Her website is galedara.com. You can follow her on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter [@galedara](https://twitter.com/galedara).

The *Uncanny Valley*

by Lynne M. Thomas & Michael Damian Thomas

As we write this, Lynne and I are celebrating the 20th anniversary of us becoming a couple. Our beginning is a ridiculous and tumultuous tale of two overwrought 20-somethings filled with passion and dreams, falling in love with each other when they probably should have known better. It started right here in Urbana, Illinois, with a date at the Bread Company, a Swiss sandwich shop next to campus. Not only is it still there, but it looked almost exactly the same when we recreated our lunch on our milestone anniversary. We've changed much more than that building.

It has been the most phenomenal adventure together, one that will continue forever.

But with that happy news, the world is also filled with sad news. Many friends and colleagues have died this year, which has devastated us. Notre Dame Cathedral had an awful fire which felt so very terrible to watch. And we just learned that *Apex Magazine* is going on indefinite hiatus for very understandable reasons.

As many of you know, Lynne was the former Editor-in-Chief of *Apex Magazine* and Michael was the former Managing Editor from 2011-2013. Without Publisher Jason Sizemore giving us that first magazine editing opportunity, there would be no *Uncanny*. Thank you to Jason, to Lynne's predecessor as Editor-in-Chief, Catherynne M. Valente, Lynne's successor as Editor-in-Chief, Sigrid Ellis, and to everyone who made *Apex* special. It published some phenomenal stories, essays, and poetry, and will be greatly missed by this community.

Change is hard and scary, and it is difficult to process sometimes why some things last and others don't. As you will see from the rest of the news and notes, change is coming to *Uncanny Magazine*. As frightening as change can be, great opportunities can also come from it. So, let us celebrate the things that last, remember and honor the things and people

we have lost, and feel excited by all of the wonders that will come in the future. No matter what happens, we have an amazing community here that will always endure at *Uncanny*, no matter how it changes.



But first, PHENOMENAL news, Space Unicorns! Three *Uncanny Magazine* stories are finalists for the prestigious Hugo Award! “The Thing About Ghost Stories” by Naomi Kritzer is a finalist for Best Novelette, “The Rose MacGregor Drinking and Admiration Society” by T. Kingfisher is a finalist for Best Short Story, and “The Tale of the Three Beautiful Raptor Sisters, and the Prince Who Was Made of Meat” by Brooke Bolander is a finalist for Best Short Story! Congratulations to everybody!

Even more wonderful news! *Uncanny Magazine* (Publishers/Editors-in-Chief Lynne M. Thomas and Michael Damian Thomas, Managing Editor Michi Trota, Podcast Producers Erika Ensign and Steven Schapansky, *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction* Special Issue Editors-in-Chief Elsa Sjunneson-Henry and Dominik Parisien) is also once again a finalist for Best Semiprozine!

Another fantastic thing! [Lynne M. Thomas and Michael Damian Thomas](#) are finalists for the Best Editor—Short Form Hugo Award!

Finally, many of our current staff and former staff are finalists for different Hugo Awards! Former Poetry and Reprint Editor Julia Rios and *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction* Co-Editor-in-Chief Elsa Sjunneson-Henry’s *Fireside Magazine* is a finalist for Best Semiprozine! Julia Rios is also a finalist for Best Editor—Short Form and for Best Related work as part of www.mexicanxinitiative.com: *The Mexicanx Initiative Experience at Worldcon 76*, and Elsa Sjunneson-Henry is a finalist for Best Fan Writer!

It is an amazing list of Hugo Award finalists, many of whom are *Uncanny* authors and friends. CONGRATULATIONS TO

EVERYBODY!!! Thank you to everyone who nominated these works. We are honored, ecstatic, and overwhelmed.



And now, for the hard news/good news things, Space Unicorns.

The hard news is that after five years, Managing and Nonfiction Editor Michi Trota has decided to move on from her *Uncanny* editorial duties at the end of 2019. We can't overstate how important Michi has been to *Uncanny*. Michi started with us on day one as Managing Editor. She developed a ton of our processes, made everything look slick and professional, always had a strong voice in the nonfiction, and has been the Space Unicorn Ranger Corps' biggest cheerleader. We really can't say enough great things about Michi and what she did for making *Uncanny* what it is today. She's a dear friend who has stepped up for every challenge. We know that Michi is going to do more fabulous things in the future.

Michi will be staying through *Uncanny Magazine* #31 (November/December 2019) to make sure we have a seamless editorial transition. Michi will also continue to co-host and co-produce the *Uncanny TV* pilot, which will be premiering later this year. We are sure that even though she will no longer be an *Uncanny* editor, Michi's association with *Uncanny* will continue in many different ways.

And now for the good news, Space Unicorns!

Starting with *Uncanny Magazine* #31 (November/December 2019), the new Managing Editor will be...

Chimedum Ohaegbu!!!!

Chimie is the current *Uncanny Magazine* Assistant Editor, and started with us as an intern in February 2018. She has done a phenomenal job, and we expect more tremendous things from her. She has been working very closely with Michi for quite some time, so we know this will be a seamless transition. Chimie is a rising superstar writer and editor, and it is such a joy to work with her. We are very excited about this!

Chimie's bio: Chimedum "Chimie" Ohaegbu attends the University of British Columbia in pursuit of hummingbirds and a dual degree in English literature and creative writing. She's a recipient of both the full 2017 Tan Seagull Scholarship for Young Writers and a 2018 Katherine Brearley Arts Scholarship. She loves tisanes, insect facts but not insects, every single bird and magpies especially, and video game music. Her fondness of bad puns has miraculously not prevented her work from being published or forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Train: A Poetry Journal*, *The /tEmz/ Review*, and *The Capilano Review*. Find her on Twitter [@chimedumohaegbu](#) or Instagram [@chimedum_ohaegbu](#).

But that is not all, Space Unicorns! Starting with *Uncanny Magazine* #32 (January/February 2020), the new Nonfiction Editor will be...

Elsa Sjunneson-Henry!!!!

Uncanny readers should be very familiar with Elsa. She was the guest Editor-in-Chief (with Dominik Parisien) and Nonfiction Editor of *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction*, and has had her essays and fiction published in *Uncanny* on numerous occasions. We are *so thrilled* to have Elsa taking over the nonfiction editing. She did a tremendous job as a *DPDSF* guest editor, and has proven time and time again that along with being a brilliant writer, she is one of the best editors in the business.

Elsa's Bio: Elsa Sjunneson-Henry is a multi-Hugo-Award finalist author and editor. She was the Co-Guest Editor-in-Chief of *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction*, where she edited the nonfiction section. Her own nonfiction writing has appeared on *CNN Opinion*, *Tor.com*, *Fireside*, and *The Boston Globe*. She teaches about disability in fiction on a regular basis. She has an MA in Women's History from Sarah Lawrence College, where she learned how to write a killer polemic. You can find her talking about being deafblind, having a guide dog, and liking bats [@snarkbat](#) on Twitter, and on her website [snarkbat.com](#)

But wait, there is more!

Starting with *Uncanny Magazine* #31 (November/December 2019), the new Assistant Editor will be...

Angel Cruz!!!!

You might know Angel from her *Uncanny Magazine* essay. She's a wonderful writer, reviewer, and editor who has contributed to numerous excellent markets, and we are very excited to have her join the *Uncanny* team!

Angel's Bio: Angel Cruz is a writer and professional enthusiast, with a deep love for magic realism and Philippine folklore. She is a staff writer at *Ms en Scene* and *Women Write About Comics*, and a contributor at *Book Riot*. She was a 2017 Contributing Writer at *The Learned Fangirl*, with additional bylines at the *Chicago Review of Books* and *Brooklyn Magazine*. Find more of her work at angelcruzwrites.contently.com, or follow her on Twitter [@angelcwrites](https://twitter.com/angelcwrites).

Uncanny Magazine Year 6 will be fantastic, Space Unicorns. Though many changes are happening, we will continue to have the BEST STAFF in the universe.



Nothing that happens at *Uncanny* is possible without our phenomenal community of creators and readers. So, do you want to help support the continuation of this awesomeness? We're recruiting new members to the Space Unicorn Ranger Corps! A small investment from you goes a long way towards paying our creators and staff. Your help means we can battle the darkness with more art, beauty, and truth!

There are many ways to join:

There is a **Subscription Drive** going on at [Weightless Books for a year's worth of *Uncanny Magazine* eBooks](#)! The drive will run from May 1-May 15. For that limited time, you can receive a year's worth of *Uncanny* for \$2 off the regular price! We will have some nifty giveaways for a few lucky new or renewing subscribers at particular milestones, too. (T-shirts! Back issues! Tote bags!) And all new or renewing subscribers will get a vinyl Space Unicorn sticker and a fancy postcard!

The [Uncanny Magazine](#) Patreon! Do you love our magazine and podcast and want to see them continue, but aren't interested in an eBook

subscription? This is an excellent way to support our magazine! You can support us for as little as \$1 per month! And you can get *UNCANNYSWAG* and eBooks at other levels!

You can subscribe through [Amazon Kindle](#)! It's simple and easy and every wonderful *Uncanny* eBook issue magically arrives on the day of release on your Kindle without any fuss!



Excellent news, Space Unicorns! The *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction* Kickstarter Campaign, with particular recognition going to guest Nonfiction Editor/DPDSF Co-Editor-in-Chief Elsa Sjunneson-Henry and guest DPDSF Personal Essay Editor Nicolette Barischoff, [won the 2017 D Franklin Defying Doomsday Award!](#) From the press release:

The D Franklin Defying Doomsday award was judged by Twelfth Planet Press publisher, Alisa Krasnostein, and Defying Doomsday editors, Tsana Dolichva and Holly Kench, and was made possible by our wonderful Pozible Patron of Diversity, D Franklin. The award grants one winner per year a cash prize of \$200 in recognition of their work in disability advocacy in SFF literature. Eligible works included non-fiction or related media exploring the subject of disability in SFF literature, published in 2017...

It is the campaign promoting the [Kickstarter for Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction](#) that was nominated and chosen as the winner of The D Franklin Defying Doomsday award for 2017. Throughout the period of the campaign the team at Uncanny Magazine published essays as daily updates. We appreciate the fact that these were public essays, and hence not limited in access to backers. There was much insight to

be gained from reading the personal thoughts of writers with disabilities on their own broad and varied experiences in, and encounters with, science fiction.

We are very impressed by the work of the team at Uncanny Magazine and are so pleased to have the opportunity to recognise them with this award, with particular recognition going to guest Nonfiction Editor/DPDSF Co-Editor-in-Chief Elsa Sjunneson-Henry and guest DPDSF Personal Essay Editor Nicolette Barischoff.

Congratulations to Elsa and Nicolette and the rest of the Kickstarter team, and thank you to all of the writers, editors, readers, and Kickstarter backers who made the *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction* Kickstarter campaign so successful!



Uncanny Travel updates!

Michael Damian Thomas will be at the [Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's 53rd Annual Nebula Conference](#) at the Marriott Warner Center in Woodland Hills, CA, from May 16-19, 2019! Michael will mostly be hanging out, keeping the *Uncanny* Penguin out of trouble, and rooting for *Uncanny* author A.T. Greenblatt, whose *Uncanny* story "[And Yet](#)" is a finalist for the Nebula Award!

Managing/Nonfiction Editor Michi Trota and Assistant Editor Chimedum Ohaegbu will be at [WisCon](#) in Madison, WI, from May 24-27. They will be hosting the super sparkly *Uncanny Magazine* Party! Word on the Madison streets is there will be ube cake again!



And now the contents of *Uncanny Magazine* Issue 28! The fabulous cover is Galen Dara's *She's Going Places*. Our new fiction includes Ellen Klages's exploration of grief and ghosts "Nice Things," John Chu's tale of family traditions and difficult choices "Probabilitea," Emma Osborne's story of loss, choices, and new affection "A Salt and Sterling Tongue," Elizabeth Bear's probing look at war and memory "Lest We Forget," Brit E. B. Hvide's story of a changing earth, family, and love "A Catalog of Love at First Sight," and Christopher Caldwell's intriguing story of whaling and relationships "Canst Thou Draw Out the Leviathan." Our reprint is Kameron Hurley's "Corpse Soldier," originally published on her Patreon in 2018.

Our essays this month include Tananarive Due's look at black horror films, Arkady Martine's examination of climate change, SF/F writing, and city planning, a collection of remembrances of the late conrunner and writer Jennifer Adams Kelley by her friends, Gwenda Bond's look at tie-in writing, and Nicasio Andres Reed's thoughts on *Star Trek* and believing each other. Our gorgeous and evocative poetry includes Theodora Goss's "The Cinder Girl Burns Brightly," Nicasio Andres Reed's "The following parameters," S. Qiouyi Lu's "Flashover," Ali Trotta's "The Magician Speaks to the Fool," and Brandon O'Brien's "Elegy for the Self as Villeneuve's Beast." Finally, Caroline M. Yoachim interviews John Chu and Elizabeth Bear about their stories.

The *Uncanny Magazine* Podcast 28A features Ellen Klages's "Nice Things," as read by Erika Ensign, Theodora Goss's "The Cinder Girl Burns Brightly," as read by Stephanie Malia Morris, and Lynne M. Thomas interviewing Ellen Klages. The *Uncanny Magazine* Podcast 28B features Brit E. B. Hvide's "A Catalog of Love at First Sight," as read by Stephanie Malia Morris, Ali Trotta's "The Magician Speaks to the Fool," as read by Erika Ensign, and Lynne M. Thomas interviewing Brit E. B. Hvide.

As always, we are deeply grateful of your support of *Uncanny Magazine*. Shine on, Space Unicorns!

Nice Things

by Ellen Klages

After the memorial service, Phoebe Morris returned to the beachfront townhouse where her mother had lived for the last twenty years, and prepared to cope. There was nothing of Mother's that she particularly wanted, but there were papers to sort and clothing to donate, and it was her responsibility. She was an only child, an orphan now, with just an aging aunt in assisted living. Rose had sent flowers and a nice note, apologizing for her absence and invoking her hip.

Phoebe stood by the door. The living room seemed sterile: pale carpet, beige furniture, sliding glass doors leading to a patio and the beach beyond. The only color came from a single shelf of dust-jacketed books, best-sellers all, and a few displays of fragile knick-knacks on the mantel and polished side tables.

Drawing her arms in close to her body was instinctive. She might accidentally knock one of the little figurines over, as if her very proximity was enough to shatter them into bits. A bull in a china shop, Mother had called her. She'd hold the dustpan and glare accusingly at her curious, clumsy daughter. "This is why I can't have nice things."

Phoebe took off her good jacket and draped it over the back of the couch. Now that all of Mother's precious things were hers, she didn't know where to start. Part of her wanted to lay claim to her inheritance by sweeping them all off onto the floor, being that bull, smashing each and every one of them. Experimentally, she picked up a little Dresden shepherdess with a skirt of frilly, prickly ceramic lace. She raised it, arm cocked and—

She couldn't.

It was as if any minute her mother would come through the doorway and catch her in the act of—of what? Of touching Mother's things. But they weren't *hers* anymore. Still, permission had not been granted by

the one person whose approval had always been required. The back of Phoebe's neck tingled: watched, judged, and found guilty.

That old familiar feeling.

The little Dresden doll went back in its place and the bottle of Pinot Grigio from the supermarket down the street went into the fridge. Upstairs, she changed into jeans and a sweater, and dug a pen and her notebook out of her carry-on bag. What she needed was a to-do list.

The sensible thing was to appraise first, smash later. Most of the little figures were porcelain, and some of them might be valuable. People collected that sort of thing, didn't they? Phoebe didn't know; she'd shared little of her mother's taste. She'd been told that was a flaw. She wrote APPRAISER—ESTATE SALE? at the top of the page, and that made her feel a bit more settled, in control.

Her day job was creating order out of chaos. A senior copy editor for the university press, she went through academic verbiage and noted what needed further research, queried questionable statements, and ensured that every fact was accurate. She was thorough and efficient, a professional nitpicker. A skill learned at her mother's knee.

For an hour she walked idly from room to room, opening drawers and cabinets and looking through the contents as if she were at an estate sale herself, browsing, not searching. Getting the lay of the land, like an archaeologist going through the remains of her own culture.

Her childhood had been privileged and uncomfortable, full of small, continual battles. "Do you *have* to slouch?" "Can't you find something better to read?" "Phoebe! Don't bite your nails." Rarely constructive, the comments became an accretion of minutiae that eventually grew around Phoebe like a coral reef, encasing her small soft self, bit by chalky bit, yet barely blunting their sting.

She felt guilty for feeling more relief than grief. She'd shed a few tears when the inevitable phone call had finally come, but knew she would not miss her mother. No more awkward visits, no more read-between-the-lines letters expressing disappointment, but signed "Love," and then, formally, "Your Mother." She had brought a few of those with

her from home, hoping they would provide an emotional nudge, but they remained in her suitcase.

On a shelf in a hall cupboard, she found a brown cardboard box marked FAMILY. Maybe that would help. A way to reclaim her own history, try and make sense of it, knit some frayed ends together. Dangerous territory, though. Best to tackle it before her energies were exhausted by dozens of mundane tasks. She carried the box to the glass-topped table between the kitchen and the living room; she planned to sell *that* as soon as possible. It was too big for her bookshelf-lined Ann Arbor dining room, and was steeped in the remains of lessons in how young ladies should behave themselves, intertwined with the invariable battles over food.

A wooden Lazy Susan held salt and pepper shakers, paper napkins, and a ceramic dish of Sweet'N Low packets. She moved it to the counter, next to the blender and the three nearly identical gold-tone canisters: FLOUR. SUGAR. MOTHER.

None of them were actually labeled. They all looked like coffee cans, complete with airtight plastic lids. The contents of two were smooth and white, the third gray, with a few unpalatable lumps of bone.

The funeral home had tried to sell her a fancy eight-hundred-dollar urn to put on her mantel. Decorating with a dead relative's ashes? No, thank you. For the time being, this cut-rate funereal object held what was left of Mother. Phoebe wasn't sure if she'd have approved of not wasting money, or been annoyed at the lack of pomp.

Mother had left no instructions about what to do with her—after. She'd had an appointment with her lawyer, but the disease had spread too quickly. For months, Mother had dismissed Death as if it were an inconvenient sales call: "I'm sorry, but this isn't a good time for me. I'm really not interested. Please take me off your list." She had slipped into that final coma with the conviction that this could not be happening to *her*. No time left to make plans or make peace.

Phoebe opened the bottle of wine.

Loose photographs in a variety of sizes filled the top six inches of the box, in no particular order: Daddy as a soldier, photos of Cleveland in

the 1950s, Phoebe's first grade class picture. She leafed through deckled edges and pink-tinted Kodachromes, throwing away unidentified relatives, skimming off photos of her mother as a girl, arm in arm with the now-aged aunt. Vivian and Rose, in ruffled dresses and pin-curls. Children Phoebe had never known. She would put those in a manila envelope and mail them off with a thank-you note for the flowers.

She lifted off a heavy, framed photo of her parents as newlyweds, then stared in disbelief at the red folder it had uncovered. She flinched, pale gold droplets of wine scattering across the glass. Suddenly she was nine years old again, her eyes prickling with tears, her hands clenched in long-buried outrage.



Mrs. D'Amico had assigned the project the first week in March. A report on an animal of their choice, ten pages, with pictures. They would have a whole month, because they were not little children anymore, they were fifth graders, and this was preparation for junior high and high school, which would not be easy, no-siree.

Phoebe chose dinosaurs, and spent her afternoons at the library, taking pages and pages of notes. The centerpiece of her report was a sheet of heavy art paper, folded and three-hole-punched to fit the folder. She'd made a tab from a white index card, "PULL TO OPEN," in her neatest printing. That revealed a colored pencil drawing, two notebook pages wide: a brontosaurus surrounded by spiky prehistoric foliage.

Art was not her best subject. She'd spent a whole weekend hunched over her little desk, fingers cramping with the effort. The dinosaur's legs were longer and skinnier than the picture in the encyclopedia, but it was still the best drawing she had ever done. The night before the report was due, she'd gotten out of bed three times to make sure it was still there, to admire what she had made.

The report came back a week later with a red-inked A and a “Very Good!” in Mrs. D’Amico’s perfect penmanship. Phoebe hurried home though a soft drizzle, the folder under her slicker, and nearly skipped through the kitchen door.

Her mother sat smoking at the glass-topped table, an ashtray and a coffee cup at her right elbow, her silver Zippo lighter and a green pack of Salems stacked neatly beside them. A crescent of red lipstick smeared the edge of the cup. She shuffled a deck of cards and laid out a complex game of solitaire, finishing the array before she looked up.

Phoebe held out the red folder. “It’s my dinosaur report,” she said. “I got an A.”

“Let me see.” Mother put the cards down and took the report. She opened the cover, nodded, and leafed through in silence. Phoebe stood on tiptoe, her slicker hanging open. She leaned forward when her mother got to the centerfold, watched in anticipation as her drawing was unfurled, then rocked back when it was folded up again and the page was turned without comment.

Her mother closed the folder. “We should save this one. I’ll put it in the cupboard by my desk with the rest of my papers.” She smiled as if Phoebe should be pleased.

She wasn’t. Her stomach did flip-flops. “It’s mine,” she said, almost a whisper “I want to keep it in *my* room.”

“Your room?” Mother shook her head and crushed her cigarette into the ashtray. “But it’s so messy, dear. What if this gets lost? Or ruined? Better to put it someplace safe. Then we’ll always know where it is.” She stood, the report in one hand, and patted Phoebe on the shoulder. Then she left the kitchen and locked away the brontosaurus.

Phoebe stared at the doorway for a minute before slowly taking off her slicker, hanging it on its hook. She knew where her brontosaurus was, but she would not be allowed to visit. Rummaging in her mother’s cupboard was forbidden.

And somehow her brontosaurus had just become one of Mother’s things.



Decades later, Phoebe Morris downed her wine in one long swallow, then wiped her damp cheek with the back of her hand and cradled the red folder to her chest. It was as if she had found her Grail, a relic from her childhood so unattainable that it had become legendary in her personal mythology. A long-missing piece of her true self.

She opened the folder, turning pages of her neatest childhood cursive, blue Bic pen on wide-lined notebook paper, pulling out the center, folding it back again with a sigh. It really wasn't a very good drawing, the proportions all wrong, not the masterpiece she'd enshrined in her memory palace.

Her longing for this particular bit of treasure had been huge and fierce, but now what? Take it home and put it in a box of her own? Buy a scrapbook? Unearthed, the legend had become another ordinary object.

She laid the folder on the tabletop, next to a small, worn brass rabbit that had anchored a stack of monogrammed notecards and envelopes on her mother's desk. Phoebe's secret pet. She'd always had to be careful to put it back *exactly* as she found it, so Mother wouldn't demand an explanation of why she'd picked it up in the first place and deliver another lecture.

For a moment, Phoebe held it in her hand, reveling in the cool contours of the cast metal, the surprising heft of it, and even more in the radical idea that she could now put it anywhere she chose and there would be no consequences.

She got up, stretched, and returned to browsing. After an hour, the rabbit was joined by a handful of similarly forbidden objects that had nostalgic resonance: her mother's ornate desk scissors; an angular art deco perfume bottle, a few gelid amber drops at its bottom; and a small leather-bound album with black-and-white photos detailing the first six months of Phoebe's life.

At dusk she ordered Chinese delivery from the menu next to the wall phone. Dumplings and shrimp toast and sizzling rice soup. She was

always surprised how expensive Chinese food was for one person—thirty dollars for a few appetizers—when it was so cheap for a group. She shook her head and reminded herself that she no longer needed to pinch pennies, at least not on the level of dumplings. Once she sold Mother's townhouse, she could pay off the mortgage on her cozy little bungalow at the edge of campus and have enough left over for a nice nest egg.

She felt a new wave of guilt as she realized that, if they had been prizes in a game show, she'd have chosen the money over Mother without a second thought. Mother had never brought much comfort at all.

The dumplings did, along with a second glass of Pinot Grigio.

Phoebe finished the soup, put the other leftovers in the fridge, and scribbled more items on her to-do list. She'd tackle the clothes in the morning, bagging the bulk for Goodwill. She was pretty sure Mother had purged any vintage things when she downsized after the divorce and moved to Sarasota.

The rest of the evening she spent inventorying the kitchen drawers and cupboards. No emotional landmines. Nothing of any importance either, but why toss perfectly good cans of tomato soup or a box of Minute Rice? She checked her email, wrote back to the friend who was housesitting for her, and RSVP'd to her book club. Then she went to bed.

It was full light, after 8:00, when she woke. She showered and went downstairs. The sound of the surf was rhythmic and soothing. She stood by the patio door, watching the waves roll in along the white sand beach, then returned to the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea. Electric stove. It would take forever. She opened the refrigerator and took out the carton of dumplings. Two left. She speared one of them on a fork and held it upright like a popsicle, biting into one crimped edge. It was cold but delicious, the dark sauce a tangy sheen. She wolfed it down, put a teabag into a flowered mug, and started on the second.

Leaning against the faux-marble counter, waiting for the kettle to boil, she looked down at the array of objects. The brass rabbit sat on a stack of photos. The scissors lay across the leather album.

She paused in mid-nibble.

Where was the red folder?

She looked under the table, on the seats of the chairs, and finally opened the flaps of the cardboard box. There it was. But she hadn't moved— She shrugged. She must have. Just didn't remember. As she lifted the folder, a single piece of paper slid out and fluttered to the floor. Not a blue-lined notebook sheet, its three-punched holes coming loose from the binding after all these years. It was heavy, cream-colored stationery, the monogram VRM embossed in slate blue capitals across the top: Vibby Reynolds Morris. In the center, in Mother's distinctive script, was a single word:

Mine.

Phoebe gasped and dropped the fork, dumpling and all, noting with dismay the brown stain it left on the white carpet. The kettle whistled insistently.

After a long moment, she turned it off, laid the note on the counter and retrieved the dumpling. She sat, finishing it slowly, savoring each flavorful morsel until she felt more like a competent, practical woman than a scared child.

There had to be a reasonable explanation.

"Look," she said to herself. "Mother was a real piece of work. But she's gone. She must have written that years ago. Sorting through pictures herself. Some to keep, some to give to cousin whats-her-name. I just didn't see it yesterday."

There. Nice and logical.

So why was her hand shaking?

Shit.

Phoebe ripped the note in half, again and again until it was confetti, tipped it into the trash, and made a cup of tea. She sipped, grimaced. No milk. She added MILK to her list, then stood up. Time to get out of here, get busy. Start *doing* the things on her list, not just making it longer. It was a beautiful fall morning, and she really needed a change of scenery. She put on her shoes, grabbed the keys to the rental car, and left the townhouse.

Three hours later, after a hearty, grounding IHOP breakfast, she returned with milk and packing supplies. Garbage bags and manila envelopes and

a five-pack of shipping boxes. Bubble wrap, two rolls of tape. Phoebe was armed and ready to pillage and purge.

The downstairs bedroom first. Musty, sickroom smell. She opened the French doors for a gulf breeze, and turned to the closet that took up most of one wall, sliding apart the mirrored doors. My god, there was a lot of stuff. No wonder Mother had always looked like Jackie Kennedy on casual Friday—perfectly coifed dark hair, pearls, in trim slacks or a Lily Pulitzer skirt. One side had built-in shelves and drawers. The other was hung with pastel dresses, skirts, and blouses, arranged by color. Mother was a Spring.

Phoebe didn't have a season. Hibernation? Her own wardrobe ran to blacks, grays, and dark blues. Early on she had drabbed herself out of harm's way; safer not to call Mother's attention. A lifetime of protective coloration.

Mother's repeated attempts to dress Phoebe in her own image had ultimately failed. She owned no pastels. Or lipstick or three-inch heels. Very little jewelry. Clearing the closet would be swift and ruthless.

She pulled out two of the Hefty bags, shaking the black plastic free with a little more force than necessary. One for trash, one for Goodwill. She slid open a drawer and tossed out nylon panties, slips, and bras. Another drawer held a tangle of scarves, still scented with Chanel. Phoebe threw those on the bed for a more careful inspection later. Cashmere, silk—maybe Hermes? Those she would set aside for the estate sale people.

The bottom drawer surprised her: a stack of neatly folded plaid wool shirts in various shades of greens and rusts and yellows. All in beautiful condition, all vintage 1960s. When Phoebe was little, her parents had season tickets to the Browns, which involved tailgate parties and other “sporty” weekend events. Pendleton and pearls.

She smiled, picturing her mother in one of these shirts, remembering one afternoon with a warm nostalgia rare for her childhood. She must have been about five. Her parents had taken her along to an afternoon party. Someone's huge backyard, views of Lake Erie, bright autumn leaves, a real popcorn machine. Phoebe had a hot dog and a Hires root beer. Mother and Daddy sat on the stone patio together, laughing. Phoebe got to run around. When it got dark, Daddy carried her piggyback to the car.

What beautiful soft wool. She stroked the top shirt, tempted to try it on, then looked at the label. Size six. She wouldn't even get an arm in. Mother had weighed 108 pounds the morning Phoebe was born, full-term. She had taken after her father's side of the family: sturdy and solid. Another memory surfaced, not warm and fuzzy, a trip to the department store downtown, sixth grade, Mother frowning at the size 12 tag on a dress as if Phoebe were the Incredible Hulk.

With a sigh, Phoebe lifted the stack of shirts and set them on a chintz-covered chair. They looked distinctly out of place. Did Sarasota have a vintage clothing store? *Someone* would drool over these. She turned back to close the bottom drawer, and saw a small bag tucked into a corner. Fist-sized, blood-red velvet. She'd never seen it before.

As a child, Phoebe had occasionally, secretly, looked in her mother's dresser when she knew she was alone in the house, curious about what went under grown-up women's clothes. Mysterious garments that her Barbie hadn't come with, full of hooks and clasps and odd bits of rubber, scary and fascinating.

She picked up the sack. It was full of—what? Spare pearls? No, not round. Loose diamonds? Yes, please. She loosened the satin drawstring, opened the sack wide, and tipped its contents into her palm. She stared down at a dozen blunt whitish objects. "Jesus," she said aloud. They were teeth.

Well, of course Mother had kept her baby teeth long enough to do the pillow thing, but saving them? Phoebe shuddered and tipped her hand over the trash bag. The teeth rattled like tiny hailstones against the black plastic, followed by the velvet bag.

Body parts. Remains. She thought about the canister in the kitchen. What was she going to do with Mother? Maybe a road trip, scattering her along the way? She'd always wanted to travel. Perhaps a spoonful in each of those logo-stamped ashtrays they had at fancy hotels, next to the elevators? A smidgen in the planters of the smoking lounge of the golf club? Vibby and "the girls" had played bridge in that room every Wednesday for the last twenty years. She ought to feel right at home there.

On second thought, the ashtray thing was probably a little too irreverent. Phoebe didn't want to be any more haunted than she already was. What about their old house, back in Shaker Heights? No. Mother hadn't been happy there. Had she been happy here? Phoebe wasn't sure.

She threw a tangled nest of pantyhose into the trash and began dragging pairs of dainty shoes out of the closet, putting them into the second bag. Size six here as well. Black heels, low; black heels, high; white heels, satin; pink and white running shoes; a pair of buff-colored bowling shoes. Bowling shoes? When had Mother ever *bowled*?

When the bag was full, she tied its handles shut and put it by the hall door. Getting rid of shoes was satisfying and easy. Figuring out the appropriate way to dispose of Mother's ashes, not so much. She needed to say goodbye. Forgive her? Tell her off? The memorial service had been lovely, but formal. Very high Episcopal, which had suited the white-haired mourners much more than Phoebe.

Her therapist had encouraged her to spend as much time as she needed, to find closure and a way to move on. Phoebe wanted to call her, get some sensible advice, except Patricia was at a conference all week. Another woman was covering the practice, but it wasn't like she'd lost a filling and any old dentist would do. Patricia had been seeing her for years, knew all her pillow-thumping, Kleenex-soddening stories and secrets.

Phoebe took a break mid-afternoon and dropped off three bags of clothes at the Goodwill store she'd passed on her errands that morning. To reward herself, she went into the bakery next door. Glass cases held cupcakes, pumpkin cookies, and elegant fruit tarts. She bought one of those, and a muffin for tomorrow morning. On her way back to the car, she glanced down at the box of pastries and the grinning black jack-o'-lantern rubber-stamped on the pink cardboard.

The last two weeks had been so busy, full of phone calls and flight arrangements, insurance forms, funeral homes, and selecting hymns. She'd completely forgotten about Halloween. She pulled out of the parking space.

Maybe that was the answer.

One of the academic books she'd recently copyedited was a treatise on Celtic rituals and modern society, and there'd been a long section about Samhain and All Soul's Day and Halloween. A liminal time, when the boundaries between this world and the next were more—permeable. In the north of England, around the ninth century, as she recalled, people in mourning had baked "soul cakes" for the occasion. Children went begging from door to door, promising to say a prayer for every cake they received.

"Trick or treat," she said aloud.

Not that she was going to hand out anything homemade at the townhouse door. The neighborhood watch would be on her in a flash. But baking sounded both soothing and appropriately domestic. Tomorrow she would make a soul cake and have a ritual feast, then scatter the ashes into the eternity of the sea.

Yes. She smiled as she pulled into the townhouse carport. It was just the sort of custom Mother would have liked. A dyed-in-the wool Anglophile, she doted on Lord Peter Wimsey and Twining's Tea, Tiptree marmalade with her breakfast toast.

As for the cake itself, Phoebe imagined it should be like the ones that travelers carried with them in fairy tales, wrapped in a bindle with a bit of cheese, sent off with the prodigal in search of fortune. When she had first encountered those tales in kindergarten, she had imagined a sort of medicinal Hostess cupcake—without the white squiggles. Brown and dry and herbal-tasting. Indestructible, but nourishing.

Inside, she ate half the fruit tart and opened her laptop, searching for a soul cake recipe. There were dozens. Irish, gluten-free, even one from the Hallmark Channel. Some were gingerbread, others more like scones or biscuits. They all seemed to call for nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger. Autumnal flavors, the cakes traditionally set out with a glass of wine. That appealed, too.

Mother didn't have a printer, so Phoebe got her notebook and copied out the recipe that seemed the simplest. She finished the fruit tart and nodded to herself. Things were coming together, and it was a real tradition, not one she was making up on the fly. When dealing with the dead, a do-it-yourself ritual seemed a bit risky.

Energized by the clarity of a decision, she got back in the car and drove to the Publix, so she'd have everything on hand in the morning. Butter and vanilla. Eggs and spices. Plus another bottle of wine and a small frozen pizza for dinner tonight.

Now that she had a plan, she felt more relaxed. She opened the wine—a red blend this time—and sat and watched the sunset on the patio while the pizza heated in the oven. After dinner, she put the plate in the sink, topped off her glass, and settled into the beige recliner in the living room. She'd brought a collection of Angela Carter stories to read on the plane and it had been a week since she'd had time to get back to them. After about twenty pages, she was yawning, the effort of all the completed tasks catching up with her, and she gave in about 9:30. Retrieving the red folder, she tucked it under one arm and headed upstairs to bed, turning off the light only after she'd zipped the brontosaurus into a compartment of her suitcase.

Phoebe woke in the middle of the night. It took her a minute to orient herself to the unfamiliar pattern of light and shadow. She turned over, kneaded the pillow, and was almost asleep again when she thought she heard the soft metallic *snick* of a Zippo lighter opening, somewhere downstairs. A minute later she smelled cigarette smoke.

She sat bolt upright, her heart pounding in her ears with sudden adrenaline, eyes wide open, staring at nothing. Those same acrid menthol fumes had wafted up to her childhood bedroom so many nights when Mother couldn't sleep.

No. Mother's dead, she thought. She almost said that out loud but knew that the word "dead" in the silent darkness would terrify her. She bit a knuckle to stop herself.

Then came a sound that raised every hair on her body.

Whirrr..., snap. Whirrr..., snap. Whirrr..., snap.

A deck of cards being shuffled, and then the unmistakable *slap, slap, slap* of a game of solitaire being laid out on a glass-topped table.

That was impossible.

Yet the sound continued, soft and regular.

Phoebe pulled her knees to her chest, curling up around herself, and tried to slow her breathing. It was only her imagination. She was alone in a strange house after a long, emotional day. Of course she was thinking about Mother. All she needed to do to reassure herself was get up, go downstairs, and turn on the kitchen light.

She couldn't move.

A minute went by. Two. She started to relax, and then:

Whirrr..., snap. Whirrr..., snap. Whirrr..., snap.

A bead of sweat trickled down between her breasts.

Slap, slap, slap.

Phoebe lay motionless, every muscle tensed, willing the sound to stop and trying to hold off the panic that if it did, the next sound she'd hear would be slippered footsteps coming to reclaim her.

Eventually, sheer exhaustion pulled her into a restless sleep. When she finally got out of bed, every muscle aching from being clamped in fight-or-flight tension, morning light streamed through the window. She dressed and padded silently down the thick carpeted stairs, clutching the only weapon at hand, a slender pale-blue Lladro figurine. That was ridiculous, but she felt less vulnerable than if she'd been unarmed.

The kitchen was spotless and empty. Nothing on the table but the FAMILY box and the small pile of objects. No ashtray. No lighter. No cards. A tomato-smeared plate in the sink, the trash empty except for the food cartons.

Phoebe put down the figurine and felt a wave of self-conscious embarrassment. She'd had a whopper of a nightmare. Not surprising, under the circumstances. With the combination of wine, greasy food, and a lifetime of, well—*issues*—of course she hadn't slept well. Made perfect sense, now that it was daytime.

Cards had been one of their few shared customs, a bloodsport that Phoebe had been taught as soon as her hands were big enough to hold a deck. How wonderful it had once felt to get Mother's undivided attention—until their games had evolved into an arena for inquisition. She'd learned to dread the moment that Mother would stop dealing and say, as if it were a casual thought, "Can't you do something with your

hair?" "Have you decided on a major?" "What *are* you planning to do with your life, Phoebe?"

She boiled water, made a rich, milky tea, and wrapped her hands around the steaming mug. The patio door slid quietly on its track. Phoebe walked out to the end of the narrow dock and stood for several minutes, the air cool on her skin, watching the waves break, over and over. Constant and ever-changing.

Sipping her tea, Phoebe planned her day. She'd finish the bedroom, take herself out to lunch and another run to Goodwill, then come back here and bake. Everything would be ready by sunset, and she'd go down to the water and do what she could to banish her ghosts.

Phoebe had never been big on rituals. She had gone to Sunday School by command, and when she was old enough to choose for herself, chose to worship the heretical god of sleeping in. So there was no religion to fall back on, no Episcopal exorcism. The soul cake was a start, though, a focus. She needed *some* structure, couldn't just walk to the end of the dock and fling Mother out willy-nilly, watching the seagulls dive down to nibble at the larger bits before they sank below the surface.

The sun rose fully above the line of palm trees, their fronds rustling in a gentle breeze, and the air began to warm. Phoebe put the mug down and walked along the sand, her hands in her pockets, inviting grief and finding it elusive.

When Mother first got sick, Phoebe had supposed that grief, when it finally came, would be a huge hole ripped out of her life. Instead it was as if some delicate, many-tentacled creature had been attached to a fine mesh, then flown away, leaving a thousand tiny holes. Particles of memory drifted in with no pattern or predictability.

Emotions swirled, chaotic and contradictory. She felt sympathy for the hollow-eyed invalid, felt relief that Vibby Morris's suffering had ended, but did not miss the cool and critical woman who had raised her. And part of her would always long for a loving mother who might have come to her in the dark when she was small and scared and alone. Who might have rocked her, sung her lullabies, and now never would.

It was almost noon when she finally returned to the townhouse. Instead of going out again, she ate the bakery muffin and heated a can of tomato soup, drinking a mug of it standing up. She spent the afternoon browsing again, gathering her offerings from each room in the house: a little figurine; a deck of cards; a selection of photographs.

One in the nursery, baby Phoebe in her mother's arms, swaddled and bottle-fed. One from high school, Phoebe wooden, Mother with a little half-smile, her arm around her daughter, her eyes on someone off camera. And one of Mother after the first operation, flanked by Phoebe and two of the "girls" from her bridge group. She had lost most of her hair, so her head was done up in a turban, but she had put on lipstick, and her pearls, of course. *Those* eyes looked frightened, wary, like an animal caught in an unexpected trap.

Phoebe went up to the guest room and retrieved the bundle of letters from her suitcase. Missives written when she was at summer camp, at college, in Chicago for her first job. All on that same cream-and-blue stationery, the handwriting so familiar, so distinctively *her*.

Returning to the table, she added them to the photos and put everything into a wicker basket. She tore the recipe out of her notebook and read it through once, then turned the page over and did the math to cut it down from a batch to one single, slightly oversized soul cake. She scribbled numbers, crossed them out, recalculating and fudging a bit to eliminate inconvenient measures like 3/32nds of a tablespoon.

Then she laid out each of the ingredients she'd purchased: vanilla, eggs, milk. Cinnamon, ginger, butter. Baking soda. The recipe called for currants, but the Publix had only stocked raisins. Those seemed too frivolous, so she didn't buy any. A soul cake ought to be a pastry without indulgence. A final course, but not a dessert.

She opened the first canister, scooped out a cup and replaced the plastic lid, sifting the flour and baking soda into the mixing bowl. She looked down at her altered recipe. One third cup of sugar. She rummaged in a drawer for a smaller measuring cup, and found a yellow plastic one behind a package of cupcake liners and some corn skewers, one of which jabbed her in the hand as she pulled the cup out.

Ow. Shit. A thin line of blood smeared her thumb. She put it in her mouth, then stopped in mid-suck at a sound from the downstairs bedroom.

Whirrr..., snap. Whirrr..., snap.

Phoebe dropped the measuring cup as if she'd been stung. She picked up the Lladro, holding it like a club, and walked into the hall. Three steps from the kitchen she heard the soft *slap, slap, slap* of a hand of cards being dealt behind the closed bedroom door.

"No!" she shouted in a burst of bravado. She hurled the figurine as hard as she could. It smashed into the wall beside the door with a *crack* and shattered, pale blue shards littering the carpet.

The sound stopped.

Phoebe waited, her breath ragged in her chest. Silence. After five minutes, she returned to the kitchen, her thumb throbbing, her attention still on the empty hallway, listening, dreading. Picking up the yellow measuring cup, she glanced distractedly at the recipe—right, a third of a cup of sugar—and opened the nearest canister. She filled the little cup, dumped its contents into the flour mixture, then tossed it back inside and closed the lid, pushing the gold-tone can back against the backsplash with the others.

She added the spices—a teaspoon of this, half a tablespoon of that—and began to stir. The smooth white flour became darker and rougher, and when it was all a homogenous pale brown, she cut in the butter and an egg, added the vanilla, and used a fork for a vigorous final mixing.

Sprinkling a little flour on the cutting board, she settled the beige lump and rolled it out until it looked like biscuit dough. The biscuits of the dead.

The hallway remained silent.

She turned the oven to 350° and cut out an irregular circle about four inches across. Noting the time on the wall clock, she slid the greased cookie sheet into the oven.

When she checked ten minutes later, the cake was still pale and felt pliant under the pressure of her finger. Ten minutes more and its edges were beginning to tan, and after another ten it was an even, golden brown. She thumped it with a knuckle, feeling a bit like a contestant in the *Great*

British Bake Off, then grabbed a potholder and pulled the soul cake out of the oven. It smelled delicious. She was tempted to taste it, just a crumb or two. No. No such thing as a ritual nibble. She left it on the counter to cool.

As the light outside began to fade, Phoebe dressed in her favorite black sweater and jeans. She put the soul cake in the center of one of Mother's scarves, tying the corners together at the top. She added that to the basket, along with the funereal gold can, four votive candles, and a box of kitchen matches. She poured red wine into a glass, filling it nearly to the brim, then clicked off the kitchen light. She slid the patio door open with her foot, stepping out into the crisp, salt-scented air of twilight.

The sun was a Fiesta-red ball just above the horizon, flattening slightly as it descended, its surface veiled by a few wispy clouds. Phoebe watched it sink into the pewter sea, then took a deep breath, shifted her basket, and headed toward the dock.

She sat, six feet above the water. Small waves broke in front of her, scattering the surface with undulating lines of orange from the neon-sunset clouds. The basket beside her, she watched the surrounding colors fade. Water lapped softly at the pilings and she heard steady creakings from a few boats moored farther down the shore. Lights came on in houses on either side, reflecting like tiny amoebas in the dark water.

Phoebe set the scarf down on the white-washed planks and untied it, laying it flat. Votives anchored each corner. The night was still and when she lit the squat round candles, the wicks barely flickered. The light illuminated the rich colors of the scarf—butter yellow with emerald piping. The glass of wine cast rich ruby shadows.

She encircled the cake with Mother's pearls.

Around the periphery she set the icons of her mother's life: an unopened pack of Salems; a silver dollar from 1943, Mother's birth year; the porcelain shepherdess; a deck of bridge cards with the queen of clubs face up; the small stack of photos. Above the scarf, the bundle of letters. Below it, the glass of wine.

She had just finished arranging everything when the full moon rose above the row of palm trees behind her, a line of white light dancing

along the dark water like a path leading to the now-invisible horizon. Phoebe Morris dangled her legs over the gulf and tried to say goodbye.

Taking a drink of wine, she picked up the silver dollar and turned it over and over in her hand. What should she say? “Safe travels, Mother.” She threw it far out into the gulf. It sank soundlessly and felt like an empty gesture.

Emptiness. She was at a loss for words. She touched a finger to the soul cake. Prayers. That was the tradition. Beggars said prayers for the souls represented by each cake. She hadn’t prayed in years, wasn’t sure who or what she was praying *to*, but—She picked up the cake and took a bite. Bitter. Not sweet at all. Well, that was fitting. The spiced cake dissolved in her mouth, crumbly and a little gritty. She washed it down with a sip of wine.

“Our Father—” she began. No, wrong prayer. This was for Mother. Phoebe sighed and started again. “The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It was a psalm, not a prayer, but she knew it by heart. She closed her eyes and recited it slowly.

Pulling another piece off the cake, she ate it and, after a moment of hesitation, picked up the letters. She read few lines from each of them and thought of all the replies she’d wanted to send back, but had never written. A lifetime of unspoken bravery. “Mother, you never—” she started to say. “Mother, I want—” Her words trickled away into the night air. Even now, the idea of talking back made her stomach tighten. After last night, she half expected Mother to appear, glaring, walking on water.

Another bite of cake, a sip of wine. Then, hands unsteady, Phoebe struck a red-tipped match against the wood of the dock, smelling a wisp of sulphur, and burned the first letter, holding the monogrammed page by its corner until the flames neared her fingers. The ember-rimmed fragments drifted over the side, hissing when they hit the water. They floated for a few minutes, pale against the darkness, then grew soggy and sank below the surface. She burned the others, one by one.

She slid the queen of clubs under the edge of the pearls and picked up the deck of cards. It had taken her a while to decide which queen was

most evocative. Spades seemed overly wicked, diamonds too Gabor, and hearts just inappropriate. But clubs? Mother *was* the queen of clubs. Golf club, bridge club, luncheon club, Wellesley Club. A member instead of a mother.

It was unthinkable to think of her spending eternity without a deck of cards. Like warriors taking their shields to Valhalla. She took another bite of cake, half gone now, and held the deck in both hands.

Muscle memory kicked in. Without thinking, she divided the cards and began to shuffle. *Whirr..., snap. Whirr..., snap.* Her hands jerked at the sound, scattering the cards across the dock. They fluttered and sailed off into the water. Phoebe watched them disappear and picked up the queen of clubs, still lying on the silk scarf. “The queen is dead,” she whispered. She ate a bit of cake and tore the card in half, sweeping the pieces into the sea.

“I loved you once,” she said. “It hurt. I wanted to be just like you, but I wasn’t good enough.” A long silence until she spoke again.

“Then, you know what—I left.” Her voice grew stronger. “I survived. I made friends. And somewhere along the way, I realized that being like you was the *last* thing on earth I wanted.” She drained the wineglass, washing down the final morsel of cake.

A ragged sob surprised her, doubling her over. For several minutes after, she sat with her arms wrapped around herself, tears running down her cheeks, the wind now cold on her face. Time to go in. She felt a bone-deep weariness and a need for this to be *over*.

Without further ceremony, she pried off the plastic lid and tilted the gold canister toward the water. “Goodbye, *Vibby*,” she said. A small vortex of gray dust swirled away. Phoebe angled the can down and poured out the rest of the ashes, watching in stunned surprise as the small yellow measuring cup tumbled out and bobbed on the waves.

“Oh, no.” A gingery bile rose in her throat. “No, no, no.”

The cup disappeared from view. She looked down at the canister in her hands as the significance of what she’d done began to sink in.

“I’ve eaten Mother,” she said.

Not even in a metaphysical way, like the body of Christ that was actually a cracker. She had actually consumed bits of her mother.

Phoebe didn't scream. She sat for a very long time, oddly calm. Shouldn't she be horrified, disgusted? She tried to summon those feelings and found them missing. Maybe she was in shock? Likely. Shock was rather pleasant. She finally felt the kind of tranquil acceptance she'd hoped this ritual would bring her. Closing her eyes, she lay on her side, her cheek against the rough wood of the dock, her mind drifting farther and farther with each rhythmic swell of the waves.

When she woke again, the full moon was high in the starlit sky and the candles had all gone out. Phoebe sat up slowly, light-headed, her body leaden. She tried to stand, legs all pins and needles. Minutes passed. Soon she would gather up the objects that remained, damp from the sea and the night air, and return them to the basket. She smoothed a hand over the silky scarf and picked up her pearls.

With a little half-smile, she reached behind her neck and fastened the clasp with a practiced click.

"Mine," she said.

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(*Editors' Note:* "Nice Things" is read by Erika Ensign and Ellen Klages is interviewed by Lynne M. Thomas on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast Episode 28A.)



Ellen Klages

Ellen Klages is the author of three acclaimed MG historical novels: The Green Glass Sea, which won the Scott O'Dell Award, the New Mexico Book Award, and the Lopez Award; White Sands, Red Menace, which won the California and New Mexico Book awards; and Out of Left Field, which is a finalist for the 2019 Children's History Book Prize. Her short fiction has been nominated for or won the Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, Locus, Mythopoeic, Gaylactic Spectrum, and British Fantasy awards. Ellen lives in San Francisco, in a small house full of books, a small brass rabbit, and other strange and wondrous things.

Probabilitea

by John Chu

Ordinary fathers lead ordinary lives. They go to work, they raise the kid, they open their homes for the weekly mahjong and meal that rotates from one family to the next in their circle of Chinese immigrants. When they text their daughters, the cell phone vibrates discreetly. If the phone is buried in a backpack, the buzzing might not be noticeable at all. Katie's father, however, is a physical manifestation of Order and Chaos. When he wants his daughter to read his text right away, it feels like the phone's about to shake itself apart. As if when she opens her backpack, she'll find the phone shattered into exactly one hundred precise diamond-shaped fragments. The phone is always perfectly intact, though, and it will be every time. Her father is too skilled and too practiced at manipulating order and chaos for any other outcome.

How Katie's cell phone is buzzing right now makes her backpack buck as like a giant jumping bean. She's ignoring it anyway as she rushes down the block. There's still too much left to do and not enough time to do it and this is after she saved four hours by leaving her Advanced Topics in Fiber Optics final early. The professor had scheduled his grueling ordeal in mathematical modeling for two consecutive exam slots, six hours. Katie flew through it two hours. The final was way more straightforward than any problem set her father has posed to her in years. She'll still get the pointlessly high score her father expects, even if his weekly problem sets ate up time she would have spent studying.

His problem sets are always these abstract puzzles where she has to manipulate one probability distribution function to another using only an arbitrary—and, in her opinion, unfair and generally unhelpful—set of mathematical transformations. It's due Saturday at dinner. Today's Friday and she's only finished the first problem. If she's lucky, the four hours she's just saved will be just enough to solve the second problem.

On top of that, she has several dozen Stochastic Processes finals that her doctoral advisor wants graded by Sunday. Well, she needs them done by Saturday afternoon. Her mom is back in town with a show and she mailed Katie a ticket for Saturday night. Katie wants to clear everything out the way so she can watch the show and spend all of Sunday with her mom. It's been a year or so since her mom was last in town. With all that, who has the time to check her texts?

What Katie really wants to do right now is to splurge on a pot of fancy tea at Take a Chance on Tea. It's a teahouse that also serves coffee because they want to stay in business. Everyone else calls it a coffee shop and, whatever it is, it's her favorite one. For just a moment, she just wants to believe all is right with the world and she can get everything done in time.

She turns the corner. The teahouse is just down the block. A line of cars is parked along the street. She freezes when she notices their license plates. The first character of each plate together forms the string "DU5DTXT3Q". Her father has told her, in the most 'him' way possible, to "Read my text. Thank you."

It's one thing to tinker with the timing of a traffic signal or the friction on a set of brake pads, but no one, not even her father, can control what people will do. And yet, here they are, nine specific cars parked in exactly the order her father wants without materially changing the lives of nine people. She suspects a manifestation of Life and Death must have been involved to find the most likely nine. Katie stares at the cars and lets the enormity of her father's work wash over her. This is epic-scale work—he had to tinker with an absurdly large number of chance events—for such a tiny result.

It hits her that her father knows her too well. Also, any text that comes with such an extravagant request to read it has to be read right now.

Katie unslings her pack and fishes out her phone as a scattering of pedestrians flows around her. The phone seems to project a smug air of innocence as she unlocks it. It's practically mocking her for not grabbing it the instant it started vibrating. Not that her cell phone is actually capable

of projecting an air of anything, mocking her, or looking like anything except the thin black slab that it is.

Her father's latest text sits in a gray bubble at the bottom of the screen. Katie catches her breath when she reads it. Compared to feat of making nine cars line up just right, though, it's almost ordinary.

"If you go into that teahouse, Jackson will ask you for the sort of help only a manifestation of Order and Chaos can give. You don't have to help. If you do, both of you get to find out what it means to be a manifestation. Or, instead, go finish your problem set at some coffee shop. Up to you. Whatever you decide, you'll always be my daughter."

Katie stares at the message as though if she could exert enough visual pressure, it would give up its secrets. In some ways, life was much easier when she was twelve and her father would just tell her what to do. Nowadays, he tries his best not to impose his expectations on her. And he even succeeds occasionally. If there's anything worse than unreasonably high expectations, though, it's unreasonably low ones or none at all.

Making her phone vibrate so hard that it shakes itself into pieces requires more impromptu math than she can manage so she lets that idea go. Besides, she can't afford to replace the phone. Instead, she just jams it back into her pack, trying to work out why her father even sent a text in the first place. She's been training for as long as she could remember. Now that she thinks about it, though, most of his exercises have been to make sure she never changed the probabilities of anything by accident. Not a day goes by that she doesn't get some sort of reminder not to manipulate order and chaos in ways that matter to people's lives. That all seems the opposite of what manifestations do. If she has to guess, then, he sent the text more to warn her away from the teahouse than to entice her in.

Take a Chance on Tea hunkers before Katie. Giant panes of glass cover the storefront. People inside sit on square black wooden stools in front of high black wooden tables, drinking their tea and eating their pastries. There are eight coffee shops on the same block. One of them even serves bubble tea, which is always fun. Another is literally right across the street with its own giant panes of glass. There's no question

which one Katie will go to, of course. She is going to her favorite. If her father says that, just this once, she gets to manipulate order and chaos in ways that matter, she's too tempted to pass that up.



Motes of dust dance in shafts of light that stream through the coffee shop's giant glass panes. The tiny particles swing around each other in absolutely determined yet unpredictable ways. Katie is sitting at a table near the back, studying that chaos to pass the time and to try to ignore the clump of polo-shirted frat boy types who've taken over the other side of the room. The midterms she should be grading and the problem set she should be finishing lie untouched scattered in rough piles in front of her. She's too distracted to work right now, not just by the clump of man boys who should know better but also by her father's text.

Jackson walks in, cutting through the shaft of light. Dust scatters around him, jagging wildly in all directions before settling back into its normal chaos. It doesn't take a second for Katie to recognize him. For her, physical manifestations of Life and Death are in sharper focus than everyone else and everything around them. The gray of his sweatshirt and faded blue of his jeans are that much more saturated than even the black of the tables he's walking past. The tan of his skin is both lighter and richer than the mahogany of the counter where he is dropping some change into the tip jar and picking up his drink. Maybe she appears the same way to him. She has no idea. Most of them, she's only met in passing through her father and it'd would have been weird to bring the subject up.

Also, Jackson is the manifestation of Life and Death who would be deadly anyway. They've known each for years. He was once that gawky kid struggling to fill out his oversized frame. That memory takes the edge off the way he looms now that he's a basically a walking avalanche. On a first impression, it's impossible not to expect him to fall on you like a giant pile of rocks.

He spots her and smiles. Jackson's demeanor starts at overgrown puppy and gets even more enthusiastic from there. His eyebrows rise and his hands spread, opening his palms to her. She nods and waves him over.

"Hey, Katie." Jackson looms over her, his glass of iced tea in hand. "I didn't expect you'd be here, too."

"Hi, Jackson." She pushes her piles of paper and her tea pot aside to make room for his glass. "Just took a final so now I need to catch up. My dad's problem set is due tomorrow."

"Your dad gives you homework?" His face seems to stretch and his jaw hangs. "What for?"

"You know, I don't know." Her eyebrows rise as she realizes. "He's been giving me ridiculously complex math problems to solve for as long as I remember."

Jackson looks around and steals a chair from a nearby table. As he sits, his expression is downright odd, all furrowed brow and pursed lips.

"Why do you always look at me like that?"

"Like what?" Katie takes a sip of her tea.

"Like I'm a disaster just waiting to happen." Jackson stabs a straw into his iced tea.

"Am I wrong?" The expression on her face was unintentional, but now she can't help but tease him to cover for it. "You killed all the pets on your block once. By accident."

"One, I was, like, twelve, practically a decade ago. I've gotten much better since. Two, I'll remind you that I revived them all right away. Hardly anyone even noticed. Except the pets themselves, I guess." Jackson tries to be serious but the broad smile gets in the way. "Also, that's a bit rich coming from someone who unintentionally stacked three mahjong tables' worth of hands when she was ten."

Maybe that's why all her father drills have more to do with making sure she never affects probabilities by accident. In any case, like Jackson, she hasn't screwed up like that since.

"Fair."

"Anyway, you see that guy over there?" He tilts his head and gaze toward someone holding court among the noisy frat boys.

That guy is lean, short, and disgustingly dapper in his dress shirt, suspenders, and vest. With neatly trimmed hair and wire-rimmed glasses, he's a cross between 1920s mobster and barbershop quartet tenor. The only way he could be more Jackson's type is if he were wearing figure skates and racing through intricate footwork on a sheet of ice. And, yet, Jackson is sitting across from her as opposed to across from him.

The clump of frat boy types slouch in the chairs around him. Their focus never leave him, even as they slam their fists on the table in agreement to whatever point he was making. Dressed in white polos and tan khakis, they look like casual members of some cult that worships mid-range department stores. Nobody who could take Jackson in a fair fight. He could pull up a chair and, even if they minded, they wouldn't be able to do anything about it. They can't be why Jackson's talking to her when that guy is literally right there.

"You want me to arrange a coincidental meet-cute for you with him?"

Jackson's jaw drops and his brow furrows. His face starts to flush and he grips his glass so hard, it starts to crack. A couple thoughts hit Katie at once, "This must be what Jackson's like when he's angry." and "We joke with each other all the time and he's never this touchy." That he can squeeze hard enough to crack a glass is not surprising.

"I'm sorry." Katie stifles the useless urge to slide away from the table. "I didn't realize it's a sore point with you. I won't do that again."

The burst of anger disappears as quickly as it came. His jaw slowly closes, but his gaze grows critical. He sets the glass down. On all sides, thin veins filled with iced tea jag from the base to the lip. Jackson stares at his wet hands for a moment before he wipes them on his jeans. Katie wastes several seconds in thought before she decides to not mess with the Brownian motion of the iced tea. She'd have to keep it up for who knows how long to keep the tea from dribbling down the sides of the glass. Besides, her father would sense the alteration.

"Nah, my love life is in bounds. Go nuts. I don't even know if we play for the same team but it is kind of annoying that, physically, he's exactly my type." He purses his lips and points a finger at her. "You don't recognize

him? Why don't you... I guess he's not infamous enough yet. Never mind. I'll just tell you. No, even better, we should eavesdrop on him."

"We?" Katie furrows her brow. "I mean, *I* can, but..."

"Do you manifest Order and Chaos or not?" He has grabbed some napkins from a dispenser and sops up the dribbling tea. "I think my mom has asked for something like this before. Can't you just—"

"Play with the interaction of air molecules to bounce the sound here? If I were my dad, sure." She gives into his expectant gaze. "Fine. I'll see what I can do."

Part of her expects her father to notice her playing around and her tea will bubble disapprovingly or something. Her tea, though, continues to behave like a normal cup of tea. As she plays, the screen of multiple overlapping conversation fades. What emerges is faint and spotty. The words would be easier to understand if she weren't working so hard to get them here in the first place.

"That's really fuzzy." Perversely, Jackson squints, as though that will make him hear better. "Is there any way you can clean that up?"

"Fuck you."

Surfaces. This cafe is full of surfaces. She sees how the sound scattering through the air can bounce toward her. Given the right set of surfaces and the appropriate transformations to reverse the scattering, his words should land right in front of them, except for some energy loss. It's impossible to amplify without also adding noise. She'll try that next if she has to.

Part of her is surprised that the only changes in the air seem to be hers. Her father doesn't seem to have noticed her work, for example. Then the realization hits her. Her father can be so subtle in detecting her work that she'd never notice him doing it. She wonders how well she's doing or even if she's supposed to be doing any of this at all.

That guy's words are still faint. She can pay attention to them, though.

"Wow." Jackson's eyes grow wide again. "This is pretty awesome. I may never say anything out loud ever again."

That guy is talking about how they will not be replaced and how they will take back the white homeland and—

The words squeeze the air out of Katie's lungs. She recognizes that guy now. He goes around the country failing to speak at college campuses so that he can claim in bad faith that his free speech rights are being violated. Anger jolts through her and, whether she wants it or not, the screen of conversation overwhelms his words again. This is the first time she's ever felt thankful that her father put her through all of those drills. Even angry, she didn't do more than let things return to the typical. The twelve-year-old her might have shattered the shop's giant window panes or something.

"Katie." His brow furrowed, this may be the most annoyed Katie has ever seen Jackson. "When you're asked to help, it'll always be because someone awful is nearby. You can't just bail because that guy is being irredeemably evil."

"Okay, okay." She holds her hand up and takes a deep breath. "Let me try it again."

The screen of conversation parts and that guy's words are now front and center as he walks through his plan. From here, he and his clump are going downtown. There's a rally protesting a speech one of their elders is giving. As the alpha males they are, surely, they have to make sure no one at the rally can't ever protest again.

Her grasp on the air slips and the screen of conversation overwhelms that guy's words. Anger is cranked tight like a vice around her gut. Her mind races through the many, many things she could do to that guy, especially now that he's sipping his tea. She'd never do any of those things though, no matter how much he deserves it. Several billion memories of her father warning her of all the ways interfering with someone can disrupt innocent lives are too deeply ingrained in her. She forces herself to whisper because otherwise she'd be shouting.

"Jackson, you have to stop them. People are going to get hurt or killed." Her hands grip the table as she leans toward him. "If you wanted to, you could drop that guy from here, right?"

"Funny you should say that." Jackson pushes his glass aside, leaving a skid of iced tea on the table. "It's not that straightforward. There's a process for figuring out what to do."

Manifestations of Life and Death have human bodies. They breath and bleed and sweat and hurt, but, as Jackson explains himself, Katie's still not convinced they're entirely human. They do die within a human lifespan but only at a moment of their choosing. Her father tried to show her what they do one Saturday when she was twelve and he was driving her back from Chinese class. For a moment, the machinery of civilization surrounded them, their multi-colored ribbons twisting and billowing. Then it disappeared and everything was typical again. Katie was genuinely unsure what had just happened and her father didn't explain himself. Afterward, they continued home leaving her with the strong conviction that he could control not just the coefficient of friction but also the weather.

It's been a decade and, infuriatingly, her father still hasn't shown her how he made it rain that day. Stressing the virtues of letting stochastic processes remain stochastic takes up a lot of time. Weather control was—and still is—more interesting than the machinery of civilization. Nevertheless, she suspects she's about to get a lot of the latter right now and none of the former.

Like her, Jackson is more manifestation-in-training than manifestation-for-real. Still, when he spreads his hands, a mass of thin glowing, translucent ribbons appears between them. Based on the scale, this has to be a model of some portion of the machinery rather than the real thing. The ribbons swirl around each other just above the table. A few of them strangle themselves into a knot right next to Jackson's right hand. The knot cinches tighter and tighter until it's a bright dot and the ribbons tied up in it start to tear. Even Katie knew that was Not Good.

"Left to his devices, as you can see, he's going to fuck up this corner of civilization. I could drop that guy at a glance right now." Jackson is absolutely matter of fact about this. "Look what happens, though, if I do."

The knot disappears, which has to be good. The now freed up ribbons tear away. They whip around and tangle into other ribbons that strangle yet others in a cascade. Katie's guessing, but that has to be bad. The "so you see what I mean" expression on Jackson's face pretty much confirms it.

“What’s the point of being you then?” Katie starts to sort the papers on the table into actual stacks. “You can’t do anything about him?”

“Whoa, I didn’t say that.” He holds his hands up as if to surrender and the ribbons fall to the table then fade away. “We just have to do something else. Besides, I want the consequences of his actions to hang around his neck for the rest of his days. This is the last part of a plan my mom has been working for a while now. If the conditions are just right, it could go like this instead.”

His hands spread before him again and the mass of ribbons reappears. The knot next to his right hand is back. His fingers wriggle. The ribbons crowd the knot. The patterns they form as they twirl and untwirl around each other grow more complex. Subliminal flashes of color become substantial. The ribbons scatter and the knot is gone.

Jackson’s expression careens through pleasantly surprised, settles for an instant at smug before it finally arrives at its final destination: relieved. The ribbons that had been caught up in the knot flutter away. His gaze follows each one as they thread themselves into the increasing complex patterns formed by the rest of his model.

“So how do you make sure you’re around when the conditions are just right?” Katie pushes a pile of exam papers to one side and sets about tidying up the problem set from her father. “Do you have to follow him around until then?”

“You do know why you’re here, right?” Jackson glares with disbelief. “You can make the conditions anything you want.”

“Well, not literally anything and my dad kind of frowns on—” Katie’s grip on the papers in her hands tightens. “Oh...”

This is what her father meant by “find out what it means to be a manifestation.” If she does what Jackson wants, she’d be responsible for how that guy’s life will change, not to mention the lives of who knows how many else as a side effect. Yes, she suggested Jackson kill that guy not even a minute ago but this feels different even though it really isn’t. She knows that and the shame settles on her like sweat on a muggy day.

“What’s the use of being you then, Katie?” Jackson does not smirk as he echoes her words back at her. “This is clearly the daughter of Order and Chaos and the son of Life and Death conspiring to fix one tiny corner of the machine that is civilization. Do you know how to set up the conditions we need?”

Jackson has his model replaying on a loop. Every few seconds, the knot reappears only to be untied when the conditions are right. Katie studies the play of ribbons, the way they push and pull against each other as though attracted or repulsed by static. Within a few replays, the conditions that Jackson wants fall into place in her head. She can see how one gets there from here, in theory. It’d all be easier if it’d conveniently start thunderstorming or if that guy and his gang suddenly re-convened on a sheet of ice.

“You’re basically asking me to manipulate one probability distribution function to another using only an arbitrary—and, frankly, unfair and unhelpful—set of mathematical trans—” Katie’s gaze falls on the first problem her father asked her to solve and a near-electric thrum of excitement vibrates through her. “Actually, yes, I do.”

Katie finally understands these endless problem sets she’s been solving for years. Her father has been drilling her for as long as she can remember on the various ways to manipulate order and chaos, always with the stern warning never to manipulate the real world in any way that materially affects anyone. He has also given her ever more ridiculously difficult math problems to solve. Put the two together and Katie can manipulate one set of real-world conditions into another. Not that her father has ever mentioned this to her. In particular, the solution to the first problem he asked her to solve by tomorrow sets up the conditions Jackson has asked for. Not only can Katie do what Jackson wants, she actually knows exactly how to do it. Well, at least in theory. If she’s solved that problem right.

“You need to decide a bit quicker, Katie.” He wilts a bit under Katie’s glare. “They’re about to leave. If they actually make it to the rally, there’s not a whole lot either one of us will be able to do to save lives.”

“Can’t you just stomp in and beat the crap out of all of them?”

“Sure, but that won’t help.” Jackson pats his right arm. “Not to brag, but my arms are more or less the size of that guy’s legs. Me beating them all up is not exactly going to deconstruct their toxic masculinity or racism.”

That guy and the rest of his horde shuffle their chairs too loudly as they get up to leave. Katie is not, strictly speaking, paying any attention to their preening, strutting exit. She’s staring at her teacup, hoping for some sign of approval or disapproval from her father. A helpful nudge about now would be great. The motion of the tea, though, is stubbornly chaotic, utterly uninfluenced. The motion of the thundering horde, on the other hand, is ostentatiously obnoxious and impossible for her to ignore. Jackson is rolling his eyes but no one else in the shop is paying them much attention. At most, the other customers have looked up for a second then went back to their conversations, phones, or laptops.

On the way out, that guy reaches into the tip jar, grabs a handful of change and stuffs it into his pocket. That small, thoughtless act of casual privilege fits exactly into the pattern of that guy’s life. The realization sharpens Katie’s mind. It settles her down and tells her what she has to do. At least for the moment, she doesn’t care whether her father approves. Tomorrow will be a completely different story. There’s a good chance her father’s reaction will devastate her, but she can deal with that later.

“Okay, Jackson. I’ll see what I can do.”

Katie’s senses follow them as they descend into the subway station. Jackson is staring at a spot in space next to his slowly leaking glass of iced tea or, rather, watching that horde deform the machinery of civilization. Its ribbons flutter at the edge of Katie’s vision. The machinery of civilization fills in for her some of what she can’t quite sense. Her father could sense it all by himself but he’s also been at it for far longer.

There’s already a sparse crowd waiting on the platform. It’s a pretty typical mix of people. Some of them are clearly college students. They’re more or less Katie’s age and carrying backpacks. A parent is telling their child in Mandarin to sit still on a bench as two people sit next to them and hold hands. The sign attached to the ceiling says that the train will arrive in less than a minute.

The horde tromps down the stairs. They fill the steps, pushing past anyone else who happens to be in the way. A turnstile slides open when that guy presents his fare card. He walks through, the turnstile shuts, and doesn't open again for anyone else, no matter how often they tap their fare card. None of the turnstiles do. Their little video displays just say to try again or to see the agent. They'll work properly again once she stops futzing with them but Jackson wants that guy separated from his minions and, well, the turnstiles are right there.

Not that anyone there notices the malfunction, especially not that guy. He's barely on the platform before he senses the vulnerable. They sense it, too, as the parent reflexively pulls their child towards them. He mocks and jeering as he pushes himself into their faces. Katie can't help but feel his slurs and death threats rip the air and her heart breaks as the child cries. It's easy for her, sitting in the teahouse, to be disgusted at how banal the same old codewords and dog whistles are. But he doesn't need to be any good at this. His smug hate, the way he presses himself up against them as though they were his for the taking, the surety that no one will stop him does the job just fine. Kate's memories of white boys pulling their eyes into slits as they closed in on her and flush-faced white men screaming at her to go back where she came from collapses the distance between the teahouse and the platform. Her stomach twists and she'll be damned if she lets that guy make her cry. The translucent ribbons in front of Jackson grow stiff and taut like the bodies of the people on the platform. Some stare back but don't say anything. Others just ignore what's not aimed at them.

"Jackson, can't you do something about this?" Katie's voice is on the verge of breaking.

"Well, nothing else that will ultimately make the world a better place, no. It hasn't even been twenty seconds yet. Give them a chance." Jackson shrugs. "Sometimes, all you can do is set up the right conditions and hope that people do the right thing."

"Hope? All we have is hope? I trapped a bunch of people with an unrepentant fascist with no regard for personal space based on your *hope* that someone will do the right thing?"

“When I gamed out this scenario with this specific set of people, about seventy percent of the time, hope was enough. It’s the best I could do.”

“Seventy percent.” Katie isn’t even bothering to hide the disgust in her voice.

“Hey, things with a seventy percent probability happen all the time. Well, they happen seventy percent of the time. You know what I mean.” He frowns at Katie’s tear-filled eyes and his voice grows mournful. “Whatever it is you’re doing, just keep doing it. Someone will come through.”

The train’s headlight is a growing pinprick in the dark. Its rumble starts to drown out that guy but that just makes him scream louder, cover more ground as he presses on one person, then the next.

Everyone on the platform, except one, is a decent person. There’s about a dozen of them. And they only need one to do something.

The overhead speaker announces that the train is about arrive. Someone, hardly bigger than that guy himself, starts walking toward him. They shed their backpack and their fists clinch as they talk back to him, blocking his every threat. That guy stumbles backward. He looks around for support. In his zeal to get in a few pointless jabs before the rally, he’s only just noticed his minions aren’t on the platform. No one is on his side.

The turnstiles finally start to function when Katie’s attention breaks for a moment. One by one, the horde starts to stream through. She grimaces. This was all much easier when it was just a bunch of equations on stacks of paper.

Their fist connects with that guy and he falls backwards onto the floor. Katie has done nothing to make that happen. That was all them. The only thing she’s doing is making sure that guy doesn’t actually fall off the platform. Much as she might want him to be run over by the train, that’s more interference than Jackson has asked for. Also, she imagines, if that guy fell in, her father might take her to task for failure of technique.

One or another of the horde stares at that guy for an instant as they break up and scatter. It’s as though they are a just random assemblage of men who don’t know each other at all who just happen to be wearing the

same polos and khakis. Most of them don't even board the train when it arrives. For them, that punch pounds in the final nail in a coffin more experienced manifestations have been hammering together. Katie can see it in the way they are reflected in the ribbons fluttering away from each other then beyond Jackson's still leaking glass of iced tea.

"That's it?" To her annoyance, she still sounds like she's on the verge of tears. She shakes her head and takes a gulp of tea.

"Well, there won't be violence at the rally and I don't know if you noticed but people were taking video on their cellphones. I'd made sure to pick people who might do that. The videos will go viral and all he'll be remembered for, if at all, is being punched for being a racist, misogynist asshole."

Katie's tea begins to bubble. Jackson shifts his gaze. He stares at the teacup puzzled. Katie just sighs.

"What the fuck is that?" Jackson points at the teacup, just in case it isn't clear what he's talking about.

"Oh, that's just my dad." Katie slumps into her seat. "Apparently, he's been paying attention to us all along."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Beats me." Katie shrugs. "If it were, you'd think the bubbles would look happier."



The instant Katie comes home on Saturday, she's hit with the scent of heaven. It smells like beef and star anise. Katie's mouth reflexively starts to water. This is her father's deluxe beef stock. It takes the entire day and an amount of beef, six different cuts, he has to special order from a butcher.

As Katie's stomach growls, her heart sinks. Her father tends to outdo himself when it's time for them to have an Important Chat. The more serious the topic, the more delicious their home smells. The last time her father made her mouth water before she'd even closed the front door or taken off her shoes, she was nine and it was to tell her that he and Mom had separated.

The weekly rotating mahjong game is here today. Her father might have gone through all this trouble for the folks coming. She doubts it, though. Also, everyone should be here already. The driveway is empty, though, and the house isn't filled with chatter and the sound of crashing tiles.

Katie shuts the front door and takes off her shoes. She inhales deeply, clutches her backpack for dear life, and goes into the kitchen to meet her fate. She has no idea what it will be. The way her father made her tea bubble yesterday could have meant anything.

These days, the way their schedules work out, about the only time Katie and her father are both awake and at home together for more than a couple minutes is Saturday afternoon. She decided to come home a little late, so the game would have already started. That way, she could just hand him the problem set in her backpack and he would be too busy to chat.

Unfortunately, her father is alone in the kitchen. Two tall pots sit on the stove, one with noodles, the other with beef stock. Two large, chipped bowls, one filled with beef, the other with suancai, sit on the slightly warped plastic table that's older than she is.

"They're all late." Her father puts some beef and noodles into a bowl then ladles in some broth. "Held up by one thing or another."

"Really." Katie does not roll her eyes. It would be disrespectful. "What a coincidence."

"Oh, please. The delay is not going to change their lives in any meaningful way." Her father tops the bowl with some suancai then sets it on the table. "Come on, you must be hungry."

Katie grabs a pair of chopsticks and a spoon from a drawer. As her father fixes himself a bowl, she sets down her backpack, sits, and digs in.

It's delicious, unfortunately. The acid of the suancai cuts through the rich, slightly salty stock. The beef is beautifully tender and impossibly savory. The thick, round noodles are the perfect canvas, bringing all of the flavors into harmony. This may be the best meal she has ever had in her life. Whatever they need to talk about must be serious.

"I shouldn't have helped Jackson?" Katie, uncertain, looks up at her father.

"Why would you say that? I might quibble about the lack of subtlety but that comes with experience." Her father sits next to her with his own

bowl of beef noodle soup. “Now that you’ve had a taste, you need to decide whether helping is something you want to do. Manifestations of Life and Death know to come to you now. Helping them won’t always be as straightforward as that and you’ll always be complicit.”

“Hey, Jackson and I saved lives. And all we did was humiliate a fascist.”

Her father frowns. He slurps a strand of noodle, chews, and swallows before he speaks again.

“It doesn’t always work out that neatly. Sometimes, we kill. And, if you remember, you wanted to before Jackson talked you out of it. In any case, your mother couldn’t share a life with someone who manipulated the lives of others. It’s a completely reasonable position. I should have warned her about manifestations and what we do long before we married.” Her father lays his chopsticks on his bowl. “When she left, I promised her you’d be so trained that you would never affect probabilities by accident. Of course, if you never affect probabilities intentionally again, you also get to keep your relationship you have now with your mother. How ever you decide, you need to tell her when you see her this weekend.”

Katie set down her own chopsticks and lets her father’s words sink in. It makes sense, she supposes, that what one tells a nine-year-old about why her mother is leaving is not what one tells a twenty-two-year-old. Her mother’s acting gigs bring her close to home. Now Katie understands why her mother never stops by and why her father never goes to see her perform. When her mother is in town, she only ever sends them one ticket and Katie always visits her and never the other way around. None of this makes her needing to make this decision reasonable. If it weren’t for her parents, she could just do what she wants. At the very least, they could agree about what they want for her. Coincidentally or probably not, her mother is in Beverly right now finishing her run as Desiree at a theater in the round. Before Katie sees her again, before she decides what to do and tells her mom, there’s something she wants to know first.

“Are you responsible for her Tony Award?” Katie cocks her head. “That was bizarre. The original leading lady fractures her foot in a freak accident swinging on a lamppost on stage while they’re here tuning

up the show, Mom takes over with no notice, and she opens the *Sweet Charity* revival to rave reviews.”

“Of course not! If I were, the sequence of events would have been far more plausible. Your mother is incredibly talented and freak accidents happen. They’re almost never some manifestation’s doing unless that manifestation is inexperienced or incredibly careless.” Her father forces Katie to meet his gaze. “I have never interfered with your mother’s life and neither will you. It doesn’t mean you can’t stay in contact with her if that’s what she still wants, but you will never interfere. Understood?”

“Yes.” Katie’s tempted again by the disrespectful eye roll but she’s apparently just made up her mind and what she does instead is take the problem set out of her backpack and sets it on the table. “I’ve solved this set. The problems you’re going to throw at me from now on are just going to get even more difficult, aren’t they...”

“Well, life is messy. It took a certain amount of advance work to get those young men to the point where humiliating the fascist might disillusion them in the first place. Eventually, you’ll have to deal with long-range changes yourself. And you need to develop the experience to find more subtle solutions.”

Her father produces a thick sheaf of paper and sets it next to the now solved problem set. It takes Katie a second to realize that the sheaf has been sitting on a chair next to him all along. Her father is capable of some amazing feats but whipping things up out of thin air is not one of them. The sheaf of paper is the next problem set. The first problem is all about the math of turbulence and she can see the analogy to the currents of circulation cells. Weather control. Her gaze shifts back and forth several times between the problem set and her father.

“You knew I was going to decide to continue?” Some part of Katie would not be surprised at all.

“No. If anything, I kind of wish you’d decided to go to some coffee shop instead. I suppose that would have just postponed your choice.” Her father looks down and sighs before he meets his daughter’s gaze again. “Life is messy.”

Tendrils of steam rise from their bowls of beef noodle soup. Katie twists them into calligraphy. A Tang poem floats to the ceiling before it disperses. It's not the first time she's played with steam like this and, as usual, it earns her father's reprobating glare. This time, though, it dissolves into a resigned smile.

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(*Editors' Note: John Chu is [interviewed](#) by Caroline M. Yoachim in this issue.*)



John Chu

John Chu is a microprocessor architect by day, a writer, translator, and podcast narrator by night. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming at Boston Review, Uncanny, Asimov's Science Fiction, Clarkesworld, and Tor.com among other venues. His story "The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere" won the 2014 Hugo Award for Best Short Story.

A Salt and Sterling Tongue

by Emma Osborne

I found my dying boy curled up in a pile of straw wet with his blood. Seamus rolled over as I entered the barn, and I saw then that he'd chewed his fingers down to the first knuckle.

I gasped.

"I can taste my King in my wet," he said, rocking forward, naming his lost Merling lord. Seamus could barely keep himself up on what was left of his hands and his knees. I crouched and moved closer and he fell forward onto forearms thin as sticks.

Seamus' teeth shone through the gore that coated him from nose to navel, and he'd bitten off a few of the scales that dotted the skin of his upper arms. One was stuck to his chin with blood.

"He's stopped singing, but I can hear him in the waves and in my blood, my lord, my king."

My youngest boy was the one of the unlucky few who'd heard the music of the Merling King while out collecting cockles, who came home the next morning shivering and soaked and vomiting up seawater, the salt crystallising in his scant beard, newborn silver scales peeping out of his skin.

"Sera, you can't tell me you don't hear that sweet melody?" He hummed a few bars of something soft and haunting.

I shook my head, too hurt to speak. I wanted to be angry, but who was there to fight?

Seamus hadn't come back to himself, come back to me, even after the dying screams of the Merling King rang out across leagues of seawater when our valiant Queen drove her sword into his chest. No, he stayed as the others did: snarling and ready to knock down anyone who stood between them and the sea, ready to drink down salt and pray and weep along with the song of the Merling King, he who would drown us all. He'd become a boy who'd stand in the cold water if he could, would cup it in his hands and swallow it down even though it came back up. A boy who refused food, cursing the taste of dust and dirt.

I'd tried talking. I'd tried shouting. I tried bringing him an old shirt that still smelled like the lavender I'd tucked into his drawers. The overworked healer, our good lad Ned, tried every powder and tincture and smoke he could think of. Nothing shifted my boy or any of the others. Folklore and field medicine counted for naught. All Seamus did was weep until his eyes were so swollen that he could barely see.

"Seamus, son, do you know me?" I knelt down before him, smelling his dirty body and his waste, hating that he'd not let me touch him with unsalted water, or with a warm damp cloth.

He laughed then.

"I don't understand why you won't let me go to him, to swim and swim until I land on his island, until I am taken in by his arms," he said. His eyes were dark, wide, and as reckless as the smash of wave on rock. "You always pull me back, saying no, saying please."

"Please, Seamus. Come back to me." My voice shook more than I'd like to admit.

"The salt on my lips is what keeps the dream alive," he continued. "All I want is to press my mouth into his shoulder, to have his seafoam eyes look into mine, for him to tell me that I'm good, yes, that I'm his."

"The Merling King is dead," I said. "You heard his screams, I heard them. You can come back now."

"Come back to what?" He nearly sounded his old self again, frustrated at my insistence that he do his chores. "I'm going, I'm his. Let me go, Sera. Let me go."

Gods, he howled as if he were drowning on dry land.

I knew it my heart that there was nothing more to do but wait, a cup of cooling broth at my side in case by some miracle he wished it. What would I tell my strong lad Jonn, who carried my old battered blade in the service of the Queen? Jonn was so sure that Seamus would recover when the Merling King was finally slain.

I sat in the barn until Seamus stopped yelling and cursing, until my poor ruined boy fell into a feverish slumber. I cleaned his face then, and the cloth came away covered in blood and dirt and scales.

When Seamus was free of grime and in fresh clothes, I pulled him into my lap and rocked him as I'd done when he was a slip of a boy. I held him as his breath whispered slower and slower and finally to a halt. I was not a perfect mother, far from it, but I made sure that when my poor boy passed, he was not alone.

I sat with his thin body in my arms until the blacksmith came looking for me and made me wrap my boy up in my best blue blanket.

It was the same colour as his face.



The Bard arrived alone a month later, riding a dappled grey horse with copper charms braided into its mane and leading a mule laden with supplies. The village children shouted her arrival, the first bright noise we'd heard since the echoing wail of the Merling King and the horror that came after. The Bard was a sight for our sore and salted eyes; an envoy of the Queen, sent in advance of wagons of supplies to bring us a hint of lightness. A golden ripple chased over her skin now and then. It was a powerful ward granted by the Queen, cast over her most honoured advisors and diplomats.

The Bard was safe on the Queensroad.

I was mending an old shirt when I heard the children. I tucked it away and wandered out to the village square. The Bard swung down from the saddle carefully, her burnished red hair snagged by the wind, her harp tucked against her hip.

I knew her from my time serving the Queen as a soldier in the earlier battles against the Merling King, so when she looked around for our leader, I stepped forward and her eyes settled on me.

“Be welcome, Haran, Bard of Queen Fortune.” My voice was rusty with disuse, and I realised that it was the first time I’d spoken to another person in four days. “It is our honour to provide for you. We—”

I was supposed to offer her food and lodging, to press upon her the best of what we had. I was caught in a moment of shame. The Merling song had caused us to huddle close to one another, to leave our fields to tend to our loved ones. His song took our children and our heart for living with them. We'd not sent traders to nearby villages since the song began. We had salt fish and our winter stores, but they were dwindling, and I knew I was not the only one to worry that they'd not last when the seasons turned.

The Bard stepped forward, holding up a gentle hand.

"Good lady, I carry my own supplies, but would be grateful for a place to sleep while I am here. Just now I passed the village Southwell, who have an abundance of apples to share and none to share them with. Perhaps they'd trade you for some fish, for you know that they are landlocked? And I hear that Blackbridge still have their hives and would surely be eager to trade for grain, should you have any to spare?"

A few of us mumbled and nodded, and the miller confessed that he'd held back some grain, just in case we traded again.

"Here," said the Bard, passing a few coppers down to Brell, the daughter of the miller. "Buy as much honey as they have to sell and ask them to bring it back in a wagon. And you, lad, go get us some apples." She handed out more coin. "This should be plenty."

And that's how the Bard gently opened our trade routes back up again, when we were too broken and huddled to do so ourselves.

"Please, you're welcome to stay with me," I found myself saying. There were plenty of empty beds in the village, but now that I was speaking again, I realised how much I missed having someone to talk to.

"I am Sera, who fought for the Queen at the battle of Red Sands. I remember well the kindness you showed to our injured. Here, let me help you with your bags."

I stepped forward, nearly stumbling in my haste to be of assistance, but the Bard only smiled at me and offered me one of her saddlebags. The worn leather smelted of pepper and dust.

"Thank you, Sera, your hospitality is welcome." The Bard's voice was sweet and nothing like my mournful rasp.

Jessup's lad Alexi promised to rub down her horse and mule and stable them safely for the night. The Bard thanked the boy and passed him a few coppers for his help. It was more coin than Alexi had seen in his life, of that I am sure.

"Lead on," said the Bard.

I took her home.



It was strange how easily the Bard fit into place in my cottage. I'd grown almost used to the silence with both boys gone, but it was no intrusion to have her settling into Seamus's bed, cluttering around making tea and softly singing to us over the crackle of the fire.

I saw how she looked at me, traced my shoulders and my jawbone with her eyes that were bright and green like fresh shoots. Green like the softest moss. Green like hope.

It nearly hurt to have someone so beautiful look at me sweetly.

"You'll let me know, won't you? If you begrudge me the space?" The Bard murmured over a cup of tea, sweet leaves that had travelled with her from the capital. I was shelling peas.

"Of course, it's no trouble." There was a long pause. "I like having someone here." The words scraped as I said them. "I like having *you* here."

My eyes caught hers. She was nearly a stranger. How could I feel such kinship so quickly? Yet, everything about her told me she'd embrace me if I asked and I longed to do so. But who was I to ask her for comfort? Gods. I wished nothing more than to be held, to be told that one day, things would be easier. Her arms were strong and sun-brown and would surely feel wonderful around me.

The Bard toyed with her harp.

"Thank you," she said, rubbing polish into the wood. She smiled up at me, and I took comfort from both her manner and her presence.

The last time I'd seen the Bard was after the Battle of Red Sands, when I'd been levied and lent my sword arm to the cause of our Queen, to fight the land-walking octopi that the Merling King sent against us a score of years ago. He had enchanted sea-creatures to walk on land, to punish us for fishing in waters he claimed as his.

I'd been full of songs of savagery and defiance when I marched off to defend our beaches from his monsters. By the end of the campaign I'd seen my share of blood red and blue, of pleading and screaming soldiers, and knew better than to crow my triumph over a field full of the slain.

The Bard had arrived in the aftermath. We'd not seen her for a week, not since she sang us off to the fight the many-armed creatures with a rousing song filled with fire and victory.

Her tune was very different, after. It was a lament, for us as much as for the fallen.

As my weary companions roamed the Queen's own beaches, burying the dead and tending the wounded, she had walked, her skirts heavy with bloody mud, but her hands clean. I'll never forget the stink of that battle. Our dying soldiers were bad enough, but the sea monsters who bled blue reeked of dead fish and stale water, and tossed and turned in the sand even after death. Even the greedy gulls wouldn't touch them, but flew overhead, screaming.

The Bard played her small harp as she walked, singing a dirge that allowed those in pain to focus for a moment on something that wasn't their guts falling out. They could nearly taste a sweet blossom in their mouth, or a lick of honey, rather than their own frightened heartbeat, stressed and wild one moment, flagging and drowsy the next.

It gave us, the horrified victorious, the will to march another few steps, to find our companions where they lay, to touch their eyelids closed and take their village-tokens from around their necks. Each of us carried a fragment of clay or tin stamped with home in case we fell. How else would we be able to count the lost? What else could we take home to their parents, their children?

I remembered her song that day, allowing me my grief at our triumph, urging me to hold my head high, to breathe through the stink, to keep

living in a world that contained the sensation of yanking my stuck sword from a soft, pliable body. The octopus had screamed when it died and flailed its tentacles at me, grasping for my belt-knife. I pulled off the clutching suckers with gloved hands, shivering at the squelch of it.

Many of us died in those battles and that fracturing was precisely what allowed the Merling King to breach our defenses a score of years later with his salt lullaby. His might had failed, so he tried subtlety.

And so, our brave white-haired Queen Fortune went to fight the Merling King, who called our people to the sea. I am glad that she ended it, and gladder still that she sent her Bard to soothe us with her songs of healing.

“Tell me about your boys,” said the Bard, breaking our easy silence. I swallowed the lump in my throat and spoke.

“Ah, here I am lost in grief when they’re not even my blood. Someone had to take in Widow Catherine’s sons after she passed from the Summer cough, and everyone else saw only the sickness on them.” My voice was rough and sad, but the Bard simply listened.

“The poor boys were as fit as foals,” I continued. “Everyone knows that the Summer cough only takes the adults, but still, nobody wanted to risk them and so to me they went when they were but five and seven.”

I told her that I wasn’t a natural mother, but that did my best to do right by them, to keep them fed and clothed. I comforted them when they were frightened of trolls and ogres lurking in the woods and gave them my fiercest scowls and extra chores when they did the kinds of foolish things that growing boys do. I taught them all I knew with a blade, until they could best most times, and showed them herb craft, so that they might have something to offer one of the other youths in trade for skills. That was how we worked, in our little village of Bellbray-by-the-sea. Through virtue of teaching one another, of lifting our neighbours up.

“And so Jonn re-wrapped the hilt of my old sword with fresh leather, shined the blade bright and left to join the Queen in her fight, but his brother Seamus stayed with me.”

Gods, Seamus.

“He had no real heart for fighting, and would near faint at the sight of the butcher’s gutted pigs, but I loved him for his sweetness and couldn’t fault him for it.”

When my words ran dry I realised how much I’d needed to say them out loud, to someone who heard both the said and the unsaid. I wept then, and she let me, doing nothing more than stroking my hair over and over. I cried and cried, until my heart was squeezed to nothing, until my eyes were red and raw.

The Bard made soothing noises, spoke little nothing words of comfort, and when I stopped my weeping she was there with a bit of wet cloth to wipe my face with fresh water. When my face was clean she held me, as softly as if I were made from glass. We sat together in silence as the fire died down.



In the days that followed, our youngsters traveled to nearby villages and brought back apples and honey and with them tales of Southwell and Blackbridge. The Bard wandered our fields, planting held-back seeds and singing to the earth, calling up shoots of green that thickened and steadied under the autumn sun. They grew a few months’ worth in an afternoon, and with any luck would be ready to harvest before the winter cold set in. My neighbours sent their children to the Bard with gathered wildflowers, with tokens woven from leftover yarn. She smiled and thanked the children gravely, and then twisted the tokens into a loose crown. The green stems only brought out her eyes.

“Tonight, we will feast on the beach,” she told us, after drinking deep from a jug of cool water. “Gather driftwood and gather food, for we should eat and be together. It’s time to say our goodbyes to your lost.”

A bonfire was built, higher than the tallest cottage in the village, and we dragged out tables and chairs and faded cloths to eat from. I spent my afternoon making sweet honey biscuits, the kind that Seamus loved best.

When the time came to meet the others, something called me to wear my best shirt, the one that I'd worn to the city to greet the Queen in. It felt right, to dress as best as I could.

The fire roared as the light faded, as we ate and talked and cried and hugged each other. Grief could be so lonely, but we were united on the beach, with the Bard sitting amongst us like kin.

When we'd eaten the last few mouthfuls of traded food, the Bard nudged us all into a rough circle around the flames, calling forward those who had hung back in their grief and touching the quiet weepers on the tops of their heads. The wood popped and sparks flickered through smoke as they rose into the bright night sky. It was clear, and if I turned my eyes away from the flames I could see more stars than I could count in a dash against the black.

"Listen to me and each other, and we'll make something tonight. Something for you, and something for the dead." And then the Bard was humming low in her chest. The song was sonorous and resonant and something in it pulled tears from my eyes and a heaviness from my bones. I reached out, blinded by tears, and she gripped my hand tight. The hum moved through her, into my hand, into my body, and I found her voice with my own before I realised it. My hum was higher than hers, but it blended in, and there was the blacksmith coughing and adding her rough voice to ours. It was just a single note, sounded again and again, but it warmed everything as the heat of the fire warmed my cheeks.

When we had that solid base note, the Bard harmonised with us, everyone singing now, dipping her voice in and out of the song of our grief, filling it out with the memory of the blue hand of a salt-struck child, drawing in the sweet scent of apple blossoms, giving us back that sunlit morning when we'd hummed and made bread while everyone else slumbered. She comforted us with the knowledge that now that we were singing together, our voices lightly woven like thread made of smoke, we would never forget our lost.

"Alais," said the blacksmith, tears in her eyes. "Oh, my poor darling. Why did it have to be you?"

“Alais,” echoed the Bard, singing her name as if it were a prayer. “Alais, daughter of Hild, daughter of the village Bellbray, daughter of our hearts, Alais.” We sang, our chests full and voices thick and we wove her name into our song.

Others stepped forward, adding the names of their loved ones, but I was frozen in place, grief heavy on my chest. All I could do was hum the names of our lost, and all I could see was Seamus’s sweet face before the song of the Merling King turned him into one of his salt folk.

Finally, there were none left but my poor adopted boy to sing for, yet still I could not find the strength to say his name. If I named him, he’d be gone. Surely that was how it went?

“Seamus,” said the Bard, resting her hand on my shoulder as she spoke. “Seamus Bellbray, son of Sera, who died at peace.”

Grief cracked my chest. Maybe he’d still be alive if I’d loved him more, maybe I could have done more when he’d faded to a wraith of sea salt and curses, blue from nose to navel, scaled from fingertip to forearm. But no, our bright song chased that away and I knew my worries to be false. I fell to my knees in front of the fire and sobbed my lad’s name. My boy, who I loved. My boy, who I lost.

My son.

I knelt by the fire until it burned down to coals. The others gathered themselves slowly and made their way home, lighter freer, healing now. My face felt tight from the heat, but it was a freeing fire, and with each crackle and drifting ember that danced up into the cold night sky I felt another touch of heaviness leaving my body.

“I remember you from after the battle, you know,” said the Bard, as she smoothed her thumb over my brow. “You thanked me for singing one of your men to sleep. A pale lad he was, not much older than fifteen.”

“Tad was his name. Just a boy.” The memory came back with surprising strength. “He’d huffed as he died, like a surprised horse. His eyes were grey like a calm sea and the shape of his chin reminded me of home.” I both hated and loved how much of the poor lad I remembered.

“Ah, he had no business on the field, but he’d stolen his cousin’s sword and slipped into the ranks, and we’d not had time to send him home before the battle. Besides, we needed his blade. Am I a fool to have kept him?”

“He saved your life, didn’t he? You told me, that day,” she said.

“I—yes. He hit one of the octopi from behind, just as it was about to stick me with its beak.”

“I’m glad I could sing for him, then. It sounds as if he was brave.”

“Brave, yes,” I replied. “Brave and young and foolish, but I feel like that could have been said of me, too.”

“We’re all children in war,” said the Bard. Her mouth tilted in a sad smile.

We stood together for a moment, until I remembered my manners.

“You must need to rest,” I said, staggering to my feet and turning toward home. Truly, I felt as if I could barely stand, such was the weight of the emotions of the evening.

“Oh, I’m awake now,” said the Bard, “But I’ll follow you home if you show me the way. I’ve gotten turned around on this beach.”

I didn’t believe her—Bards make a living out of knowing details small and large—but it was a kindness. We walked home together, her fingers twined with mine.



I kindled a candle or three when we got back to the cottage, thinking it was too late now to revive the fire. I bit my lower lip, imagining the Bard’s kiss. I wanted it so badly and I wanted more, but something in me was still locked up tight. Ah, but she was so full of healing sweetness.

“Sera?” The Bard whispered a hand against my shoulder. “Are you well?”

“I...” I had no idea how to answer that question. I just looked at her, wanting.

Her face softened.

“Would you like me to kiss you?”

Bards are nothing if not forthright. Her eyes told me that she understood my need to be cared for, to be embraced, to be filled with something kind to hold back the goodbye ache.

“Yes, please.” I leaned in, stopping just short of her mouth. She lifted her lips to meet mine, and there was her hand cupping the back of my head. We kissed by the fire, again and again, until I was warm inside and out.

That night, my sweet Bard did not sleep in Seamus’s bed, but came to mine. The night was tender and fierce and we gave each other pleasure and sweetness. I fell asleep with her body pressed warm and soft into mine. I never hoped to keep her with me, but I took this one bright moment as she offered it and gave her what I had in return. As we woke and kissed again, I allowed her gentleness to sink into my heart and burnish it softly.



After that night of healing and tenderness I felt strong enough to take Seamus’s Bellbray village token to the sea. We’d burned the bodies of our salt folk out of fear that they’d rise again, so I had no grave to visit.

“Be at peace, my son,” I said, as I tossed the token into the water he loved so much. And he had, long before the song of the Merling King. I’d taught him to swim when he was small and whenever he’d finished his chores he’d run to the sea, whooping and bright, to drench himself in the cool water, to warm his wet skin under the summer sun. That’s the Seamus I would remember now that the Bard had done her work.

I watched the token sink and let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. When it was gone I left the beach for home.



After a week of sweetness I found the Bard on that same beach, watching the whales as they played in the water off the coast.

The Bard sang long sonorous notes, amplified somehow, matching the song of the great creatures of the deep. They called back to her like giant keening ghosts. Somehow, they and the Bard were kin in song, and as I watched the whales breach and smash down into the sea I knew for a moment that the world contained wonders beyond those that I could see. The sun warmed me and gulls cried in the air. Her voice was pure and clean and their song was deep and melodious and the combination was beautiful.

When she finished singing and the last fin slipped beneath the waves, she strode from the water with a face bright with wonder. When she saw me watching silently from the shore, the corners of her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

“I taught them the song of Bellbray-by-the-sea,” she said, reaching up to twine a lock of my hair between her fingers. She smelled of salt and wild roses.

“Oh?” I replied, tongue-tied.

“Indeed,” she continued. “The creatures of the deep live long lives, and they’ll sing you to their family for years to come. The song will travel as far as they can swim, and farther than that as the song is shared. Mayhap one of them will sing out the name of your Seamus a score of generations hence.”

I blinked back the tears that rose at his name.

“And are you teaching names to the whales at every place you stop?” I tried to sound teasing, but it just sounded sad.

“No,” said the Bard quietly. “Just yours.”

I knew then that it was nearly time for her to leave.

There was a question I wanted to ask her hovering at the back of my mouth but I didn’t get it out before she leaned in and softly kissed me. Her lips were soft and salted, her tongue sweet.

“My route takes me down the coast. My Queen commanded me to restore her folk. To help them heal.” Our eyes met, mine wet.

“Yes,” I said. “I know. I knew you’d not be able to stay.” I clasped her hand in mine. “You did something so good here and I thank you for it.”

The Bard leant in, pressed her body against mine and put her face into my neck.

“Just because I must leave, it does not mean I can’t come back.” She pulled back a little, looked at me. “Can I come back?”

“Yes,” I said, my chest sparking. The waves rolled in, as they would roll in in a month, a year, a decade from now. “Yes, you can come back.”

She did.

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Emma Osborne

Emma Osborne is a queer fiction writer and poet from Melbourne, Australia. Emma’s writing has appeared in Nightmare Magazine, Shock Totem: Tales of the Macabre and Twisted, Apex Magazine, Queers Destroy Science Fiction, Pseudopod, the Review of Australian Fiction, the Year’s Best Australian Fantasy and Horror, and GlitterShip. Emma is a graduate of the 2016 Clarion West Writers Workshop (Team Arsenic forever!) and is a former first reader at Clarkesworld Magazine. Emma currently lives in Melbourne, drinking all of the coffee and eating all of the food, but has a giant crush on Seattle and turns up under the shadow of the mountain at every opportunity. You can find Emma on Twitter at [@redscribe](#).

Lest We Forget

by Elizabeth Bear

I am dying of the war, though not in it.

Such is the nature of wars. A person doesn't have to die in battle to be killed by a war. A person doesn't even have to be a soldier to die of one.

Wars have always been slow killers as well as quick. The war that killed my grandfather killed him thirty years after he was discharged, when his liver finally quit from all the self-medicating it took to deal with the aftermath. It killed both his wives, too, though they never served.

Dying of wars is strangely contagious.

If we were a more honest people, there would be a lot of statues of civilians on the National Mall. Maybe that's something you can look into, when we're done here. Imagine if all those wedding parties and starving children and violated women at least got the notice in death that life—and war—denied them.

Empty. Meaningless to them, since they'll never know about it. But a gesture at least. A reminder for the living of the horrors that have passed. Not that we tend to learn anything from the sins of our fathers.

Case in point: *my* father also died of a war. Cancer, which certainly had nothing to do with chemical weapons or toxic environmental conditions where he fought.

How could it? There were definitely no chemical weapons used in his war, and just as definitely no toxic environmental conditions pertaining. Just ask the organizations—commercial, governmental—that could otherwise have been held fiscally responsible for treating a sick soldier.

If they had to treat one, in fairness you might expect them to treat them all. What possible reason could they ever have had to lie?

And then there's me.

I'm not dying because I was a hero. I'm dying because I was the villain. I was a legitimate war criminal.

What can I say? Following orders seemed like a good idea at the time.
But I'll never be brought to justice. I'll never even go to jail.
And choices like the ones I made then eventually demand some kind
of accountability—a reckoning—in the *now*.



I was a suicide.

It seemed like the least I could do. Not to make amends: you don't make amends for what I did. There are no real reparations.

But a kind of restorative justice. A tiny little drop in the ocean of what I owe.



Perhaps I should say that I *am* a suicide, because I'm not done dying yet.
Maybe I will never be.

I am not a suicide in the normal course of events. I am a *special* kind of suicide.

Dying of a war is not a new thing. But the manner and purpose of my going... that's where the revolution lies.



Dr. Cotter had a day job at the V.A., but she didn't recruit her subjects where she worked.

She got us the old-fashioned way. She put an ad on the T.



P.T.S.D.??
DID YOU SERVE?
ARE YOU SORRY?
FREE HELP!



Underneath, there was a contact number, and some fine print about a study and the exact specifications of who they were looking for. They were looking for me.



I might not have showed up, except it was a month or two after my dad died, and I was taking it hard. I didn't have anybody: I'd driven them all off. I was as alone and adrift as I have ever been in my life.

Then I met Dr. Cotter and everything changed. For the better, for once.

Cotter wasn't even a shrink. She was a neuro-something, I guess. Some other kind of brain doctor. I never can get the specialties straight anymore. My functions have been pared down. Let's be honest: I don't really have a consciousness. I feel like me, but I'm not an individual in the sense we're used to. I'm just a set of protocols.

I'm not as smart as I used to be. When I had a brain of my own. When I wasn't using something else's.

But maybe I wasn't that smart then, either. Because I didn't use that big brain much. I just followed orders.

They were bad orders and I knew it. But they make it so easy not to think for yourself. Just to do what you're told. They make it so easy not to say no.

I tortured people. I sprayed them with white phosphorous and burned them alive. I didn't do it in person, but from a distance. I used a robot, like the reach of God's clawed hand down from Heaven to pluck up the just and the unjust alike.

It didn't seem so bad, from a distance. I know you know what I mean. You've seen the photographs, the films of smoking houses, smoking places of worship, smoking marketplaces.

Some of the people I burned weren't soldiers.
A surprising number of them survived.



I was never brought to trial.
They will never be asked to testify.
I can only speak for them, in one last unsubtle irony.



Cotter leaned across her desk. Her grey hair was escaping her bun, as usual. Her gaudy earrings swung. "My parents were Holocaust survivors. Do you know what *epigenetics* is?"

"No," I lied.
"Trauma experienced by your ancestors can affect your genetic expression. Your personality; your physical self. The environment you experience can affect the genetic expression of your children. It iterates. It's handed down."

"Oh," I said.
"I know what you did in the war," she said.

It was, in a strange way, a relief to be confronted. "I was just following orders."

“There’s no *just* about it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

She sat back and suddenly relaxed. “How do you feel about it? About what you did, I mean. In the war.”

“I...”

I shook my head.

I opened my mouth.

I shook my head again.



Some time later, Cotter leaned back, folded her hands, and said, “What if you could make people understand that? *Really* understand that? Really understand how you feel?”

I took a sip of water. It greased the words a little but they still had edges. “How many people? Until when?”

She shrugged. “Most of them? For a long time?”

I wonder how many times, in how many people, I’ve relived all that now.

Statistically speaking, if you are a human being in the Americas or Europe, you’ve already experienced it. As if you had been there. They’re working on drugs to fight the infection, I hear, but it’s already spread to Asia and Africa. Maybe not Madagascar. But the flatworms can live and reproduce in freshwater.

I expect they’ll be around for the foreseeable future. So I don’t have to tell you again what I did in the war, and how I came to feel about it later.

No point in beating a one-trick pony to death.



Sometimes we captured people rather than burning them. Some of those people went to prison camps where they were tortured, and I have a responsibility for that, too.

It doesn't sound so bad—caning the feet, stress positions, waterboarding, electric shocks, isolation, sleep deprivation. It's not supposed to sound so bad. They show you worse things as entertainment, and the people on TV usually seem to walk away in the end.

It doesn't sound so bad.

Because you have been lied to.



“Lee,” Cotter said. “You’re the one.”



“*Planaria lugubris*,” she said, holding up a tube filled with cloudy water. “A common flatworm. Not so common anymore.”

“Are they endangered?” I asked, interested.

“No,” she said. Light glinted through the tube. It was quite pretty. “We edited them.”

“Like a book?” I joked.

“More or less.” The tube clicked as she set it back in a rack. “Do you know what CRISPR is?”

“Sure,” I said. “It shows up in a lot of horror movies. There’s human DNA in your flatworms, right? They’re going to grow to the size of school buses and learn to use automatic weapons?”

“Well, no,” she said. “But we did use some bits of another flatworm. A parasitic one. And *Toxoplasmosis gondii*.”

I felt my mouth doing a funny thing. “Isn’t that the bug that makes rats walk into cat mouths?”

Her mouth did a funny thing, too. As if she were trying to smile, but didn’t really feel like she deserved to. “Do you know what’s interesting about planarians, Lee?”

“Wait,” I said, suddenly full of high school biology. “They can pass memories to one another, right? If they eat each other?”

“Fucking little cannibals,” she agreed.

“You want to feed them my memories.”

Her fingers drummed silently on the steel lab countertop.

“Then what? Make people eat them?”

She stepped away from the counter and faced me. “They reproduce in human brains. They can pass their memories along to their hosts.”

“That sounds like terrorism. Not to mention one hell of a violation of consent law.”

“Did you consent to what happened to you?” she asked me.

My lips clenched around the words, holding them in. I closed my eyes and got out a single one. “Technically.”

That was why some of the people I worked with went to jail. I didn’t. Mostly because the government wanted the prosecutions—and the attendant publicity—to stop as soon as they’d plausibly punished someone for what they told us to do.

“Is coerced consent really consent?”

“Who is ever,” I asked, “really free of coercion?”

She sighed and rolled her head back to look at the ceiling. “Yes, it’s terrorism. Yes, it’s a terrible, unethical thing. Yes, when it comes out, I will go to jail at the very least.”

“And me?”

“You’ll be dead.”

“Right,” I said. “They’re going to eat my brain. That’s how they get the memories, isn’t it? Just like they get the memories of other flatworms from eating each other.”

She just looked at me.

I waved my hand airily. “I’m okay with *that*. Are they going to eat other people’s brains?”

“The first generation will reproduce and die,” she said. “They’ve got a... I guess you would call it a kill switch. Their offspring will be commensal organisms rather than parasitic ones. We’ve programmed them to eat

damaged cells instead of healthy ones. Infected people will actually, on average, live longer. The cure for war is also the cure for cancer.”

“Flatworms that will certainly never mutate back and just eat brains or something. All the brains. Everywhere. You’ve recreated mad cow disease, but with flatworms.”

“Planarians are a lot easier to kill than prions,” she said. “And parasites generally evolve to be less deadly to the host, not more.”

“You’re an even more awful human being than I am,” I said.

“Do you want to end war?”

I bit my lip. I looked down at my shoes. “It seems like the least I can do.”

“You will have to formally consent, and indicate that you understand what the process will require.”

“What, now consent matters? What about all those people out there who don’t pay their taxes in order to be parasitized by flatworms and traumatic memories?”

“I’m a hypocrite,” Cotter admitted. “And if I knew what else to do I would. Aren’t all those people out there who pay their taxes complicit in drone strikes on kindergartens, too? If they stopped trying not to worry about it, or thinking of it as necessary collateral damage, do you think things would change?”

My stomach clenched. I held out my hand, as if we could shake on it. “Okay. What is it, a lethal injection or something?”

She looked away. “Lee. You have to be alive while the flatworms work.”

“Well.” I swallowed and took my hand back. “Show me where to sign.”



I didn’t expect to remember.

No. That’s wrong. That was, after all, the entire point of the exercise: me remembering. Me remembering war. For you.

I didn’t expect that I would be self-aware through the process, however. My own private richly-deserved Hell.

I wonder how many times, in how many places, I've relived this now. I'm not sure I would have had the guts to commit to the process, if I realized that I would have to go through it all again. Billions and billions of times. I mean, moral cowardice is what turned me into a war criminal in the first place.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. When I had a brain of my own. And wasn't just a parasite in yours.



The process of being converted into flatworm memories didn't hurt. Your brain doesn't have any nerves to feel pain with.

It was actually kind of a relief. I could feel the memories slipping away. A relief, anyway, until I realized that the memories were all I was anymore.



War is a contagion. The contagion is in you.
The contagion is me.



Cotter died in prison, as she'd predicted, after the world figured out what we'd done. Too late to change anything. Too late to fix anything. Too late to mean anything.
Sending her to jail was a nice gesture, I suppose.

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(Editors' Note: Elizabeth Bear is *interviewed* by Caroline M. Yoachim in this issue.)



Elizabeth Bear

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She has been the recipient of Hugo, Sturgeon, Locus, and Campbell Awards, among others. Her most recent novels are Ancestral Night and The Red-Stained Wings. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, writer Scott Lynch.

A Catalog of Love at First Sight

by Brit E. B. Hvide

The Mother that Made Me.

Cold and wet and smacked with air. I scream until I feel a familiar heartbeat. Smell of milk, and beyond that, the smell of lavender. Blooming in fields that stretch to touch the horizon. Home. Safe. Warm. Warm like the burning sun in the burning sky.

The New Boy Who I Kissed Behind the Door at School.

His name is Dallas, which is a place that seems very far away and exotic, and he wears a dinosaur backpack. I like triceratopses. He has blond hair and blue eyes that are the color of my blanket. His skin is the color of cereal. When he sighs, it reminds me of the way my mommy sighs when she looks at the dry farmland outside with all her dead herbs shriveled up, and all I want to do is tell him it will be all right even though I don't know if that's true. Instead, I tell him to come with me onto the playground at recess and we sing that song "Rain Rain Go Away" but with the words changed around so the rain will come back.

The Boy with the Dimples at the Gas Station.

The fires are coming in over the mountains, hot, red, and fast, consuming everything in their path. They eat the trees in huge, whooshing gouts, take their time through the wild grasses and fields of lavender, and nibble on the stucco siding of our one-story farmhouse.

Home is where the heart is until it's not. Until you're running for the car and shoving into the backseat with the only thing you could think to grab, a stupid third-grade soccer trophy because it was within reach when the sirens went off. Until you're crying like a baby watching your home turn into a bonfire and then just a wisp of smoke in the distance while you clutch that hunk of spiky gold plastic to your chest. Then your home is just ash. Then home is nothing.

We drive for hours, Mom, Dad, my brother Andy, and me, and Mom is crying and Dad keeps saying “at least we’re together” like it’s a magic spell that can bring everything back.

We drive past more burning houses and the blackened ruins that the fires have left behind. Whole cities have been flattened beneath its gluttonous hunger. We drive forever. Driving and driving until I don’t know where we are and I’m tired from crying. Then we stop.

Mom sends me into the gas station to grab water and snacks for everyone while she fills up the tank.

Inside the store, the air is cold and crisp as an apple. Huney Buns and Slim Jims are displayed in neat rows on the shelves and everything smells like a pleasant mixture of bleach and hot dog water. I don’t realize I’m hungry until I get inside. I don’t realize I’m dirty with soot until I see my reflection in the doors of the soda aisle. I don’t realize I’m in love until he smiles.

“Let me help you with that,” he says, reaching up to grab the Coke I’ve been eyeing.

He says it slow and shy like he’s afraid I might startle, like I’m a deer he’s found wounded in the woods, and he smiles the same way: slow and shy. He’s around my age, probably working a summer job, but he doesn’t carry himself with that same overeager awkwardness that the other boys do. His movements are careful and kind.

I trip over his dimples, the size of moon craters, and words fall out of my mouth in a tumble. “We lost our house.”

He nods. “Lotta people had that happen lately. Where are you headed now?”

I want to watch his lips move forever. They’re a dark, golden brown like the rest of his face, but his bottom lip turns pink towards the center like a rose petal.

“East. To the city,” I say, biting my own lip.

“Yeah, they say it’s safer there. My aunt moved all the way to New York. She said they built giant walls to keep the hurricanes away.”

“Do they work?” I ask. “The walls, I mean.”

“For now.”

I want to talk to him more, find out about his aunt and him and his parents and why they stay even though they keep seeing people like me pass through every day, people with dirty hair and sooty faces. But maybe the answer is obvious. Maybe he stays for the same reason we stayed and stayed and stayed. Even as we saw the fire coming down the coast. Even as we lost Redding and Chico and Santa Rosa and Sacramento. Why did we cling to the land like that? Like it would spare us?

I'm suddenly embarrassed and angry. Betrayed. We were so stupid. I look so stupid.

My mom's car horn blares from outside. I want to loop my arm around his waist and take him with me so I can keep staring at his rose petal mouth and watch his hands rearrange things into straight, safe lines. Even that he does kindly, like he doesn't want to disturb the chips in the bags when he moves them.

"Sounds like you've got to go," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Take care."

"Yeah."

The Girl with the Box Braids from Fourth Period.

We lose almost everything in the fire, and so we drive and drive until we end up in Chicago sharing a three-bedroom apartment with another family. My parents sleep in shifts. With its dirty streets packed full of people and its bitter cold winds, I think we might have been better off in the fire. The people here like to talk about the good old days when there were a sixth as many bodies packed into the city limits and everyone kept to themselves. But I can't imagine a world like that anymore. A world without elbows and knees and twenty million anonymous faces staring back at you as you walk down the streets.

I live though. My family lives. We make it work in this horrible garbage city because it's safe from the fires of the West and the floods of the East and the tornadoes of all the places in the middle. Because Chicago is the city that looks out for itself. It ran a river backwards. It built the giant,

whipping wind dispersers and the industrial temperature panels to protect itself, and to hell with all the little suburbs that got screwed in the process.

Mom grows lavender in the windowsill, a bit of basil, and thyme. She makes me water them—thirsty, greedy creatures—and makes me smell their sweet, soapy aroma.

“Look how hard they fight to live,” she says, pointing out the way the stalks bend towards the sun. “I like a plant with sass. It reminds me of how the world used to be before all this.”

Sometimes we take walks up the lakeside with its murky water and trash-filled beaches and pretend it’s nature. But we do it less and less until the only thing I’ve got left is staring up at the skyscrapers and wishing they were redwoods.

We get older this way. We forget things without realizing it: my elementary school teachers, the color of our old front door, the name of the place we got ice cream in the summer. We’ve only spent a year within the confines of the city, and Andy’s already forgotten the smell of fresh-tilled soil.

But tonight I forget everything. I’m drunk on Wild Turkey with the girl with the box braids who just moved in across the hall, and we’re on our rooftop looking out over the city.

“What was California like? You know, before the fires?”

“Nothing,” I say, beating back memories of purple fields and blue skies. “It was always fires.”

Abby nods. “I don’t remember a time before the hurricanes were trying to chase us from Charlotte. No one knew the water could even make it so far inland. But every month, another one. It took us in inches.”

“Why didn’t we leave sooner? Why did any of us stay as long as we did? We could have gotten here early, gotten our own apartment before all this crowding and ugliness. That would have been the smart thing to do. Smarter than staying there just watching the fires creep up.”

“Why is here any better?” Abby asks. Her smile is a slow curve up one side of her face, and her eyelid on the opposite side droops just a little—the result of an accident from when they were escaping the flood. It gives her an amused look, like she’s got a secret that no one can share.

“It’s safe here, at least,” I say.

“It’ll get us eventually though. The dust, the rain. The heat, the wind. Something will get us. There’s always something.”

She hands the bottle back to me and we stare over the lip of the building at the sky. It’s too bright to see much. Too many lights shining from cars and uncurtained windows and neon signs over shitty grocery stores. But you can still make out a few stars: shining pinpricks of light out in all that empty space.

I turn to Abby, letting that static charge build in the empty space between us, feeling the hairs on her arms tingle against mine, and wondering what it would be like if it were just me and her in all the universe. Cold black space and warm black skin. “Why don’t we run away then,” I say, emboldened by youth and liquor and the electricity between us.

She laughs and breaks the tension, her voice more intoxicating than the Wild Turkey. She doesn’t say that we’re basically strangers or that we’re just kids or anything like that. Instead, she looks out over the city and sighs. “But where would we go?”

I don’t run away until years later. Instead I find myself twirling my fingers through the thick basil leaves in the windowsill, getting the smell on my fingers and wondering why the Earth hated us so much and why we didn’t fight it back with equal vigor.

In school, I study the stars.

The Woman on the Greyhound with the Longchamp Bag.

The summer before my senior year of college, when disease takes my mom, eating up her bones and turning them to chalk, I walk out of the hospital, down the street to the bus stop and don’t look back.

Andy and Dad keep calling me, but I don’t answer. I am untethered. I pass from bus stop to bus stop, not caring where I am or who I’m with or what I’m doing, and wondering nothing except where I’m going to lay my head that night. Sometimes I don’t even care about that.

There aren’t many places to go anymore, but I don’t care to stay in Illinois with all its memories. Texas is gone. Florida, Nevada, and

Louisiana too. And most of the east coast is waterlogged. But New York keeps persisting like a stubborn cold, so that's vaguely where I'm heading. I remember the boy from the gas station and wonder if his aunt's still alive out there.

A woman sits down beside me.

Her face is a perfect oval. Thick brown lashes frame brown eyes that are neatly rimmed by dark brown eyeliner. She's beautiful for sure, but what gets me is her fingernails. They're cut short with just a centimeter of whites showing, filed smooth, and clean. Her cuticles speak to me of someone well cared for and well loved, someone not so stressed and worried and messed up that they've chewed their own away. She looks as if she's stepped out of another world. In my mind I spin out a cozy, middle-class life for her where nothing bad has ever happened—the kind you see in old sitcoms. I imagine her as delicate, but not because she's weak, just inexperienced. And I imagine putting her head against my chest and holding her as she discovers how cruel life really is.

I want to hold her perfect hands in my own and kiss her fingers. I want to make her coffee in the morning and deliver it to her while she's still asleep, naked and sprawled out in our bed. I want to step into her clean, unburnt skin. I want to say hello.

She looks at me, catching my gaze, and for a second I am so hopelessly in love that I freeze.

She tells me her name is Lilly.

She tells me she's running away to New York to have her baby.

I tell her everything.

The Girl Who Knows Nothing Yet.

Six months later, Lilly's baby is born at 4:03 in the morning on January 18. She is 7 pounds 11 ounces. I remember these numbers for the rest of my life. We name her Grace.

The Girl Who I Rock to Sleep at Night. The Girl Who Loves Bubbles. The Girl Whose First Word Is “Bird”. The Girl Who Will Now Only Eat Bananas When Previously She Did Not Even like Bananas, and What Am I Even Supposed to Do with That.

Every time I see her, it is like the first time. Even when she's screaming. Even when I am so dead tired that I see dark visions in my periphery. Even when I feel like a monster because I have to go to work and she is there on the floor clinging to my leg begging, “Stay me, Mommy. Stay me.”

Every day, I fall in love with her anew.

The Girl Who Turns Four Today.

“What’s a spaceship?” Grace asks. I’m trying to show her how to water the little garden I’ve started in the windowsill, but she’s not paying attention.

“It’s exactly what it says in the name,” I say. “It’s a ship that takes you into space.”

“Why?”

“Because the Earth is too dangerous. It keeps trying to hurt us, so I’m working to get us to a safer place,” I explain. Lilly convinced me to finish my degree remotely, and after that I managed to get a spot on one of the many aerospace companies finding a way off the planet.

“But why is it trying to hurt us?”

“Because...” The question stumps me. All my answers are bitter: because life is cruel; because the world is hateful; because we messed it all up and it’s messing us up in return. But they don’t feel right. Grace plucks a leaf from the basil plant to put in her mouth and makes a face at its herby sharpness.

“It’s just leaves, Mommy,” she says as if I’ve betrayed her.

“It’s leaves now, but when you cook it up, it actually tastes pretty sweet.”

Her eyes grow wide and I laugh and think for a second that maybe Earth is not entirely heartless. At least it gives me this. I pull my daughter in, overcome with joy and blow a raspberry on her belly, making her scream with laughter.

Lilly watches from the doorway, smiling at us, her hair wet from the shower. I put Grace down and walk over. The smell of her body wash reminds me of the farm back in California before it all turned to smoke, and I bury my face in her neck, breathing in memory.

Something buzzes in my pocket: a familiar alarm. We both freeze. The weather notices have been going off more and more frequently. The wall that holds back the ocean is strong, but every time it rains, we lose something new. Once, we took a boat out to see the remains of Coney Island, just rusting metal and gaping clown faces grinning at you from above the water.

I let go and reach for my phone. Flood warning.

“Will we have to evacuate?” Lilly asks.

I pull up more details. “No, we’ll be fine. Work might be closed.”

The tension in Lilly’s face relaxes and Grace cheers. Flood days mean we both get to stay with her. No preschool. Her excitement makes her wiggly, and she runs across the room to where her presents sit on the kitchen counter. Brightly colored bags stuffed with old newspaper. She clammers up like a monkey and tries to shuffle the papers around to see what’s inside.

“Not yet, Peanut,” Lilly says and pulls her away. “You have to wait until you blow out your candles.”

For a second the two of them are silhouetted against the small window, grey light peering in from behind the rain clouds and I ache with a heavy sort of happiness.

The View of the City from the Hurricane Walls.

“Look! There’s the Statue of Liberty,” I say, pointing.

“There’s my school!” Grace shouts.

“The Empire State Building,” Lilly says.

“The park!” says Grace.

“You can’t see the park from here, silly.”

“I can see everything from here,” she says with the wisdom of all her six years.

I've never been religious, but as I look out over the city, Lilly's hand in mine, I understand the Bible a little bit: why Adam named the animals, I mean.

Names have power, and in naming the city, its power courses through me. I know this place now. I know the pace of its streets and which bus to take to get to the Brooklyn Museum. I know the length of its sidewalks and the dingy bodegas on its corners. I know its parks, its trees, its canals. And once you really know somewhere, you have to love it.

My heart flutters up in my throat as the realization hits me hard and fast. This is home. Again. Again. Again. No matter how far I run, no matter how I fight, the earth keeps calling me back.

"What are you thinking about?" Lilly asks, once Grace has settled down with a sandwich onto the picnic blanket we've spread out.

"The city. Everything. Out there, it's..." I can't bring myself to call it beautiful. Not yet. "Not all bad."

"I know, right?" Lilly says. "I wish I could take her back to Oklahoma and show her where I grew up, the big sky, the red earth. See where she comes from."

I put a hand over hers. She never talks much about why she left: the trash youth minister and his threats. But she talks about Oklahoma so much I feel as if I've grown up there too. My memories twisting in with her storytelling, the open sky above Anadarko mixing in with the sunset over Chicago, the flat earth looking like endless concrete sidewalks and California soil.

"She'd have loved it," I say.

"What if we..." She stops herself.

"What? Stayed? It's too dangerous. You know that."

"It's safe here, though, right? And that bill just passed—all that money going into climate reversal research. Restabilization something—"

"For now. But who knows how long it'll take for that to go into effect, and after that there's no way to know for sure it'll work, or when. It could be decades. Centuries."

"I just... I want so much more for her than what we had. We're stuck here behind these walls just waiting for everything to end. I want to give her the whole world."

“You’ll give her the stars,” I say, trying to lighten the dark mood that’s settled over us both.

She chuckles, but it’s a sound made mostly to humor me. “Yeah. It’s not the same though, is it?”

She’s right. Out across the water, the sunset is reflecting off the glass skyscrapers and the sparkling flickers of night lights are just startling awake—the city is golden.

The Forgiveness I Know I Don’t Deserve.

His face is new. The same, but still new. Everything is broader, as if his features decided to relax on his face: wider nostrils, thicker, bushier eyebrows that remind me of Mom, doughier cheeks. Andy shows up at my office—my photo’s on the website; it isn’t hard to find—without calling ahead, and drops his bag on the floor. Smiling. Big. Bigger than I remember him ever smiling before, and for a second I’m frozen like a trapped animal. Not out of fear. It’s shame.

“Are you going to give your little brother a hug?”

I go to him, hug him, and it all feels alien and familiar at the same time. Warm.

“You’ve gotten bigger,” I say, pulling away.

“So have you,” he says. I’m quiet as he looks around my office, whistling appreciatively. He eyes the photograph on my table: Lilly, Grace, and me. He points. “Yours?”

“Yeah. Gracey’s seven now.”

“Cute kid.”

I nod and babble something about how kids are a handful while my mind races. Why didn’t I call after I left? Why didn’t I visit? It made sense at the time, shame and sadness stretching days into weeks into months into years until the chasm of time opened up and swallowed my intentions whole. “How’s Dad?” I ask finally, scared of the answer

“Good. Good,” he says. “Well, sort of good. He would have come along but he had radiation scheduled. Skin cancer. I mean, he’s not terminal or anything, don’t worry. And we managed to score him a really great doctor at Northwestern Memorial—just fantastic. Degrees out the wazoo.”

I laugh at the word “wazoo” because it sounds just like Dad. But that only makes me feel worse. “Fuck. Cancer,” I say, not knowing what to do with my hands. “I’m sorry I never called.”

“I know,” Andy says. “This really wasn’t meant to be a guilt trip or anything. I mean, we were mad at first, super mad, but then it just... we just missed you.”

We talk until the rest of the office clears out and my phone rings. It’s Lilly asking if I’m coming home late, and I tell her my brother is coming for dinner without asking him. We eat leftover fried rice that’s been re-fried with an egg on top. Hot, slick, and fragrant with sesame oil, extra crispy. Grace is shy of my brother at first, but warms up after he starts telling stories of when we were little. I am surprised at how much I forgot, his words filling in the holes in my memory and patching them over with his own.

When conversation turns to work, I get quiet and awkward. This is what I think is coming: he’s going to ask me for a seat on the spaceship. It’s what everyone’s been doing. Asking, hinting. Sometimes even bribing. I’ll probably even get him one with all the shame I’ve been burying.

But instead, this:

“That’s why I came,” he says. “To say goodbye. I got offered a seat way back in February but turned it down, so I’m not going with you.”

“What?” I say, dumbstruck. “Why?”

“Oh, I mean, I just assumed you’d be going. I’m not wrong, am I? It’s history repeating itself,” he says. “You leaving. Me staying.”

“No. I mean why are you staying?”

He laughs. “Where would I go? We’re farmers. Farmers belong on Earth.”

“Farmers belong in Chicago?”

“Well, sort of farmers,” he corrects himself. “It’s just what we call ourselves at Compass Climate. Kind of like a nickname. I’m part of the re-habitation program, trying to make it all grow again, turn back the clock, fix what’s broke, that whole thing.”

Lilly lights up. “I’ve been reading about them—the dam removals and the re-seeding, those little algae that scrub carbon dioxide and poop out oxygen. That’s you?”

“I’m just on the re-seeding group. Starting with a test plain in Illinois, and working our way out from there. Trying to get the mixture right so it’s as close to natural as we can get. You’d be surprised at how hard it is to find heritage switchgrass.”

Lilly goads him for more information, impressed, curious. He explains more about the work finding seeds, searching archives for old explorers’ diaries and agricultural texts, the biology, the chemistry, the engineering the whole undertaking requires.

“It’s funny it worked out this way,” he says turning to me. “You were always the one with the green thumb.”

I snort. “That was Mom.”

“No,” he says, pointing at the windowsill, which has grown over with lavender and rosemary to accompany my unruly basil. “You always said you hated it, but you never really did.”

Lilly nods. “Grace is learning too, and she’s getting pretty good at it. They’ve got a tomato plant on the fire escape that she’s been tending to herself. First time she saw a tomato on there, you should have seen her face. Pure joy. She came running in and asked if we could make salad with it.”

I try to protest: it wasn’t that big of a deal, and Grace had made a huge mess bringing the whole plant back in through the window with her. But Andy just laughs. “Yeah. That’s my sister: shoving her hands in the soil and then complaining about the dirt.” He pauses, as if holding in a breath. Then release. “That’s why Dad thinks you left, you know. It’s why I think you’re leaving now. You love it so much that you’re afraid of losing it. So you leave first.”

Lilly puts a hand on my arm and gives it a squeeze. “I think I’ll go check on Grace. Sounds like you two have a lot more to talk about.”

That Look of Hers that Means She Understands Without Even Trying.

There’s a dive bar that’s been around since the time of the dinosaurs. It’s dark, full of heavy wood and vintage beer advertisements, and the specials are all written on the mirror behind the bar in sharpie. On warm nights, they open up the back door and let the crowd spill into the narrow

concrete backyard, faces aglow in fairy lights. They've got a good veggie burger, too, and sometimes Lilly and I will come here after a movie when we've paid the sitter to stay late.

This is the last time we sit here, facing each other under the moon, our napkins stained with French fry oil. The last day we have on Earth before the shuttle takes off.

Her nails are still perfect. Always have been. Always will be, even here at the end of the world. But I do not take her hand and kiss her fingers the way I want to. Instead she takes mine. Soft and slow as if I might startle.

I take a breath, ready to spill out my feelings in a rush, all my second guessing and guilt and worry and sadness and explain what a coward I am and how I'm sorry I'm like this, so indecisive and selfish and... but she goes first

"You want to stay," she says. Her voice is calm.

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "I don't want to run anymore."

The Earth.

Home is where the heart is until your home is on fire and also underwater and being blown away into dust. Sometimes you lock your heart away because your home is fighting you like a teenager who can't understand how much you really fucking love them until it's too late. And sometimes you have to leave your heart behind so you can run. So you can travel as fast as your legs can carry you, searching for new homes in new places that won't break you quite so hard.

But every so often, your home and your heart line up. Sometimes you can kiss your heart on the forehead and hold your other heart's hand while you all watch the shuttle take off, your feet still and solid on the home you've chosen for yourself. Sometimes you promise your heart that you're going to make your home better. You're going to fix everything humanity ruined, because one day your little heart will know what it's like to grow lavender in a field wider than the eye can see.

For a while, after the spaceship leaves, Lilly, Grace, and I don't know what to do with ourselves. There's no school and no work and no nothing. We take a walk in the park and duck through the quiet museum, touching things we know we shouldn't until the last security guard in Brooklyn shoos us away. Protecting their home the way I'm doing mine.

We've got a flight out to Chicago the next morning, but tonight we sit on the roof of our building and marvel at how empty everything feels, how quiet. A cold wind tickles my neck, and stretched out across the horizon is that same golden city I fell in love with.

It makes me think of a poem Lilly always liked: "The world is too much with us." And I wonder if maybe it's not that the world is too much with us, but that we are too much with this world. We are made of its earth, of its water and sky. And that's why we have such trouble leaving. It's why we stay and stay and stay.

I think of all the running I've done, fighting the part of Earth that's always been inside me, and am overcome with exhaustion.

Sometimes home is where the heart is. And then sometimes home is just you, sitting with the choices that you've made on the beautiful, dangerous, glorious, garbage planet. This planet you chose to save. This planet you chose to love. With your heart telling you it's okay.

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(*Editors' Note:* "A Catalog of Love at First Sight" is read by Stephanie Malia Morris and Brit E. B. Hvide is interviewed by Lynne M. Thomas on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast Episode 28B.)



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Canst Thou Draw Out the Leviathan

by Christopher Caldwell

(*Content Note for use of racist slur.*)

John Wood boarded the *Gracie-Ella* ahead of the crew. He carried his sea chest on his shoulder. In a satchel slung low on his hip were his tools and the three things most precious to him: a lock of his grandmother's hair, a shaving from the first cabinet he had built as a boy, and his freedom papers. No light but the moon, but John could walk the length of the *Gracie-Ella*'s decks eyes closed and barefoot without placing a wrong stop. She was named for the daughters of two men who held her title, and at sea she belonged to the captain, but John reflected that she was his as much as anyone's; his hands had shaped her and healed her, cosseted her and kept her afloat. He ducked down below decks. In the dark he made his way midship to a space he and the cooper shared. The smell of sawdust and resin was a comfort. A few strikes of a flint and the lantern overhanging his workspace was alight. John set about arranging his tools. The work here was sweet. He ran his hand over words he had carved on the underside of the vice-bench. "I hereby manumit & set free John Wood. He may go wheresoever he pleases."



The sixth night out from Nantucket, John woke to find William Harker looming over him in the darkness. John sat bolt upright in his hammock. William put a calloused finger to John's lips. William's voice was silky. "I've been thinking it's been a mighty long time since I've been ashore. Man can develop a thirst."

John groaned, half in anticipated pleasure, half in exhaustion. "Not even a week yet. Ain't your wenching last you a fortnight?"

William bent close to his ear. John could smell salt, armpits, ass. William's breath was hot on his cheek. "T'aint wenches I'm after. I was hoping the ship's carpenter might lend us some wood." William put one big, scarred hand on John's crotch.

John felt himself stir in response. "Captain'll make you kiss his daughter if I'm too ill-rested to swing my hammer come daybreak."

William put his other hand on John's neck. "My harpoon will be all the keener for it, and I can give you practice with your hammer."

John sighed. "Best get on with it. It's summer and the night's nowhere near long enough." He slid out of his hammock and led the big harpooner by the wrist from steerage towards the foretween decks.

John shoved William against the bulkhead and fumbled with his breeches. For all his talk of rest, John was every bit as eager. In the darkness, he traced William's form with deft, curious hands. The body was familiar: the taut belly, the ropey scar high on one hip. He found William's mouth with his own, hungry and biting. They rocked as the ship rocked. John felt the crest of a wave, and in its deep trough heard William cry out. Warm, sticky wetness splashed against his thigh. Slick and sweaty, the two men clung to each other. William whispered, "I'll make you pretty baubles from the bone of the next whale I kill. I'll spend my lay to bring you spices and silks. I'll—"

Light pierced their quiet darkness. John saw the earnestness in William's eyes, before William shoved him away and pulled up his breeches, slipping back the way he came.

John shaded his eyes. Pip, one of the cabin boys, walked past wide-eyed towards the forecastle with a stinking little lantern and a beaten tin cup. If he took any notice of John near naked and smelling of sweat and spunk, no sign of it shown on his dark, intense face. John laced up his breeches and followed after.

"Hoy there, Pip."

The boy spooked. "Hoy, sir."

John laughed. "Ain't no one never called me sir. And you ain't 'bout to start. Name's John, or John Wood if you have to keep formal. Bought my own freedom, and I won't let you give me yours."

The boy gave him an owlish look. “Hoy, John Wood. Never bought my freedom. I suppose I might have stolen it.”

John clapped Pip on the back. He pointed with his chin at the tin cup. “What’s that, boy?”

“Corn meal.” Pip pinched his lips together. “I ain’t steal it. Cookie gave it me.”

“A nobbin-hearted old skinflint like Cookie gave you near a half cup of it? You must got more charm than I know.”

The boy cradled the cup close to his narrow chest. His eyes were wide. “La Sirene knows ways to soften the hearts of men.”

John ruffled the boy’s hair, as coarse and kinky as his own. “What you doing with that this time of night?”

“Watch.”

John watched in the flickering lamplight as the boy wet a finger with his tongue and traced with precision a little boat on the deck. Pip finished his drawing by writing a word strange to John, “Immamou.”

John said, “I learnt my letters soon’s I got my manumission papers, but what’s that word for?”

Pip said, “Protection.”

John laughed. “I don’t know about that. Ain’t no charm against the captain if he catches you sleep on first watch. Get to bed, boy.”

Pip blew out the lantern.



Two more days out and early morning John was dumping wood shavings into the cold furnaces of the try works when he heard a foremast hand’s thin voice cry from the hoops, “She blows! There she blows! A cachalot!”

The Captain roared, “A sperm whale, aye? Where boy, be quick? She alone?”

“Leeward, Captain! One spray. No more’n a league out!”

“To the boats, boys!” The Captain cracked a rare smile. “Mr. Wood! You keep my ship in order.”

John looked among the bodies scrambling over the deck for the other shipkeepers, Cookie, the cooper, the blacksmith, and the steward. He saw they were all awake and above-deck. “Captain sir, all’s ready for your return.”

The Captain beckoned at the Kanakan harpooner named To’afa—whom everyone called Gospel—with measured speed they headed to the first whaleboat, four crewmen in tow.

William ran to the third whaleboat swinging from its davit. His boatkeeper, the portly second mate, close on the lean, blond harpooner’s heels. William looked back at John once and shouted, “I’ve not forgot me words to you.”

The Captain’s boat launched first, and the boat with William soon splashed down after.

John heard the Captain cry out, “Take care, you louts, any of you gally this whale and she sounds, I’ll stripe you with nine lashes.”

Four whaleboats set out leeward after the whale. John stood for a moment at the railing midship watching them row, each boatkeeper urging their crew on faster in low growls. Cookie stood at John’s shoulder. He spat a thick gob of phlegm over the side. Cookie sucked at his gums. “Whale brains the night instead of salt horse.”



The sun was high when John first heard the crew again. Echoing over the waters, rough voices sang obscenely about the ladies of Cuba before the first of the whaleboats came into view. Towed behind them by the fluke was the carcass of a sperm whale nearly half as long as the *Gracie-Ella* herself.

John yelled for Pip to attend the returning crew. The ship pitched and listed as they lashed the massive beast starboard for the cutting in.

The crew were wet and boisterous, although to John's eyes, tired and the worse for wear. William's whaleboat was the first. The second mate's face was red. "Grog!" He shouted. "Grog for the harpooner!"

Pip ran over with a tin cup full of drink slopping over the edges. William took it from him with both hands and drained it in a single pull. He looked over at John. "That old bull was meaner than my granny, but I keep me promises."

The Captain supported one of his rowers around the shoulder. John ran to help. Ethan, his name was. John knew him to be a serious, quiet boy from Pennsylvania. His thin, white arm was bent at a ruinous angle. He slumped into John's arms, his face gray. John thought Ethan would have need of his saw. The boy whimpered. John looked to the Captain. "He well?"

"Struck by the blow of a fluke. Plenty of grog and full barrels of parmacety will help him forget, I reckon. Time he comes to collect his lay he'll be smiles again."

John half-carried the boy down into the darkness of the forecastle. He lifted him into his hammock, the boy yelping and shuddering. Ethan's eyes were large and tearful, but John knew he was needed on deck to erect the cutting stage. He stroked the boy's hand. "I'll send the Steward to come look after you."



The sun was low to water when John, stinking and calloused, hammered the last plank of the cutting stage into place. The hands' voices hoarse with hours of filthy shanties—Gospel abstaining. The whale was held fast to the *Gracie-Ella* with great chains. John remembered the injured boy, but knew the Captain would see pulling an able worker away to tend to Ethan as coddling. Every hand was turned to cutting in the whale. The harpooners peeled its skin in spiralling strips known as blankets with long-handled cutting spades. Each blanket piece was so heavy it

took John and six others to haul it up. Men already sore and tired with rowing and killing chopped those pieces into smaller sections, to be yet again minced into paper-thin slices known as bible leaves.

William was back in the water with a monkey-rope tied around his waist, passing up buckets full of spermaceti to the two cabin boys, who ran the pearl-colored waxy substance over to barrels, which when full, were hammered shut and sealed under the watch of the cooper. The deck was red and slick with blood. On one of his last passes Pip slipped in the gore and fell on his back. John tossed a horse piece of blubber to the blacksmith and hurried over to the boy. Pip's eyes fluttered shut as milk-fragrant spermaceti from his bucket pooled around his narrow frame. John lifted the boy up and staggered against sudden weight; in an instant Pip felt heavier than one of the blanket pieces. He kneeled under the tremendous burden. Pip's eyes snapped open. The boy's expression was hard and made him look far older than his fourteen years. His voice was like thunder. "John Wood. You know me not. But you I know. Your kin called to me for safe passage across my waters."

John groaned struggling to keep the boy upright. "Pip, this ain't sensible. You struck your head."

The boy's look was pitying. "Pip? No. I am the storm and the wind hard behind it. I am the wave and the darkness below. I, the white foam and the shifting sea sand. Do you know me, John Wood?"

John whispered, "Agwe?"

"The blood remembers. Destruction follows your present course. You have until the moon waxes full and wanes again." Pip shut his eyes. John felt the weight vanish from the boy.

The first mate, a tough, wiry man with a parsimonious mouth and thinning sandy hair stood over them. "You niggers pick a fine time for resting. Work to be done, and that spilled parmacety will come out of your lays, so I swear."

Pip squealed. "Sir, t'ain't the Carpenter's fault. Sir? Mr. Wood was just helping me on account I'm so clumsy."

"That so? You'll pay double penalty, then."

John stared hard at the deck so as not to give the First Mate a reason to call him out for insolence. “Sir, now Pip’s up and about, if I have your leave, I’m needed elsewhere.”

The First Mate scowled. “What are you looking poe-faced for? Back to work!”



That night the fires in the tryworks burned hot. Foul smoke, black as ink, curled up and blotted out the stars. The crew pitched bible leaves into the try pots for rendering. The cutting in had slowed after the sunset, and John turned his hand to the Captain’s whaleboat, which had seen some damage from the flailing whale. It had needed bailing out with a piggin on the way back, but John assessed the boat as being in fine condition, all things considered. He was sanding out a new board to replace one that had been cracked in the hunt, when a shadow distinct from the roiling clouds of smoke fell across him. Without looking up he said, “William, your mama was no glassblower.”

William’s smile seemed to beam in the lantern-light. He was wrapped in a moth-eaten old bear hide and held out two cups full of grog. “Looks like thirsty work there.”

John accepted one of the cups. He took a deep pull, relishing the burn down his throat. He gazed up at William. Shivering cold. Bedraggled. Ridiculous in that bear hide. Reeking of stale blood, salt, and sweat. Beautiful. He said, “You stink. You ain’t think to splash some of that ocean water on you whilst you was splashing around with that big fish?”

William smiled and squatted next to John. “That whole time I was fighting that mean old bastard, thinking what you’d say to me when I came back with a mouth full of teeth to carve into something for you kept me going.” He rested his hand on John’s shoulder.

“Careful. You’ll get old Gospel to come over and give’s a sermon ‘bout the evils of sodomy, and I don’t know about you, but I prefer my sinnin’ in quiet,” John said.

“Be days before a whale this size is barrelled and tucked away, unless the sharks find it first. We won’t have any idle hands for the devil’s tools, I reckon.”

John swatted William’s hand off his shoulder. “The devil! You think I’m old scratch?”

“You are a mighty temptation.” William’s voice turned serious. “That little negro cabin boy? What happened with him? There’s been some whispers that he’s touched.”

“He fell. That’s all. Ain’t none of you hoodoo-fearing whaler men never fell?”

William pulled John’s hand to his mouth and kissed the knuckles. “I just know you’re fond of him. I wanted to you to beware if things go sour.”

“A great big whale out there in less than a fortnight’s time, and you all are muttering about things going sour?” John laughed, but thought of the word “destruction” and all his mirth drained away.



Three days after the cutting in, John was working at the vice-bench, when Ezekiel, the other cabin boy, rushed in, flustered. John looked up from his work. “What is it, boy?”

“Mr. Wood! Mr. Sherman sent me in to find you he said to bring a saw!”

“Bring a saw? where?”

“The fo’c’sle! Ethan Anderson’s arm’s gone all wrong!”

John nodded, took a moment to select his sharpest and a yard of clean cloth, and followed the boy. The forecastle, never a sweet-smelling place, was rank with the smell of sick and rot. Ethan’s twisted arm had turned black. It wept pus through a poultice. Ethan moaned. His face in the lantern-light was pale. His lips were grey. John pressed gently on the arm near the wound and heard a crackling sound like logs splitting in a fire. John pursed his lips. “Zeke, get the boy whiskey.”

Ethan's eyes were dull. "Don't mean to gainsay you, Carpenter, but I dreamt of a black dog. Death's coming, and I'd rather go into the sea intact."

"If that arm don't go, death will surely come. You had a misfortune is all. Don't mean the end."

Ethan managed a smile. "My fortune ended the day I signed up to the *Gracie-Ella*."

John looked over to Simon Sherman, the Steward, who stood striped by shadows just beyond the dying boy. He wiped a thin hand across an ungenerous mouth and sniffed. "Well, Mr. Wood? You heard the man. Leave him to die in peace. Go find Gospel, he'll want to say some prayers for his soul, I imagine."

John put away his saw and found his way to the deck where he saw To'afa looming over the Captain. The harpooner was six and a half feet if he was an inch, and the expression he wore would fit a desert prophet. "Sir, may I have permission to speak plainly?"

The Captain winked at John. He stroked his salt-and-pepper beard. "To'afa, you seem about to burst if I say no. So out with it!"

"Sir, I have served you with the best of my skill. My arm has been yours. Why have you chosen to imperil me with the placement of an unrepentant sinner?"

"Imperil is a strong word." The Captain beckoned to John. "Mr. Wood, what's your perception of sin aboard this ship of mine?"

"Seems to me like pumping the bilge and repairing rotten boards occupies my time in a way that I ain't really considered it, sir."

To'afa wheeled on him. "This is no matter for sly jests. I have seen how you coddle that little heathen. You ought to talk sense to him!"

"Who ain't got sense, now?"

"That cabin boy, Pip. I know you feel a fondness for him out of your shared bondage. But he invokes heathen gods! He makes offerings and worships idols. This cannot stand!"

The Captain stood. Even at his more modest height, he struck an imposing figure. His voice was low and calm. "I trust your objection is to my choosing to have Pip crew my whaleboat? Do you have a suitable

replacement for Mr. Anderson? Will you perform the laying on of hands to heal his ruined arm? Or would you prefer I take that half-wit moon-calf Ezekiel to row? I would take the devil himself over that weakling and poltroon. If you have any objections to Pip and his savage worship, I suggest that you live up to your moniker and convert him, Gospel."

To'afa looked thunderstruck. The Captain turned his back on him and walked slow and stately aft.

To'afa looked to John as if he could spit. "Does my faith amuse you, Carpenter?"

John's voice was soft in reply, "It is your faith that has sent me forth. Ethan Anderson is not long for this world. Mr. Sherman has sent me to ask you to say a few prayers for his soul in the next one."

To'afa nodded. "I shall collect my Bible." He looked in the direction of the Captain. "I hope the Old Man does not regret taking no heed of my words on that devil-worshipping boy."



On the day they buried Ethan at sea, one of the foremast hands caught sign of whales. Right whales this time, two, mother and calf. As the crew made muster again for the whaleboats, William pressed something hard and cool into John's hand. It was a sperm whale's tooth, carved into scrimshaw. John recognized his own face carved into the surface, rough edges smoothed away, and surrounded by fanciful flowers. He watched William bound across deck to his whaleboat and smothered a rueful smile.



It was after nautical twilight when the whaleboats returned. The crew sung no work songs, and the slapping of the oars against the ocean struck John as sepulchral. It reminded him of the creaking of a hearse. Once aboard,

the Captain's face was pinched and Gospel walked behind him with his head down, muttering prayers beneath his breath. William found John and embraced him in sight of God and the crew. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

John grabbed William by the chin. "What you sorry for?"

"The boy Pip—he..."

"Where is he?"

"The hunt was good at first. Old Gospel got right into her with his whale iron, she were fastened, and—" Tears and snot streamed down William's big honest face. "Whale sounded and snapped two lines. The sea churned into froth. All the whaleboats rocked, mine nearly overturned. Pip. He just dove into the ocean after the whale. It must be a fit of madness. We searched until it was half-dark, but he never surfaced."

"I see," said John in a cold fury. He looked over at To'afa's broad back. "You sure he ain't had any help."

William shook his head. "Gospel's a sanctimonious bastard. But he wouldn't bring no actual harm to a child beyond sermonizing."

"Ain't needed for the cutting in, am I? Reckon I have work to do below-deck," John said.

John was not settled at his vice-bench for more than a moment before William's shadow fell between him and the lamp. Chisel in hand he said, "Thought I told you I had work."

"Thought maybe you could use me in grief as you do in joy." William's tone was bashful.

"You think that? We sailing together on a ship for two years, but after that I ain't so sure I'll sign back on. Seems a short time for you to be studying my grief."

"Six year we sailed together since I was a green hand and you—"

"Bought myself free from a cabinet maker?"

William's voice was patient, pleading. "And you came aboard to be this ship's carpenter, even if you are too skilled by half. What I mean to say is, I don't see no future for me without you in it, John Wood. I keep my lay by, don't spend more than necessary. I've set aside some money. I could set you up a shop to work your trade, buy land for a house and—"

John sighed. “William, I like you. I likes your body. I likes my body when it is with yours. But future? Ain’t no future for any negro and a white man in the goddammed Union ‘cept as master and slave. I been a slave, I’ll be in my grave before I return to that.” John looked down at his lathe to avoid the hurt he knew was in William’s eyes.

“You’re wrong, John Wood. I love you as any man loves his wife. More. I love you so much that it is the filling up and making of me, and sometimes feel like to shatter when you’re not near.”

John made his expression stony. He crushed down the part of him that wanted to recite to William the Song of Solomon, that wanted to cradle him in his arms and rock him to the rhythm of the boat. “We have sweetness here. Sweetness never lasts. Let it linger on your tongue while it can.”

“Do I mean nothing more to you than the cockroach-ridden molasses you sweeten your coffee with?” William clenched his fists.

John looked at the lathe. “What I mean is, we got two years. Ain’t no point in expecting more.”

“I knew what you meant.” William said. John watched him walk away. When William was out of sight, John pulled out the scrimshaw portrait from under his shirt, where it had dangled on a cord to rest next to his heart.



Restless, late to bed, but too tired to find himself elsewhere, John headed midship where he had his hammock. Across from him the blacksmith snored. Above the blacksmith, William slept. His arms hung down limply, and the careworn look on his face had vanished. John put out the lantern. He settled into his hammock, turning to face away from William. His mind raced darkly, but sleep took him in moments.

He dreamt of the poor lost cabin boy Pip sitting at the right hand of a handsome brown-skinned youth with green eyes and wavy hair. The youth rested indolently on a coral throne. His full-lipped mouth pouted prettily, but the sea green eyes were piercing, knowing. An enormous

mirror gauzed over with black crepe rested just beyond the throne. All else was darkness. Pip spoke, but the voice was like the roar of the ocean, and John knew the words belonged to the melancholy youth. “You break bread with thieves. They seek to plunder my seas the same as they have plundered the land before them.” He gestured behind him. John knew without seeing that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of shuffling figures in that unspeakable darkness. The youth nodded. Pip spoke again. “You *feel* them. The whales sing to keep them calm, to prevent them from despairing of never seeing Guinea. These the plundered lost in crossing. I have given them homes and solace.”

John felt himself transfixed by those green eyes. Pip spoke in his own voice. “Ain’t right what they done to us. Ain’t right what they do the whales. They’d burn us both up for lamp oil, and then when we’s gone seek to take more.”

The dead, John knew they were the dead with certainty, began to shuffle into almost visible ranks beyond the coral throne. They cried out in languages that were strange to him.

The voice of thunder issued from Pip’s mouth again. “Until the moon is dark.”

John awoke, the visions fresh in his head. He saw that William had already arisen and left his hammock empty. After washing his face with cold seawater, and finding the vision did not fade from memory like most dreams, John resolved to see the Captain.

The Captain had just finished taking breakfast in his cabin with the Mates. The First Mate cast an ugly look at John when he asked if he might have a moment of the Captain’s time, but the Captain agreed and bid John to sit at his table. The Mates cleared out in silence. The Captain was still hale at nearly sixty, but John noticed a sag in his shoulders. He looked at John with something like regard and asked, “What troubles you?”

John put his head in his hands. He knew the Captain to be a man of no great faith in things unseen. “Sir? Would you say I am honest?”

The Captain inclined his head. “I know you to be an honest man. And one who never has shirked from toil.”

John swallowed. “As I am honest, and for the love I bear you as one who has served under your command for six years... I—”

“Out with it, man.”

“Captain, this ship must return to its home port.”

“Are you mad? We’re less than a month out. We had good fortune with that cachalot bull, but the ship’s holds are nearly empty.”

By instinct, John fell back into the flowery speech he knew appealed to white men of rank. “Sir, I swear by my life that death and perdition overhang this ship. My only care is to save the *Gracie-Ella* and her crew from this fate. And if I be honest—”

“Enough! I had not thought you to be a fool, John Wood. But if I hear that you have repeated this half-cocked notion of curses and witchcraft to any soul aboard, I swear by my life I’ll clap you in irons.” He thumped the table with a short-fingered fist. “Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You may leave.”



Another fortnight before the next whale sighting. It was an ugly, overcast afternoon on choppy seas. John was ill-tempered and worse rested. The night before he had troubling dreams of voices calling out to him in the darkness. He and William had scarcely spoken. But he caught William by the arm as the whaleboats swung on their davits. William’s face was unreadable. All John managed was, “Take care.”

William pulled his arm away. “Take care?”

John felt his cheeks burn hot. “I love you, too.”

William grabbed John then, pulled him close to his chest and kissed him hard and deep and slow. Gospel squawked in protest, and John heard noises of disgust, but his heart thundered in his chest loud enough to drown out the roar of the ocean and he kissed William back.

"I'll take care," William said. Then he bounded over to his whaleboat with a joyous whoop.

The moon was a sliver in the sky when the whaleboats returned. John heard the Captain cursing and spouting imprecations across the water. When all the whaleboats were pulled up, John's heart sank. The Second Mate's boat had absent both its boatkeeper and its harpooner. William was nowhere to be seen.

He overheard one of the hands from the boat talking to the steward. "Bad hunt. Lost two. The Second Mate and his harpooner. Harpooner got caught in the line, Second Mate went to cut and got carried over. Whale rammed him up against the boat."

John felt a great shudder of grief. The Captain passed by without meeting his eyes. A choking sound died in his chest, and he ran to the railing and vomited.

To'afa crossed his arms across his chest and surveyed the smashed timber. Without looking John's direction he said, "The wages of sin."

Another hand said, "And after all that loss, damn whale sounded before we could bleed its black heart away."



The next morning a squall came hard out of the west. Waves battered the ship. Its creaks and moans sounded like cracks and wails. Listless but dry-eyed, John made his inspections, filling in leaks with oakum, yelling at Ezekiel to help him pump water out of the bilge. The moon would be dark tonight, he knew. He carried out his tasks diligently with dread growing in his chest like wet rot. He remembered William telling him he saw no future without him and laughed without humor.

That night the storm quieted abruptly. John went above-deck to examine the masts and the yardarm, when in the night's stillness the ocean roiled. Whales in their multitudes flanked the ship aft and starboard.

No foremast hand called out this sighting. The Captain himself was left speechless. Right whales, humpbacks, sperm whales, fin whales, in numbers beyond counting were, a phalanx of the sea. Some hand, not clever enough to be terrified, broke the silence to opine that these whales represented riches beyond the dreams of avarice. It began shortly after. A sperm whale rammed the boat with his large square head. There was a crunch and crackle as wood splintered. The ship, over a hundred foot long from stem to stern rocked and shuddered. The Captain screamed, “Mr. Wood! See that you keep us afloat!”

John ran down below-decks and into the hold. The ship shuddered with repeated assaults. A great fracture ran along the keel, and John knew the situation was hopeless. The hold was taking on water fast, and oakum wouldn’t slow it down. Still, he picked up his hammer and rolled an empty cask over to the worst leak in an attempt to slow it. Another heavy crash and the ship listed hard to port before righting itself. Thunder pealed. John set to breaking apart the barrels in an effort to shore up the ship. The thunder spoke to him. “John Wood,” the voice was Pip’s. “You ain’t gonna save them, but you can save yourself. You bought your freedom once, and I give it back to you now.”

Hearing the truth of this, John reached inside his shirt for the piece of scrimshaw, and clutching it abandoned his task, tearing out of the hold and onto the deck. For a mad moment, John thought to go back, grab his satchel with his grandmother’s hair, and his freedom papers, run his hand over the words on the vice bench. Then the whales struck again, and the deck listed, causing John to slide into the mast, where he clung for dear life. There was a scream, and he saw the First Mate tumble overboard into the churning water. The Captain kept his footing, and shouted for whale irons. The last John saw of him, he thrust a harpoon into the air and vowed to the heavens that he would fight and kill every last fish in the ocean.

When the ship righted, John scrambled over splintering wood and dodged falling debris. Crab-walking midship on the port side, he tucked himself into a spare whaleboat, cut it loose from the davit, and trusted fate during the long drop into the night-dark water. A bull sperm whale,

black as obsidian but with green eyes, breached nearby, and the force of his splashdown pushed the whaleboat away from the doomed *Gracie-Ella* as she sank out of sight.



He was adrift for two days and a night before a merchant vessel came across him. With kindness and care they rescued him from the leaking whaleboat and brought him aboard their ship, *The Lady Elise*. After he was given fresh water to drink and wrapped in warm blankets, The captain, a young, amiable-looking man with freckles, asked him to tell his story. John did, with some careful omissions. *The Lady Elise*'s captain furrowed his brow. “We picked up another castaway form your ship two nights gone. You must have the devil’s own luck.”

He saw him then, wrapped in an Indian blanket. Staring up at the star-shattered sky was William.

John fell to the deck. “How can this be?”

William hobbled towards him, his movement slow and aided by a cane. He said, “Leg’s seen better days, and I’ve been pummeled all about like a sack of rotten fruit, but I live.” William winced. He dropped the blanket. A red welt the breadth of a thumb was raised around his neck. “Nearly strangled to death and dragged into the sea. But when I was down in the briny cold I heard a voice tell it weren’t yet time, that I were given a second chance. Queerest thing, sounded the near exact twin of that poor lost little cabin boy.”

John rose to his feet and closed the space between them. When William took his hand, John was still clutching the piece of scrimshaw carved with his image.



Christopher Caldwell

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Corpse Soldier

by Kameron Hurley

Everything started here:

A broad plain of yellow grass, the stalks crushed and smeared with blood, and the sounds of dying men—yes, all men—sobbing and praying to the rusty pink sky. The high grass hid their forms and faces. They were bodiless voices, as if ghosts already, rising above the field like ashes to heaven.

Nev had his fist in his own wound, pressing hard to staunch blood that flowed free as a spring rill, pumping across his breast with every heartbeat. He used his other hand to claw himself towards the sounds of the dying men. Not to save them—no—not to help them—no—but because he hoped they were not quite as doomed as he. He hoped they carried six more breaths instead of his two. He wanted to *become* them, to steal the last of their conscious moments, to take harbor within their mangled, broken bodies and mend them with the fire of his corpse-jumping soul. He had to find a form that would house his soul for another day, another hour, another breath, until he could jump again, and again, into his promised immortality.

But for now, in this moment—Nev needed just one more breath.
And he did not have it.

That's when he heard the little girl singing.

Nev's life after that day in that bloody field, after the war, after he fled the guild that once protected his immortal soul from superstitious mind clerics and osteomancers, was no easier. No matter how far he ran, or how many times he changed his face, Nev could not escape his past, and the sound of the little girl singing while he bled out. His old masters would inevitably find him and remind him of his obligations to the Body Mercenary Guild. They knew what sort of person he really was. They knew what had happened on the field that day.

They knew about the girl.
And what he had given her.



“Name and occupation?”

“Nevarius Plum,” Nev said, and not for the first time, he felt the urge to say he was a scribe, or perhaps a tax clerk, because it seemed so fitting to the current name he used. Body mercenaries like him should have had names that inspired fear and awe in the presence of the foes whose faces they would soon wear. But names didn’t always make a person, however much weight they gave on first impression. He had once known a man in the guild called Torgenson Bold. Torg perished on the field during his first skirmish, screaming and blubbering like a colicky newborn babe.

It wasn’t about the name—it was about the soul. Nev chose names that reflected the soul he wanted to show the world. The soul he aspired to.

“And *occupation?*” the squat woman repeated, sweating heavily behind the smooth wooden counter of the mud brick toll gate that flanked the main road into the city of Avarise. The tattered coil of fabric above her did not give much shade in the muggy heat, and the sun was high and hot. Most of the toll booth operators at the gates to the city were men. He considered asking her if she knew of an open position among them, grasping for an alternative to the summons from his guild masters, then shuddered at the idea of touching and speaking to so many people every day.

Too much temptation.

He could have said, “I’m a member of the Body Mercenary Guild,” but his kind were hated everywhere, here more than most; here they were routed out and run down. He had not been in contact with anyone from the guild since that day in the field, some seventy years ago, though he could still feel them, pursuing.

It’s why he needed to make this trip.

“I am a simple trader,” he said, “with goods to take to market.”

“Doesn’t mean you get in for free. You are showing very little respect.”

He bowed. “I apologize. Please, examine my wares and let us agree on a fee.”

Nev had learned that apologies and passive subservience cost him nothing in exchanges with those who fed on the power afforded their own little fiefdom. No doubt this woman enjoyed making visitors like him wait outside the gates indefinitely if they crossed her. Petty, counter-productive... but human beings were not rational. A hard lesson. Logic did not convince people to come over to one's position. One had to appeal to their emotions, egos, and desires. That had taken Nev many bodies' worth of lives to learn properly.

He brought his lop-eared alpaca forward and divulged the contents of her plump saddle bags. Hunks of volcanic glass shimmered. Nev gingerly picked up a chunk and offered it to the woman.

She took six pieces for herself, and one of the bronze bands he wore on his fingers for just such a bribe. Her ego assuaged, he passed into the city without further issue.

Avarise hugged the riverbank of the crushing gray wash of the River Monesi, a bloated, fast-moving breadth of water prone to lose its banks each year and overtake the stilted homes in the flood valley on the other side. The city proper loomed above the great river, tucked securely on a hill dug by thousands of hands for just this purpose. It afforded citizens not only a view of potential trouble, but safety from the river's wrath.

Nev climbed up the narrow cobbled streets. Flat pavers at the center of the way were for the carts; the knobby pebbled paths on either side were for hooved creatures who would have found the flatter way far more treacherous. The alpaca, with her soft padded feet, was content to tread next to him, though as he glanced at her two-toed feet he made a note that her nails needed trimming.

He consulted the little map in his pocket several times. Like many cities formed in the early days of the last empire, the streets were a hodgepodge of dead-ends and narrow alleys that sometimes opened briefly into airy plazas, then closed and pinched again, running down and down to some sewer grate or back up and up again only to bring him to the battered calcified door of some private residence.

After several bad turns, he finally came to the residence he sought, a pleasant little first-floor apartment with the family name “Clovanis” set in tile next to the threshold. Bursts of lovely pink flowers sprouted from window pots. Potted palms and heart-shaped snaking vines grew in the small yard just to the right of the door, a rare, narrow band of open space. An old woman sat out there, lean and regal, slightly hunched over a swath of fabric. At the rear of the garden, an unfinished canvas lay dashed in spots of color meant to mimic the flower boxes.

Nev came to the little courtyard gate. “Pardon, matron,” he said, “Are you Matild Clovanis?”

“I am.”

“Nev Plum,” he said. “I’ve brought the volcanic glass from Magoransa.”

“Of course, please, come. I didn’t expect you to be so young! What a journey you must have had.”

She rose, smiling. Her white hair was nested into an intricate knot of strands bound in multicolored ribbon. She did not walk with a cane; she moved swiftly, for all her years, and the sun-hardened lines of her face.

“I don’t have many visitors from so far away. Let me get you tea. We have clover tea! And biscuits.”

“You are very kind.”

Matild bustled into her home, though he noted she did not invite him in. Nev knotted the alpaca’s lead at the table and began to unload his stones.

When Matild returned, she chatted absently about the weather, then asked about his journey.

“Uneventful,” he said, but he shared details he supposed she would enjoy, about the people, the scenery, a scrappy young dog who ran off with the last of his jerky, a child with a voice like a bell, and news of a small settlement lost to a storm said to strike from a clear sky.

Matild exclaimed over the volcanic glass. “I have so many more buyers,” she said, which he already knew, because he had posed as one of them not long back. “But alas, not as much coin as I’d hoped in exchange.”

“I’m sure there are other bits and bobs I could settle for.” Nev pretended to give a longer look at the surroundings, the hanging vegetation, blooming

purple flowers up on the roof, aged brick walls; the bird poking its vibrant orange head from a nest snuggled tightly in the mouth of a tentacled nightmare meant to cover the otherwise inelegant appearance of a drain.

Nev drew a broken trinket from his pocket and placed it on the table between them. A blue stone shot through with green glass. “Have you ever come across a stone like this one? I’d be very keen to find one intact. I collect them.”

The woman brushed the bits of stone with her fingertips. “I had something like it, a very long time ago.”

“And now?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have it anymore.”

“You sold it?”

“I simply don’t have it.”

“I suppose that’s best. Those who carry intact stones can be in danger. Some... bad people are looking for intact stones.”

“But you aren’t one of the bad ones?”

“I don’t like to think I am.”

She leaned back in her seat. “I’m an old woman. There’s very little you or they can do to me. I’ve seen the world and lived a good life.”

Nev’s stomach twisted. He did not like to use fear, but in this instance, the tactic was warranted, and terribly true. “Perhaps you could tell me what happened to it. If I can have something to go on, I’m even happy to leave extra with your religious order. Whichever you subscribe to.”

“My mother sold it, a very long time ago.”

“You know where?”

“A company creditor, I imagine. She made a living in the ironworks. I was twelve or thirteen, then. Fifty-three years on, now. In the summer. I remember the sound of the cicadas.”

“Could I speak—” Nev stopped himself. He knew better than to ask, but it slipped out sometimes, his assumption that everyone lived forever.

“She passed some years ago.” The woman’s attention shifted. She seemed to re-evaluate him.

I’ve shown my hand, he thought. She knows.

“You should speak with my granddaughter,” she said, flicking her gaze up to the squawking bird in the drain. “She is very good at finding things.”

“It’s all right, I—”

“Nice young man like you. This is a very dangerous place, you understand? She could help you. You may not look foreign, but your accent is archaic, and you are... odd.”

“Perhaps I’m not as nice as I look.”

“I very much doubt that.”

Nev stood. He unloaded a few more stones from the alpaca’s saddle bag. “Thank you for your help.”

“Give me your map,” she said. “I can show you where my granddaughter is.” She peered at the angle of the sun. “Yes, this time of day I know where she’ll be.”

“That’s kind,” he said, “but I really do prefer to work alone.”

The old woman tugged at the map, though, pulling it from the table before he could snatch it up. She traced a section of the city about a half a mile back down the other side of the city, right up along the riverfront. “The Wandering Eye,” she said, and chuckled. “That’s where she’ll be. Ask for Mezelda.”

“Thank you.” Nev tucked the map back into his pocket. He hurried away, dropping his gaze, not wanting to look back.

But she spoke again, a line from a very old tune, one he had long ago tried to banish from his memory:

*Come little Jini in your flying machine
Come across the waves with me
Those golden waves, Jini
Those golden waves.*

Nev glanced back, just the once. Met her look. Tipped his hat, and then he and the alpaca were back in the square, drifting among the other residents, trudging deeper and deeper through the maze, the map forgotten, wanting only to disappear into the twisting labyrinth of Avarise forever.



Nev went down to the ironworks first. The pawnbroker there was young; he asked after the former proprietor, and celebrated his luck when the girl trotted into the back and came out with her mother. When he presented the stone, the old woman did not recall it, but her records went back a hundred years, she said, and for a few bronze rings, she put her daughter to work combing through the records from fifty-three years prior, in the summer months.

The girl brought out the big book and after reading a dozen pages, found the entry he sought.

“Oh yes, this family,” the old woman said. “The wizards. I didn’t realize that stone sat here so long. Bad buy, bad buy. Fifty years to turn around a trinket! Terrible.”

“Wizards?”

“Yes. I remember her, *Bafasa Mundi*. She came looking for a good luck stone. The green crystal soothed her. It was for her son. I recall her because they left the city a few months ago, after their youngest passed the wizard trials, and well... he was chosen for temple work. And you know what happens to children, especially boy children, chosen for such a fate.”

Nev did not. “Do you know where they went?”

“No, no. I’m sure no one does. They left in the middle of the night. The fewer they told, the better their chances of escape. A shame, really.”

Nev thanked them for the help and wrote *Bafasa Mundi* on the back of his map. As he did, his gaze went to the tavern along the waterfront. The Wandering Eye. It was true that he did not know these people, and they had no reason to trust him. He was also almost out of volcanic glass and bronze rings. Too much more of this and he would be broke, and no closer to the stone than when he started.

He reasoned that if it was difficult for him to find the stone, it would be equally difficult for the Body Mercenary Guild. Perhaps he was being overly anxious. Overly cautious. But it was this extra care that had

ensured his freedom and survival over these many long decades. To turn away now...

Nev sighed and patted his alpaca. “Long way to come for nothing, right?”

The alpaca hummed.

They began the long way down to the water.



The wharf smelled of copper and death, a combination that Nev had not yet encountered. The churning gray waters carried detritus from upstream; broken trees, dead animals, silt runoff, but from the smell, less sewage than he would have suspected. Avarise lay close enough to the headwaters that it was the first major city on the river’s wending path.

The Wandering Eye lay furthest upstream, closest to the boat docks.

Nev’s body was not terribly tall, but he had to stoop to enter the low doorway. He removed his hat. Inside; darkness, and the cloying stink of old sweat and cheap spilled beer. Beneath that, the whiff of aged cedar and hardened leather. Outside was hot; inside was much hotter, almost unbearable.

Three women collected at a table in the back. A barkeep spoke in low tones to a patron at the smooth cedar plank of the bar. Sounds of raucous laughing in the back could have been the cook staff or a gambling den.

Nev kept his head down and went to the bar, asked the beefy bar keep, “Excuse me? I’m looking for Mezelda?”

The barkeep rolled her eyes. Jerked her thumb at the hefty, heavy-lidded woman she spoke to. The woman bent over a gravy-soaked potato dish and what remained of a thick, frothy black beer.

“Good to know you have my back if the dock patrol comes calling,” the woman said, wiping her face on her sleeve. Her voice was rich and smoky; it put Nev in mind of another mercenary he once knew, long dead on the same field that had nearly claimed him.

“He’s definitely not dock patrol,” the bar keep said, and laughed. The table in the back called for another round. She went to the tap to satisfy them.

“Mezelda, I’m Nev. Your grandmother said you find people. Things.” Nev guessed Mezelda was in her late thirties, maybe early forties. He had found it difficult to judge the ages of those from cultures he was not yet accustomed to. It wasn’t so much that the age markers differed, it was that the way bodies aged was so intrinsically tied to their lineage, their daily work, their habits, and above all, their environments.

“Mez,” she said. “Nobody calls me Mezelda but Grandma. You have money?”

“I have some volcanic glass, a few bronze—”

Mez help up her hand. “Forget it.”

“Surely there’s some other—”

Mez nodded at the noise from the back. “Tell you what. Beat me at a game of cards, I’ll hear your sob story. I win, I clean you out.”

“This... does not seem like a deal a sane man would take. Thank you for your time.”

Nev put his hat back on and trudged to the door.

“Who you looking for?” Mez called.

“A boy. A wizard. His family left here some time ago. He has something I’m looking for. Your grandmother had it at one time, but her mother pawned it away. She said you could help.”

“Why ask for *my* help? Do you not like wizards?

“They’re fine.”

“So you don’t like children?”

When pressed, he always preferred honesty. Fewer things to remember. “I’m never certain how to treat them. Many parents take offense if I speak to a child as I would an adult. Should I treat a child as half human? Part animal? Does the percentage of their humanity change based on age? Is there a sliding scale?”

“I find children amusing.” Mez gulped her beer. “I once told my nephew that griffins weren’t extinct, just nocturnal. He loudly proclaimed this fact to his professor. It delighted me to no end.”

“You must have lost his trust.”

“I taught him critical thinking. He was, like, four.”

“You taught him adults are liars.”

“Is that untrue? Now he asks for a second opinion when I tell him anything. How many kids just believe whatever nonsense their Aunt Edna spouted off after she heard it from a grocer? The world would be a better place if we all questioned our elders more.”

“You advocate for disrespect?”

“Who do you think I am? A priest?”

“I... need to find someone else. You aren’t the right person for this.”

She chomped a hunk of potato; a bit of gravy leaked out the side of her mouth. “Figured,” she mumbled around the potato. “Grandma sends me particular kinds of people.” Her gaze narrowed; black eyes, long lashes. Like her grandmother, she seemed to see through him. I’m being paranoid, Nev thought.

“I’m not keen on games,” Nev said.

“And I’m not keen on working with someone I don’t know.”

“I prefer my independence as well.”

“Independence rarely gets me paid. Come out back.”

Her followed her to a scuffed table out on the patio. Here, it was cooler; a blessed breeze came in off the boiling river below. Mez set out a deck of cards; already a bad sign. Playing with her own deck meant it was likely marked. Did he look so young that she thought he would fall for that? Young, a foreigner... maybe so.

But he sat across from her anyhow. Placed his hat on his knee.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said, dealing out the cards. The deck was familiar. The game, he suspected, was Five-Card Shot. When she placed a single card face up between them, it confirmed his guess, but he demurred.

“What are we playing?” he said. “I admit I don’t have a head for cards. I’ll need the rules.”

She told him the basic rules in a breezy tone, deftly dealing the cards. He knew to lose his first hand. He won the second two.

“You’re not from here,” she said, leaning back in her seat, hands behind her head as he lay his winning hand face up.

“Just luck.”

“You are a poor liar.”

“Am I?”

“Kid’s name?”

“The mother is Bafasa Mundi. But it’s less a person I’m looking for and more of a thing. Is that all right?”

“Same.”

“But—”

“Things are generally either carried, lost, or hidden by people. It’s one and the same. Lots of trophies taken during the war. I’m wondering—we looking for something that got stolen from you, or for a trophy you stole from someone else?”

“...yes?”

“You from Moronov?”

“Yes.”

“And all you got outside is that alpaca with the rocks?”

That impressed him. He assumed she had not seen the alpaca, let alone had the time to see what he carried. But if she knew he carried the glass, she would know he was from Moronov. And of course—her grandmother had wanted the glass. Mez would have known that.

“Are you a wizard?” he said.

She collected her cards.

“I just wonder what kind of person walks five hundred miles from Moronov carrying just a few bronze rings, some rocks, and maybe a local script for a bank? You better have a script for a bank.”

“What kind of person gets into retrieving people?”

“Are we going to go visit this kid wizard or what?”

“Don’t you have to find him first?”

“I know where the Mundis are.”

Nev crossed his arms. Of course. “So you just thought I’d be an easy mark for cards? An easy day’s pay for you.”

“Not really,” she said. “They’re dead.”



That eerie yellow field of his youth, smeared in red. Blood always looked more watery than Nev expected. And there, again—the girl’s voice. High and melodic, surreal in its perfection because she was clearly so young.

He raised his head from the prickly pillow of grass, knowing this was among his last breaths, terrified to consider how many more he would see. Saw two small brown feet, toes curled in the bloody field. She was only four or five year old.

She wore a tattered blue shift. Her hair was coiled back from her head in braids coming loose now at the ends. She was unharmed. Unblemished. Smooth, perfect skin. All her fingers and toes. Bright, glassy eyes.

Five years old. The age he had been when he found out what he was. He had worn a tattered shift just like this, already begging his mother for men’s pants and wearing his brother’s hats into town. They told him he was a fool, back then, told him he was a she, that being born into that body came with its privileges, and he should be happy with his place in the world. He knew. But it never sat well with him.

And here, again—a young girl. A new, fresh body. A new start. As if the universe were offering her to him, as if he could start again.

He lay gasping like a fish as he bled out, reaching for the girl. He rasped, “Help me. Please. Please help me.”

All he needed to do was get his hands around her throat. End her life cleanly, swiftly, before his expired, and then move his soul from his body to hers. And then he would be free. He could get far, in her form. No one would notice another dirty, tattered child in the streets of the big cities, some refugee from the country, fleeing the war. He would be vulnerable for a time, perhaps, until he found another form, but he would take any body now, for one more breath. No matter the price.

The logical thing to do was to kill the child and inhabit her body. It’s what the guild had taught him to do. We all die. Few were so privileged to see their bodies inhabited again once their spirits had passed over. He was going to do her a favor, truly.

“Are you dying?” the little girl said.

“Yes.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes. What are you called?”

She leaned closer.

He snatched her wrist. Dragged her to the bloody field beside him. Her face was so close he felt the heat of it; her dark eyes went so wide he felt he would fall into them.

Take her. Wring her neck. Steal her body. Do it, Nev. You have done it a thousand times before. You will do it a thousand times again.



Nev walked a step behind Mez, leading his alpaca. The way to the graves of the Mundi family was a day’s walk, and Mez had insisted on loading the alpaca with beer, musty blocks of cheese, and a fried meat product of some kind that she called jerky.

The family had been killed just outside the next town, a little hamlet called Fortezia. Nev knew the name from his map, but had never been there. The road turned quickly from paving stones to dirt, but at least the rutted way was dry. Mez insisted on taking side paths several times, muttering darkly about bandits. He had encountered none since crossing the border into this country, but he did not argue.

“You have a name for it?” she asked as they came over a wooded ridge and back onto the proper road.

“Hm? The alpaca? I call her... Alpaca.”

“How can you call her the same name as any other alpaca?”

“She answers to it.”

“Hardly creative.”

“Creativity doesn’t improve the experience in any way. A woman called Mag is no different if she is called Magoransa. Same woman.”

“I’d disagree, obviously. Good dig, though. You wouldn’t just call her, hey... Human!”

“Not if she preferred another name, no. That would be rude. Would it not, Mez?”

“But alpaca—”

“She hasn’t told me her name. I would be happy to use it if she had. Do you know it?”

“Now you are being didactic.”

“Only honest.”

They huffed along awhile longer. Mez clearly struggled a little more than he did. He suspected she was spending most of her time sitting around playing cards in taverns and a lot less doing the leg work required to find people. Perhaps she had people for that. Despite her imposing form, he suspected he could outrun her easily. Wit and speed and his peculiar talent had always been his most effective weapons.

“You said your nephew.”

“What?” She narrowed her eyes.

“The child,” Nev said. “The one you lied to. Do you not have any children?”

“No. And you must not either. Well, not any you actually hang out with.”

“I don’t think I do,” he said. “It’s been—” and he had to close his mouth, because though his face was that of a man who might have been in his mid-twenties, he could not clearly remember the last time he’d had sex. Four decades ago? Six? Before the war, certainly. He had spent long stretches of peaceful time in cities before, a year here, a year there. They were pleasant enough times while they lasted. But as time went on he found his was more comfortable traveling alone. Fewer questions. Fewer emotions.

Mez crooked her mouth. “Don’t tell me you can’t remember?”

“Perhaps I can’t.”

“Remind me to give you a drink. See if that kicks anything loose.”

They spent the night at a way house. He insisted on sleeping outside, but she offered to share a room. “For the trickery on my part,” she said. “This is a favor more than a job. Though you’re still paying me what’s left of that volcanic glass.”

Nev liked to think he was good at reading people after all this time. It's why when she offered him a beer he pretended to drink it, and when she began pulling at him to dance with her and sing bawdy songs, he said he needed to find an outhouse and instead went to the barn, untethered his alpaca, and drifted back onto the road. He didn't mind her company, but he had yet to relish it, and it was always a good idea to move quickly before one transformed into the other.

The stars were out; the night was blessedly clear. The great gory constellations and massive swirling nebulas gave him enough light to get by. He abruptly turned off the road at the first path he found and continued on, despite his alpaca's annoyed humming.

"She's drunk," he said, thumping the alpaca's cream-colored neck. "One turn enough will deceive her." He was uncertain if that was true, but it sounded well enough there in the dark. It sounded so good that when the alpaca stopped, twitching her ears, he thought there must be some predator in the dark; it certainly couldn't be Mez.

He was mostly right.

The thump in his chest knocked him back a step. Nev had a moment to wonder at the feathered shaft jutting from his chest before the pain hit him, a purl of fire that uncoiled across his whole left side.

How terrible. He had loved this body.

The second arrow took him in the left side, a little lower. He let himself fall because he knew they would keep shooting until he did. He loathed to let go of alpaca's lead, but did so, yelling for her to run. She kicked up her toes and took off into the darkness.

Nev lay on the still-warm ground. He slipped his fingers behind him, took hold of the small utility knife he kept in a discrete sheath tucked into the inside of his belt. The burning pain of his wounds threatened to cloud his mind, but he breathed through it, as he has been trained to do.

"He down?"

"He's down. Where's the fucking camel?"

"I can track it."

"Let's search him first."

Nev closed his eyes and listened to them approach. Two voices. More importantly, two clearly separate gaits, not three or six or eight. Two was difficult, but not impossible.

He had really loved this body. Youth was wasted on the young.

Their hands on him. A rough kick at his wounded side.

Nev rolled and lunged, stabbing the nearest man in the throat. Blood gushed. The man gurgled. Behind him, a younger woman, little more than a girl, shrieked. She fumbled with her bow, dropped it, thinking better of the distance, and went for a knife.

But by then the man was bleeding out. Nev pulled him close, so close he smelled the terror of his breath and felt the tinkling of the man's curly black beard. Nev pressed his palm to the back of the man's neck, skin on skin, as if they would share a kiss, while the man's hot blood soaked them both. The man's body sagged.

Nev huffed out a breath.

Felt the distant stabbing in his side. The girl with the knife.

Too late, though, too late.

He jumped.



The girl in his grasp. The yellow field. Easy to take her. Face to face. Breath to breath.

But as his fingers closed over her throat she murmured,

Come little Jini in your flying machine

Come across the waves with me

Those golden waves, Jini

Those golden waves.

Nev released her. Lay back. Huffing. "Bring help," he said. He stuffed his fist in his wound. He wouldn't make it. It would take too long. If they knew who—what—he was, maybe a line commander would send a body. But how...?

He grabbed the chain at his neck. Yanked at it, too weak to fumble with the clasp. On the end of the chain dangled a stone of green glass and silver, etched with his name and rank within the guild. It contained something far more important than that, though.

“Get this stone to a soldier,” he said. “Command. Send...help.”

The little girl took the stone into her palm. Wiped at the blood. “I’m Matild Clovanis,” she said, “from Avarise. What is your name? I can’t help a stranger.”

“Nevarius. Now run! Go! Before I change my mind!” he snarled.

She leapt away, a startled deer.

He lay where she left him. Tears clouded his vision, or maybe the darkness was coming. He wasn’t sure which—or both. More the fool, him. A soft heart. Corpse soldiers with soft hearts wouldn’t last a decade, let alone a century. He would die on this field with all the others, because he did not have the heart to kill a little girl.

Nev rolled on top of his own fist, using the pressure of his body to further quell the blood from the worst wound. From this vantage he could just see the outstretched hand of a corpse, one half buried in mud churned up by some elemental wizard.

Nev clawed his way forward. An inch. Two. A hand’s breadth. Gagging, making bloody bubbles, sick with pain, he crept forward. Again. Again.

The darkness. Death. The long night. He felt it, comforting, like a warm bath after a long, agonizing day punishing his body to the brink of its endurance. How wonderful would it be to just...stop?

He stopped. How far to go?

Nev reached for the fingers of the corpse ahead of him as the darkness took him.

I should have been a better soldier, he thought.

It was the last thought he had in that body.



Nev was not the first to escape the Body Mercenary Guild; he certainly would not have been the last. There was no public record of rogue Body Mercenaries; it would inspire panic and pogroms if the public knew exactly how many people like him walked among them. His records, such as they were, would be closely guarded things. He liked to imagine that perhaps he had been officially declared dead. After all, there was no physical way to know he was still alive outside summoning his soul into another body.

And only one with the stone could do that. The stone he had given Matild that day. Matild from Avarise. He would never be free, truly free, until he destroyed that stone.

The guild loved to make its members' lives more difficult; to make all lives more difficult. The more difficult the lives, the better it felt it was doing its job. It believed itself the arbiter of whose lives counted, and whose did not. In all his living years, decades, he had never thought who got to be human a political position. It was a moral and religious position. But in most of the countries and city-states he lived, there was no line between government morality and religious morality. Right and wrong were beliefs, as were religions. Intrinsically tied, for better or worse.

His own existence had come down to his military usefulness. What greater fear could an army invoke than unleashing a wave of undead against the enemy, undead who could take on the face of those they killed? Shock. Horror. Awe. Fear. He had seen all of it.

Nev came sputtering back into consciousness. He lay on the ground next to a pock-marked young man with two arrows jutting out of his torso. From this vantage, the young body Nev had worn looked foolish, foppish, the mussed hair, the terrible complexion, the knobby knees and elbows.

He bent over in his new, shaggy body and vomited. Black bile. A little blood. He reached reflexively for the wound he had inflicted while in his other body. It had already closed. His tunic was heavy with his own blood.

Nev gazed into his big, calloused hands. Coarse black hair studded the knuckles.

Across from him, the girl was on her knees, eyes glistening in the starlight. "Papa?" she said, choking on her tears. "Papa, are you all right?"

Nev's guts churned. He stumbled off the path and yanked down his pants. A wet sea of shit left his body. He braced himself against a heavy tree trunk and vomited again.

Gasp ing, spitting, he yelled, "Stay away!" He did not even know her name. They tried to kill you, he thought, here you are, soft again. But he had made his own terrible choices often. He understood.

"Papa, I—"

Nev heard the crashing before she did. Whether it was his heightened senses after the body jump, or her fear and grief that disguised it, he did not know.

A figure smashed into the girl, knocking her flat.

Nev cleaned himself up as best he could and slogged toward the ruckus.

Mez tussled on the ground with the girl. Popped her nose. Just as he got hold of Mez's collar, she locked the girl into a neck hold.

Nev heard the snap.

He let Mez go. The girl's body dropped like a marionette, the neck broken.

"Mez, I—"

She punched him in the face.

Nev reeled back, stunned, but he could feel the second wind coming, the massive surge in adrenaline that he got after every body hop. His senses became heightened. The pain vanished all together.

Mez hit him again. He snagged her arm and twisted it behind her.

"It's Nev! Mez!"

She snapped at him, nearly taking off his ear. He pushed her and held her down, relying on this new body's brute strength and the adrenaline that still coursed through his healing body.

"Mez! I'm Nev. The alpaca named Alpaca. We played cards."

She head-butted him. His nose burst. Tears welled. He spit. He was aware of the injury, of the pressure, but no pain. Not yet, not until the rush wore off. Already, the blood gushing from his nose stopped. He would have a few more impervious minutes for her to flail at him.

"Your nephew believed griffins were nocturnal. You have no children. You tried to serve me a beer and dance. You remember that part at least? I do."

She tensed. Arms tight, still pushing him away. But her look was different. She eyed him like a terrified animal caught in a snare. Maybe that's what he had done.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Can I let you up? Mez, if you kill me I'll have to kill you and take your body. You understand? There's no reason to attack me. Don't make me do that."

Her body softened, almost imperceptibly.

"All right?" he said.

One nod; a spastic jerk.

He eased his grip, but did not let up his guard. "You understand?" he said. He jerked his head at the young body filled with arrows. "That was me. Now I'm here."

She mouthed something at him. A curse?

"What?" he said.

"Corpse soldier." Soft and smoky. Not fearful. Factual.

His mouth twisted, even after all that time. "We prefer to be called body mercenaries."

"Thought you were all dead. My grandmother—"

"I gave her the stone that can summon my soul."

"Why?"

"I thought I was dying. If she got it back to the guild, they could summon my soul from the darkness. Bring me back. It's where my soul goes if I can't find a body to house me."

"You're already dead."

"I've been dead many times, yes." He saw her swallow; the starlight made her eyes seem luminous. "I'm going to let you go," he said.

"You said that."

"I said there was no reason to attack me."

"All right."

He released her. Took two long steps back. In this body, he was much larger than her; he stood a head and shoulders above her, and outweighed her by eighty pounds. He tried to give her space.

Mez sat in the dirt. Gazed up at him. Then at the body. She got up and went to his old body. Knelt beside it. Pushed the hair from the face, noted the wounds. Then Mez began to methodically remove all of the bronze rings Nev had kept on those skinny little fingers.

“Your remorse is touching,” Nev said.

“About as polite as you running off in the middle of the night. You fucking idiot.”

“I know about women like you.”

“Women like me? Like *me*? ”

“It didn’t seem wise to stay.”

“I was being polite. You have a massive stick up your fucking ass.”

“I have been around a long time.”

“No doubt.” She snorted. Pocketed the rings. Leaned back on her heels. “You just kill people when you’re attacked? Just like that? No wonder we hunted you all until you were dead. Really dead. After the war. How did you live?”

“Not every country believed the genocide of *people like me* was humane.”

“You mean not every country wanted to give up their tactical advantage.”

“I don’t fight on purpose. The bodies I take... most are as this was. Defense. Or those already dead.”

“Stealing the dead is better?”

“They are dead. What do they care? You certainly didn’t care about the dead when you took those rings just now.”

“I can’t believe I fell for this.”

“For what? I’ve told you nothing untrue. If someone has that stone, someone alive, they are in danger. Because yes, you are right. People like me are being hunted. If they find someone with that stone—”

“If they find someone with that stone, it leads them back to you. I wasn’t born on a slow boat. You’re worried about your own guts.”

Nev shifted from foot to foot. The adrenaline was draining from his body now, leaving him feeling exhausted, hungry. “I need to find Alpaca. Keep the rings.” He bent and took the dead girl’s heavy knife. He felt a coin purse knotted against his own shin. He would have money enough,

provided it was coin in there and not something more nefarious. It was horrifying, some days, to realize what sorts of bodies one had jumped into. Who they had been.

He headed down the way he had seen the alpaca go, humming softly for her. It was not long before he heard Mez crashing around behind him. She was nimble as a bear, that one.

“What?” he said without turning. “You want to knife me in the back? You’ll need to creep better than that.”

“Why didn’t you kill my grandmother? You gave her that stone and hoped someone brought you back, but why not just kill her? Then you’d know you’re coming back for sure.”

Nev lifted his gaze to the crowns of the trees. Little blossoms fell from the canopy, collecting around his feet like dying stars. “It was not necessary,” he said.

She grunted.

He waited.

“I take you to the gravesite,” she said. “That’s it. That’s what I agreed to.”

He nodded, already turning his attention to the flash of creamy white in the distance.



The site of the massacre was mundane. All such sites were, in the end. He remembered a war from some time ago, when they buried all the dead beneath birch trees. For two decades after, he had avoided birch trees, made uneasy and anxious by their breezy forms.

The place where the little child wizard’s family had been killed was a tall field of grass, a clearing overlooking the little settlement they had hoped to settle, Fortezia. How terrible, to get so far, to be within sight of salvation, and to be cut down.

“Who killed them?” Nev said. Beside him, the alpaca hummed. Her saddle bags were empty. She had either lost, or someone had stolen, all

of Mez's beer and musty cheese and jerky. Of all the things that had happened the night before, Mez seemed angriest at the loss of the beer.

"Temple people," she said. "You know what they do to those kid wizards in the temple."

"Matild said that too... but no, I don't know what they do."

"Oh." She shrugged. "Bad things. They think you have to hurt kids to make them powerful. Make them mean. You know, toughen them up."

Nev knew all about that.

He found the fresher, humped ground over the graves. "They buried them?" he said. "Didn't burn them?"

"You don't burn wizards. Does bad things to the air. Miasmas."

"Let's dig," Nev said.

They spent two hours digging. Brought up the corpses. A man and a woman, only a few months in the ground. Mez did not gag or complain, but searched the corpses thoroughly with him.

"Where's the boy? Did we miss him?" Nev said.

"Maybe they didn't get the boy."

"Where did you hear about these deaths anyway?"

"The tavern. Old soldier I know from some jobs last year. He was in the party sent out after them."

"And he said they got all three?"

"Maybe they were supposed to, so that's what he said. Word gets around. He's old enough not to yak in a tavern that he *didn't* kill someone he was supposed to."

Nev came up empty; the pockets and pouches held some old snuff and a decomposing map. As he dropped the map he noted the cord around the female body's neck. He tugged it. It came up with a little bronze pendant. Nothing.

"Her hand," Mez said.

Another cord trailed from the woman's hand, filthy like the rest of her. He uncoiled her rotting fingers and slid the cord free.

A blue stone shot through with green glass gleamed from the end of the cord. As it dangled there, shimmering in the light, Nev remembered

what Matild had said about the woman buying it as a good luck charm for her son.

He imagined this scene as it had played out here, some desperate family trying to save their child from harm. The soldiers drawing the boy away, the father dying, or already dead, the mother wounded, clutching at her boy, her fingers tangling in the pendant hanging from his neck. The soldiers yanking the boy away, and the pendant, there, curled up in her palm, all she could save of her child.

“Nev?”

He let out his breath. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding it.

“That it?” Mez said.

“Yes. Thank you.” He knotted the broken cord and hung the stone around his own neck. It felt warm against his skin. It had been so many decades since he parted from it; he expected to feel some jolt of power, a tingling of recognition. But there was nothing. It was just a stone. Until it was needed.

“Well, let’s cover them back up.” Mez rolled the woman back into the shallow grave and began heaping dirt over her again.

After a moment more, Nev helped her. In half an hour, the bodies were covered again, leaving Nev and Mez filthy and breathless, sweat pouring down their bodies.

“Guess that’s it,” Mez said.

“I guess so.”

“What’ll you do next? Go creep back to a hole somewhere?”

He pressed his fingers to the stone beneath his tunic. As long as the stone existed, they could come back for him. He could live, yes, it was true. But he would be theirs. Always theirs. What was he really, now that the war was over and he’d fled the guild that had once shielded him and his kind from the obliteration of their immortal souls? What was he, but a corpse soldier running away from the same fate that dogged them all, mothers and children. He closed his eyes, and remembered Matild’s singing.

Nev took the stone from his neck and dug into the alpaca’s saddle bags. He had kept a few chunks of volcanic glass there, sewn into the

bottom, just in case. Now he took them out and lay a flat piece on the ground. Put his soul stone on top of it.

“What are you doing?” Mez said.

“Making sure they never find me. Making sure they never use me again.”

He brought down the hunk of glass in his hand. Smashed the soul stone. It shattered into half a dozen fragments. They scattered, bits and pieces lost in the uneven terrain of the field.

“Shit!” Mez said. “Are you...wait, you’re still alive?”

“Yes.” He smeared the dust of the stone between his fingers. “But there’s nowhere my soul can go but a body now. No stone. No other way to bring me back.”

She shivered. “Yeah, well, if you get sick, don’t come near me. I’m not some extra body.”

He met her look. Nodded. Stood. Nev took the alpaca’s lead and started down into Fortezia.

“Where you going?” Mez stood outlined in the afternoon light, her black silhouette large and beautiful in the heat.

“I’m going to find the boy,” Nev said. “I’m going to bring him back.”

“He could be dead.”

“No. He’s useful to them. They will keep him alive as long as possible.”

“That could take you far from here! The wizard conclave is a thousand miles south of here. You know it gets cold down there! What will I tell my grandmother?”

“You fulfilled your part.”

Mez came down after him, huffing. She came up to the alpaca’s other side, put her hand on the alpaca’s neck. “Hey, listen, you hired me to find a thing *and* a person. I’ll go with you.”

“We’ve established I work better alone.”

“So do I. But what else am *I* going to do, just go back to that tavern and get drunk?”

“You have exactly one life,” he said. “You spend it any way you please.”

“I’m going with you.”

He shrugged, and did not look at her. To look would be to remember how she came after him after he left her. To look would be to think how much she looked like Matild. To look would be to know what she would look like when she was old. To look would be to imagine how she would look when he put her body into the ground or under the torch. The little smirk. The long lashes.

“You must give her a name,” Mez said as they walked down and down into the widening valley. The alpaca hummed, as if in agreement.

“Now you outnumber me,” he said.

Mez scratched at the alpaca’s ears. “See? Listen to her. She has a great little voice. Call her Matild.”

Matild, Nev thought, the little girl who saved me.

“All right,” he said, “but don’t tell your grandmother that.”

“Lips are sealed,” Mez said, and whooped.

Nev kept his gaze on the blue, blue sky ahead.

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Kameron Hurley

Kameron Hurley is the author of The Light Brigade, The Stars are Legion, and the essay collection The Geek Feminist Revolution, as well as the award-winning God’s War Trilogy and The Worldbreaker Saga. Hurley has won the Hugo Award, Locus Award, Kitschy Award, and Sydney J. Bounds Award for Best Newcomer. She was also a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Nebula Award, and the Gemmell Morningstar Award. Her short fiction has appeared in Popular Science Magazine, Lightspeed, and numerous anthologies. Hurley has also written for The Atlantic, Writers Digest, Entertainment Weekly, The Village Voice, LA Weekly, Bitch Magazine, and Locus Magazine. She posts regularly at KameronHurley.com.

Black Horror Rising

by Tananarive Due

When I was growing up in Miami, my late mother, Patricia Stephens Due, sat down with me on Saturdays to watch “Creature Features”—old Universal film classics like *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, and *The Mole People*. The first deep scare I remember is the end of the 1958 version of *The Fly*, when the scientist/fly caught in a spiderweb calls out in his hopelessly tiny voice, “Help me! Help me!” The depths of his in consequence scared me for life. Mom also gave me my first Stephen King novel, *The Shining*, on my 16th birthday.

And so my love for horror was born.

I didn’t know then that I wasn’t alone: black children across the country were also watching movies like *Night of the Living Dead*, *Candyman*, and *Tales from the Hood* with their parents and grandparents, drawn to horror both to heal trauma and to celebrate representation. Black horror fans’ love of horror is the stuff of legend: theaters in black neighborhoods carry the (well-earned, at times) expectation that audiences will express vocal frustration, outrage and joy while they watch their favorite horror films. For years, black comedians have joked about how black characters in horror would never rush so foolishly toward danger.

It’s no surprise, then, that Black Horror is now rising to the national consciousness. A large part of it, of course, is the phenomenal success of Jordan Peele’s films *Get Out* (for which he won the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay) and his follow-up film *Us*. I executive produced a documentary for Shudder called *Horror Noire: A History of Horror*, the streaming channel’s first original documentary. (The Hollywood premiere trended on Twitter as a who’s who in Horror Hollywood, and it was the highest rated film on Shudder the weekend after its debut this past February.)

Our documentary, directed by Xavier Burgin and adapted from the 2011 book *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the*

1890s-Present by Dr. Robin R. Means Coleman, has been embraced by horror fans of all backgrounds for its lessons on the most common tropes around black characters in cinematic horror:

- the Spiritual Guide
- The Sacrificial Negro
- The Magical Negro
- The First to Die

The documentary also discusses the ways black creators have fought back with films like *Blacula*, *Ganja and Hess*, *Eve's Bayou*, *Tales from the Hood*, and *Get Out*. It traces iconic characters in horror like Ben (Duane Jones) in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and contextualizes films like *Get Out* within a framework of both horror history and U.S. history.

And history is in the making. A strong early box-office showing for Jordan Peele's *Us* is cementing him as not only a leading black director, but a leading American director—and *horror* director. It is a badge he wears with pride. Because Peele, like me, and like so many other writers I know, *loves* horror. His profile photo on Twitter is from a *Key & Peele* sketch evoking *The Shining*.

For many black horror fans, I think the love of horror—whether or not the characters are black—is rooted in the desire to process and escape trauma. I didn't realize it as a child, but I now believe my mother's love of horror was directly related to her activism during the Civil Rights Movement in Florida, when she and other Florida A&M University students—including my aunt, Priscilla Kruize—spent 49 days in jail in Tallahassee after their arrest during a lunch counter sit-in. In 1960, a police officer threw a teargas canister directly in my mother's face as she led a nonviolent march. Until she died, my mother wore dark glasses even indoors because of sensitivity to light after her experience with state violence.

I also think horror appeals to fans in general as a salve for traumatic histories, events, and experiences, allowing us to confront real-life demons

from a safe distance. When Jordan Peele tweeted on March 17 the simple words “*Us* is a horror movie,” the horror community saw it as a rallying cry, defending horror from the genre bias that often limits students, writers, and filmmakers because power brokers often consider horror to be nothing more than cheap scares. It isn’t a “thriller,” as studios are so apt to call quality films, but *horror*. On my Twitter page, fans with disabilities and mental illness shared how meaningful the genre has been to them.

As fans defended the honor of horror in general, I saw echoes of what I believe is also the power of Black Horror—to visualize trauma. To fight back. To try to heal. To seek out survival behaviors in crisis. To face the worst and be able to walk away unscathed... because, unlike the demons in our real lives, it isn’t real. By comparison, in fact, sometimes the real-life demons don’t seem quite as bad. Or sometimes, horror is the only way to help others understand.

Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* is the epitome of the contemporary racialized horror story—where racism is literally the monster, and all members of the audience, no matter their race, are forced to empathize with a black protagonist who is hunted and abducted by a white family. Within that simple premise, Peele layers in commentary on white liberalism, micro-aggressions, the history of slavery, and the appropriation of black bodies.

Another good example is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (which, granted, the author herself does not consider horror). In her use of a ghost to embody the child murdered by her mother, Sethe, to prevent the infant from falling into slavery, Morrison created a metaphor so powerful that Jonathan Demme’s film adaptation is almost too painful to watch despite its cinematic beauty and earnest casting of Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, and the introduction of Thandie Newton. *Beloved* helps us *feel* at least a sliver of what it would have felt like to live with that guilt and trauma, which is so hard to put into everyday words. Horror’s visceral nature makes it the perfect genre for such a story.

In the age of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, it’s easier to see how well horror can help us allegorize racial monsters to help us confront true-life fears, especially as a marginalized group where we are often in a minority: the

only one in the room at work, at school, at Starbucks. When the blue lights of a police cruiser surprise us on a deserted road.

But as *Us* shows us, not all black horror is about race—blackness adds a layer to messaging, but those characters *could* have been white. The simple appearance of black characters in horror is still noteworthy, evoking societal advancement at times, or societal pathologies at other times, depending on the filmmaker. The first awareness I had of a black character in horror was probably Ken Foree as the heroic lead in *Dawn of the Dead*, who survived the film. Or was it Scatman Crothers in *The Shining*, who was axed in the chest by Jack Nicholson as soon as he walked through the door of the Overlook Hotel? (A departure, by the way, from his fate in Stephen King's novel. In the film, he was simply thrown away.)

But I loved the horror movies of my youth, flaws and all. And in the '90s, I saw *Def by Temptation*, *Candyman*, *Tales from the Hood*, and *Eve's Bayou*, and by then I knew I wanted to write horror. My first novel, *The Between*, was published in 1995.

But even more than the films, it was books and writers who convinced me to pursue my dream of writing horror. The first was the late Gloria Naylor, whose novel *Mama Day* showed me that a novel with metaphysical leanings could be celebrated as literature. Second was Anne Rice, who I interviewed by phone as a reporter for *The Miami Herald* and asked her the question I was wrestling with privately: "How do you answer criticisms that you're 'wasting your talents' writing about vampires?" Not *my* words—I was quoting from actual critics—and then I waited with bated breath.

Rice wasn't offended or bothered. She just broke it down: "My books are taught in colleges," she said. She went on to explain all of the sweeping themes one can write about in horror—love, death, and mortality. I finished a draft of *The Between* nine months later.

It isn't always easy being a black horror creator, or a black horror fan. Just as some black movie fans on social media have said *Us* looks too scary to watch, book clubs have been afraid of my book covers,

and believers have feared for their souls. I've faced blank faces pitching black horror projects in Hollywood, where a producer once asked aloud what so many other executives were thinking: "Do the characters have to be black?"

While I was writing *The Between* in the early 1990s, before I had even read a single Octavia E. Butler novel, I remember asking my sister if she thought anyone would read black horror stories. But sure enough, Terry McMillan had ignited the black commercial books boom of the 1990s, so I published *The Between* quickly, following up with *My Soul to Keep*, *Joplin's Ghost*, *The Good House*, and my short story collection *Ghost Summer*, among others. In publishing, it was like I had two families who were rarely in the same space—black readers and horror readers.

Today, the lines are blurring a bit more. More horror readers are aware of black writers, and more black readers are embracing horror.

But as much as black horror is gaining popularity on screen, movies still haven't caught up to the variety of black horror works available in literature. From the late, great L.A. Banks's Vampire Huntress series to Brandon Massey to literary star Victor LaValle, black horror writers have been on the rise as well. The next step is to move from original scripts like Peele's to film adaptations of black horror literature—which is on the horizon. LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* is in development at AMC, for example. Several of my works also have been in and out of option for years, but the timing may finally be right for a greenlight.

So far, my only film adaptation is the short zombie film I crowdfunded and shot myself: *Danger Word*, co-written with Steven Barnes, directed by Luchina Fisher. (You can see it free here at dangerword.com.) It stars veteran actor Frankie R. Faison and newcomer Saoirse Scott. During our crowdfunding campaign back in 2013, we railed against stereotypes and tropes, promising a new era in black horror.

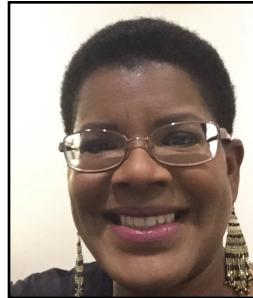
That era is here.



Here's your Black Horror starter kit: Check out the [Horror Noir Syllabus](#) for recommendations for books, features, short films, literature and essays.

Also, check out my [six-part digital download course](#) based on my popular UCLA class, "The Sunken Place." Special guests: Jordan Peele and Tony Todd!

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Everyone's World is Ending All the Time: notes on becoming a climate resilience planner at the edge of the anthropocene

by Arkady Martine

How to deal with the end of the world: first, recognize that everyone's world is ending all the time.

Then, take note: in fact, lambkins, we will live. All despite ourselves, we will live—and be irrevocably changed, as we have irrevocably changed the world.

1. All That Is Solid Melts Into Air

Approximately two and a half years ago, after the election of 2016, I wrote—on Tumblr, in a desperate attempt to shore up my own epistemic universe, to try to find a way to deal with the existential shock—I want to build cities that won't drown. I was looking for narratives that had futures in them. I was thinking of politics, then. But it turns out that the future I was spinning for myself wasn't exactly about politics (though everything, here at the edge of the Anthropocene, is about politics). It was about climate change, and urban planning, and coming home from exile.

In May of 2019, I will have acquired a degree in city planning to add to my collection of degrees. But I mean to go out into the world with this one. I mean to be of service, as best as I am able, to my city—and the world around it. In 2016 I was still trying to find a tenure-track position in Byzantine Studies. Sometime in the dark after the election I applied to be a city planner instead. I knew going in that I was going to work on climate resilience. I knew going in that I can't leave well enough alone. That I am compelled and terrified and obsessed with problems larger than I can see the edges of, but which still give me real work to do. I went in thinking that city planning would let me put my hands on the

shape of the future, and I would have taken anything that promised me that, right then.

Planners have thought we could control the environment and urban spaces since the inception of the profession—planners are engaged in a “search for spatial order.”¹ The development of the profession, at least in the United States, has almost always been marked by an attempt to make the spaces we live in legible—both readable and understandable—through the logic and mechanisms of scientific empiricism. Planning emerged from the problems of the industrial city of the late 19th century—overcrowded tenement slums with profoundly unsanitary conditions²—coupled with the burgeoning ideas of scientific management and social reform orchestrated by the state. The vision of planning born from the miasma of the slum and the dream of high-modernist social reform is one that tried to rebuild the city from the top down, believing that changing the urban environment for the scientifically-recognized ‘better’ would change the behavior of urban dwellers likewise, and improve the quality of life and morality for all citizens. “City making and citizen making were the same.”³

How extremely science-fictional. High modernism, with its technological and scientific-empirical solutions to social problems, is so deeply embedded in science fiction of the early 20th century... and the later 20th century, for that matter... that it is almost too difficult to see: we’re infused with it. It is in the groundwater. The vision of Le Corbusier, whose Radiant City of isolated towers surrounded by parkland was meant to be both a transformational instrument and an inevitable product of the enlightened people within it, who would live in syndicalist authoritarian communes where both men and women worked and the chief source of community was the society of one’s co-workers: it might as well be a science fiction concept. I think I’ve read that book, or versions of it. I think I’ve written versions of it. Le Corbusier talked about the Radiant

1 Boyer (1986). *Dreaming the Rational City: the myth of American city planning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

2 Hall, P. (2014). The City of Dreadful Night. In *Cities of Tomorrow: an intellectual history of urban planning and design since 1880*, 4th edition (pp. 13-47). Wiley & Sons.

3 Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing Like A State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, 54-65. New Haven: Yale University Press.

City as being made of “the architecture of happiness”⁴, and the Radiant City is a *designed place*, where planners work their will on the built environment and the souls of their compatriots at once.

What an appropriate profession for a science fiction writer, lost in epistemic political crisis, to find herself taking up.

If only any of it worked. It doesn’t. Le Corbusier is *wrong*.

And thank God it doesn’t work. Thank any god you like that the profession I found myself swearing allegiance to is not, after all, *solely* an authoritarian tool of social design. Le Corbusier did build some Radiant Cities—Brasilia, Chandigarh—but they were transformed not by radical architectural influence on the behavior of their residents, but by the ‘on the ground’ uses the city finds for itself: the favelas of Brasilia, the adaptation of Chandigarh to Indian culture and aesthetics, as well as modern India’s economic and social structures—small businesses set up inside concrete buildings designed to evoke the grandeur of administration.⁵ The street finds its own uses for things, even Radiant Cities.

The street finds its own uses for us, too. For me. *I want to build cities that won’t drown*, I said, naming what I fear: erosion of stability. The end of my own personal world: New York City, which I love absurdly, violently, rendered wrong, uninhabitable, flooded, through the vast revenge of nature and the physics of carbon dioxide. Climate resiliency planning is almost anti-Corbusierian, by necessity. It has to function in a state of permanent flux. We don’t know what is coming, exactly, only that nothing will ever be the same. There is no ‘new normal’. A climate planner has to respond to the street’s uses, and the street’s needs, and the street’s profound, delicate vulnerabilities. The soft flesh of cities, that is so easily torn apart by water and fire and entropy and heat.

To speak to that soft city-flesh, to speak *for* it, and for its people, to respect that climate change harms first those who have been already been harmed worst—to practice not only planning but environmental justice—

⁴ Fishman (2015), citing Le Corbusier *La ville radieuse* (Boulogne Seine, 1935), 167.

⁵ Sisson, P. (2017): Le Corbusier’s utopian city Chandigarh and its faded glory, captured in photos. *Curbed*. Accessed at <https://www.curbed.com/2017/4/10/15243458/chandigarh-le-corbusier-modernist-architecture-planned-city>

for this I must believe that a planner at the edge of the Anthropocene is a translator with an agenda.

Which suggests that planning, as a profession that I am preparing to practice, is a type of applied diplomacy. The job of a planner is to talk to all the stakeholders of the built environment—the community, the municipal government, the developers, private and public interests—in their own languages, and come up with a plan for the future of that environment which is both executable and mutually agreed-on. But the planner ought to come to this translation process with an ethic, and thus an agenda that arises from the compulsions of that ethic. This statement, which is quite unorthodox by current planning theory (current planning theory would like me to be a translator who is *transparent*, reflective only) is what the apocalyptic moment of climate change, a moment of epistemic collapse which is prefigured by the politics of 2016 and will be even stronger in the warming world to come, has given me. Planning cannot be neutral, even if a planner is able to reflect the views and languages of disparate groups back towards them, and render them intelligible to one another.

Malka Older gave me the words for what I want to do, the sort of lack of neutrality I feel ethically bound to: climate mitigation and adaptation work is “speculative resistance.” It is made of ways of imagining other futures, other ways we will have to live, and how to get ready for them. There is such a need to convince people to make hard choices in circumstances which are entirely perilous, *even if those choices produce unhappiness or are unacceptable to some parts of the group affected*⁶—there is no longer time for delay. Climate resilience planning has to be done. It has to be done *now*. It should center the marginalized and disenfranchised, as they will suffer first. They are already suffering: Nebraska’s farms are under water. Three thousand died in the hurricanes in Puerto Rico. Uncountable numbers are dying right now after Hurricane Idai in Mozambique. Droughts drive migrations, and migrations drive conflict before them like carrion birds.

⁶ Connelly and Richardson (2004) ‘Value-Driven Sea: time for an environmental justice perspective?’, *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 25(4): 391-409.

Everyone's world is already ending all the time, is the thing. If there is anything I know for sure. Epistemic shock is with us now. For some of us, existential threat has never been absent. Mary Annaïse Heglar [wrote](#), earlier this year:

"I'll grant that we've never seen an existential threat to all of humankind before. It's true that the planet itself has never become hostile to our collective existence. But history is littered with targeted—but no less deadly—existential threats for specific populations.

For 400 years and counting, the United States itself has been an existential threat for Black people. [...] I want you to understand how overwhelming, how insurmountable it must have felt. I want you to understand that there was no end in sight. It felt futile for them too. Then, as now, there were calls to slow down. To settle for incremental remedies for an untenable situation.

They, too, trembled for every baby born into that world.
Sound familiar?"⁷

2. A Perfectly Just City Rejoicing in Justice Alone

Why cities, when I could have chosen anything to preserve? To devote my life to keeping out of the sea? I cannot help but think that cities are our best and our most inevitable future. Urbanization rates are increasing; so are the effects of density, both for good and for ill. More and more of us live in congested, vibrant, conflict-prone urban centers. Iris Marion Young wrote in her *Justice and the politics of difference*, "By 'city life' I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without

⁷ Heglar, Mary Annaïse. "Climate Change Ain't the First Existential Threat." February 18, 2019. <https://medium.com/s/story/sorry-yall-but-climate-change-ain-t-the-first-existential-threat-b3c999267aa0>

those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness.”⁸ I take—as she does—this ideal of city life as a normative one, one I want to work toward. It is also personal: I cannot stop being in love with New York, with a sort of exquisite violence. It is my home, and where I want to come back to. Working as a climate planner in New York City would be a kind of service to something larger than myself that I love, a commitment like a marriage. A city is large enough for that. This city especially. I cannot claim that I am not partisan. I am *devoted*.

Let me tell you a story. It’s what I do. It’s what I’m for.

This is a story about the New York City subway system.

Since its inception in the early 20th century, the New York City subway has been notable for its social diversity: since its routes traverse a broad spectrum of communities, all races, classes, sexes, and nationalities are simultaneously present in the subway.⁹ The subway acts as a location where, in a situation of neutrality (i.e. all of the people present had compatible goals of transit and travel), strangers can encounter each other without the fear engendered by difference. The subway produces a thousand communities a day, and each one of them is contingent—created during the period of a commute and then vanished, fluid and denatured, held together by memory and the boundaries of one subway car: infinitely dissolvable and re-creatable at the same time. The subway has always been this way for New Yorkers. It has also always been a site of difficulty and possible violence.

Artistic representation of the subway, both visual and literary, emphasizes the common experience of community: think of all the New Yorker cartoons of sleeping commuters elbow-to-elbow, or of the famous 1939 etching by Isac Friedlander, called *3 AM*, which depicted a subway scene with seven drowsing riders, a man reading a newspaper, and two people locked in a romantic embrace.¹⁰ The subway also acts as

8 Young, I.M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 237.

9 Hood, C. (2004) *722 Miles: the building of the subways and how they transformed New York*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 116.

10 Gear, J. (1989) *Straphangers*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art. Unpaginated.

an equalizing, democratizing force: the low fare, fought for over decades (and still in jeopardy), allows people from disadvantaged backgrounds and disinvested communities to access all of New York life.¹¹ It is also a space which inspires the sort of loyalty-to-city which I myself find compulsive, necessary: I experience the subway as a distillation of what is New York about New York.

However, the subway is also anarchic, difficult, and a site of violence: sexual assault and robbery are still unfortunately common, as are hate incidents (though the former have declined and the latter increased in the 21st century). Places which are conducive to “unassimilated otherness” are also conducive to fear of that otherness. “Strangers bring the outside in,” wrote Zygmunt Bauman in 1990—the presence of strangers makes “home” illegible, destroys comfort, and provokes fear of annihilation—the annihilation of dissolved boundaries.¹²

The annihilation of dissolved boundaries is coming for all of us, though. It is coming quickly: in the heat of the summer and the melting ice, in the hurricane-struck and the drought-poisoned, in cholera and Lyme disease and how there aren’t going to be any apples south of Manitoba by the time I die.

And yet. And yet, everyone’s world is already ending all the time.

3. *The Apocalyptic Is Itself A Form of Denial*

Right now I have the pleasure of serving as *Reckoning Magazine*’s guest editor for fiction and nonfiction. *Reckoning* is a journal of creative writing on environmental justice. It has produced some of my favorite climate-infused speculative literature. (One example, among many: Jess Barber’s “[Lanny Boykin Rises Up Singing](#)”¹³). And yet, as I read through the submissions for Issue 4—on the built environment, on cities and the material, on the hybridity between ecology and construct—I am

11 Hood, 216-17.

12 Bauman, Zygmunt. “Modernity and ambivalence.” *Theory, Culture, and Society* (1990).

13 Barber, Jess. “Lanny Boykin Rises Up Singing.” *Reckoning*. June 21, 2018. <http://reckoning.press/lanny-boykin-rises-up-singing/>

struck again by how much climate writing is all about grief. Is almost pornographic in its obsession with loss. It wallows in apocalypse.

I am not saying that we should not grieve. How can we not grieve for what we are losing, and what we have done to create that loss? But grief absolves us of action. Grief can so easily become despair, and despair creates *inaction*: what would be the point of trying, anyway? We will all die. Nothing we love will be un-dissolved, or remain un-drowned. All that is solid will melt into the heated air.

I reject this. I reject it as a planner and as a writer. I reject it because *the apocalyptic is itself a form of denial*¹⁴. It is a place to hide within. It is also a kind of violence, inflicted on us—sometimes unintentionally, sometimes quite deliberately by agents—whether they are fossil fuel companies or simply people who cannot imagine a future different from the one which gives them some power and some control—to push us away from the work. And it is so easy to be pushed away from the work. Writing SFF right now, while knowing what I know about the shape of our very possible future, knowing just how bad it might get if we aren't lucky, brave, and driven to find or take political will to decarbonize our economy and care for the most vulnerable populations who are already experiencing their own world-ending climate—oh, writing about good futures, or even *neutral* futures can seem insurmountably difficult. Or an action which is just a method of inflicting pain on myself: I want sometimes to simply blank out climate change from the future worlds I imagine, to pretend that there are worlds where it never happened, or never will. Write those, and not hurt so much. But this is what I mean about the apocalyptic being a form of denial. If climate change is so enormous and world-collapsing that it cannot be looked at without screaming in despair, or turning away—if there is only apocalypse, only *and now we all die* without the promise of *and we will all be changed*—the rational, self-protective response is to turn away.

But that is denial. And denial is a failure of imagination. And I'm a writer, and a city planner, and my business is imagining the history of the future.

14 <https://twitter.com/alexsteffen/status/1024361572011888640>

I'll go back to Mary Annaïse Heglar, because she understands how to look at something this catastrophic straight in the eyes:

"You don't fight something like that [racism, climate change] because you think you will win. You fight it because you have to. Because surrendering dooms so much more than yourself, but everything that comes after you. Acquiescence, in this case, is what James Baldwin called "the sickness unto death." Now you understand what Fannie Lou Hamer meant when she said, "What was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do was kill me, and it kinda seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

What, now, do you have to lose? What else can you be but brave?"

I learn bravery from dreaming of other ways the future might be. I don't think I—this person I am, a white Jewish woman in America, who has been hideously fond of Le Corbusier in her time, and of worse things, and knows it—could be a climate resilience planner without first having been a science fiction writer. Without having been given models, and written models, of how the apocalyptic can be banished, or reframed.

My favorite piece of climate fiction in the world, for the record, is T. Kingfisher's "[Packing](#),"¹⁵ in this very magazine. She begins:

"Today is not the day I wanted to do this, but we aren't always given choices. It's time to pack for the new seasons.

No, you can't stay. This place won't be here soon. It's already going, slipping away, each new summer tearing off strips. You can see the new flesh underneath. We're still guessing at the shape of it. Probably the cicadas know, but we can't understand their buzzing, and there are more of them every year.

¹⁵ Kingfisher, T. "Packing." Uncanny Magazine Issue Seventeen. July/August 2017. <http://uncannymagazine.com/article/packing/>

All these choices were made long ago. Now is not the time to relitigate them.

Now our job is to decide what to bring with us.”

I love my city. I love its blood, its metal and electric heart, its subway that tells me that there might be something in the future for me, too. For me and every one of us here. A space to dream futures in, and write them, and give them to one another. A space to decide what to bring with us, as Kingfisher instructs: to decide what we each are able to preserve, what bright new configurations we might see come to pass, even shaded with enormous loss.

I will need those spaces, to be a climate planner at the edge of the Anthropocene.

I’ll need them to be a person at the edge of the Anthropocene, too.

Go on. Take up the wheel. There is work to do.

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Arkady Martine

Arkady Martine is a speculative fiction writer and, as Dr. AnnaLinden Weller, a historian of the Byzantine Empire and a city planner. Under both names she writes about border politics, rhetoric, propaganda, and the edges of the world. Arkady grew up in New York City and, after some time in Turkey, Canada, and Sweden, lives in Baltimore with her wife, the author Vivian Shaw. Her debut novel, A Memory Called Empire, was released in March 2019 from Tor Books. Find Arkady online at arkadymartine.net or on Twitter as @ArkadyMartine.

Jennifer Adams Kelley—A Remembrance

This is an extremely difficult thing to write and compile.

Our dear friend [Jennifer Adams Kelley passed away on February 26, 2019](#), after a brief battle with cancer. The Thomas family first met Jennifer nearly 20 years ago at a *Doctor Who* convention—the very first Chicago TARDIS, in fact. She was the very heart of *Doctor Who* fandom in the United States. Equal parts kind, knowledgeable, and passionate, Jennifer made the conventions a very welcoming place to us and Caitlin.

When Lynne and Tara O’Shea were soliciting writers for their *Doctor Who* essay anthology *Chicks Dig Time Lords*, Jennifer was at the very top of the list. Nobody embodied the community more than Jennifer. Jennifer went on to co-write the history of American *Doctor Who* fandom, *Red White and Who: The Story of Doctor Who in America*, a story she was often at the center of.

We are gutted, and *Doctor Who* fandom will never be the same.

In honor of her contributions to our community, we’ve gathered some remembrances from a few of Jennifer’s friends. When Lynne wrote her own *Chicks Dig Time Lords* essay, the essay’s theme was about the welcoming kindness of this community of like-minded geeks who love this ridiculous show about an alien who travels through time and space—a person who makes everyone a bit better just because they passed through your life. That was Jennifer. She made us all better by knowing her.

Our love to her husband Phillip, her daughter Valerie, and to all of her friends and family.

Jennifer will be greatly missed.

—Lynne M. Thomas and Michael Damian Thomas



Jennifer Kelley was a friend of mine for over two decades, and more than that: we were tied together by our shared passions and experience. Along with Steve Hill, the three of us pooled our resources to create the *Outpost Gallifrey Doctor Who Forum* in 2001, an online community (supported by my website) that, more than any other, brought together a massive and wide cross-section of *Doctor Who* fans together in one place. We commiserated about our experiences with our respective conventions (mine, Gallifrey One; hers, ChicagoTARDIS); we both were the public faces of our respective events. But mostly, Jennifer was my dear friend since the 1990s, and I will cherish that friendship forever.

—Shaun Lyon



I knew Jennifer first through her work with the Federation and the videozines that came through the fan networks. Her story writing showed creativity and a sly humor and her talent in costume-making set an early standard. While I was helping with guest escort at Visions and later Gallifrey One (and then later at Registration for Chicago TARDIS), I saw again and again how her patience and skill in organizing made the Masquerade a success at those cons. Many con-goers remembered the early Creation Cons as “exploit the fan cons” and that memory probably influenced Jennifer. When she was in charge of programming, she made sure to have panels that would interest several types of fans. She even went so far as to have Tai Chi for early morning people, and I greatly enjoyed the sessions she led. It was the best way to center yourself for a day of con-attending.

Jennifer worked so hard on collecting information about *Doctor Who* newsletters and zines and cons for *Red, White and Who*. I sent her a lot of newsletters to scan and I’m glad people can read the book and see all the work she and her co-authors put into it.

I'm going to miss catching up with her at cons, talking about *Doctor Who*, and sharing sightings of *Man From U.N.C.L.E.*

—Kathryn Sullivan



My first *real* memory of Jennifer Adams Kelley—face to face, not electronic—happened on the closing Sunday of Chicago TARDIS, 2011. She had offered a chance for me to serve as a social media volunteer since I would not have been able to afford Chicago TARDIS that year. Carrying my Linux-powered Panasonic Toughbook, I had managed to provide social media posts throughout the convention *and* meet some new(ish) friends from Chicago Nerd Social Club.

After reporting back to her about my weekend, Jennifer asked: “I was wondering... do you want to run our charity auction?”

“Yes.” My answer was quick and impulsive, but worth it.

“Good,” she responded. “You had mentioned that on our survey, and we’ve been looking for someone...”

From there, Jennifer and I started a personal and professional relationship as *Doctor Who* fan organizers. Ironically, Jennifer and I “grew up” in the 1980s heyday of Chicago Who fandom: she was part of the north side Federation; I was part of the south side UNIT Irregulars. If you know someone who became a *Doctor Who* fan before 2005, you know the drill—we watched it religiously Sunday nights on Channel 11, and we hated pledge nights. (Jennifer and I never met formally during that time due to both the imaginary north/south boundary of Chicago... and she was slightly closer to drinking age than I was, but not by much). As an organizer for the Chicago *Doctor Who* Meetup, I developed a really strong rapport with Jennifer because of one thing we had in common: a desire to foster a healthy, diverse community for *Doctor Who* fans.

Whether it involved joke-filled conversations in the car on the way to planning meetings or casually articulating her ideas for programming,

Jennifer worked hard to ensure that Chicago TARDIS provided a welcoming place for a wide range of fans. Fighting against the “turnkey convention” approach popularized by certain larger shows, Jennifer’s efforts always focused on the *experience* of convention attendees as much as they did on overall attendance numbers. Other conventions may have run charity auctions to foster goodwill and/or positive public relations; Jennifer saw it as a way to create unique programming and develop a Friday night cornerstone for attendees.

(Working with her for five years, we raised over \$10,000. The auction also developed its own smaller community of CT attendees as well. We were both proud of that fact).

I will always remember Jennifer’s willingness to bring empathy, compassion, and connection to greater *Doctor Who* fandom. Like many fellow staff members, I enjoyed working with someone who listened to my suggestions and shaped programming which delivered on its promises. She motivated people to embrace their love of the show and their common joys with others (it’s not surprising that many of my friendships in *Who* fandom evolved through working with other Chicago TARDIS staff). She allowed newer volunteers and staff additions to grow into their roles. Although Chicago TARDIS volunteers may have been labeled “staff”, Jennifer treated them more like friends and family than employees. Jennifer’s compassionate, empathic approach had a huge impact on those who worked with her...including myself. After all, we all shared a sense of wonder at an alien in a blue box that can travel *anywhere* in space and time.

My last face-to-face memory of Jennifer was March 2016 when she helped me move out of my apartment after my mom’s sudden illness. When I asked what motivated her to help—after all, she lived in the Skokie/Evanston area, I was near Marquette Park—her only comment was, “I know what it’s like to have to move.” It was our first significant interaction since she left Chicago TARDIS, but it was a meaningful gesture that provided great comfort... and that spurred me to say “Yes” when one of those new(ish) friends from 2011 asked for a connection to

Chicago TARDIS. In 2017, I helped deliver on that promise...but that's another story for another time.

One of my favorite *Doctor Who* quotes states that a person is the sum of their memories, a Time Lord even more so. Jennifer Adams Kelley has transcended that, becoming part of the collective memory of *Doctor Who* fandom through the people who knew and worked with her. Her dedication and diligence inspired and empowered efforts towards inclusivity and engagement with the greater *Doctor Who* fan community.

Every *Doctor Who* fan owes a debt to Jennifer Adams Kelley. All of us who are fortunate to organize around *Doctor Who* fandom—or *any* fandom—can take inspiration from her work.

I know *I* will.

—Gordon Dymowski



Back in the mid-1980s, I was a young *Doctor Who* fan just making my first steps in fandom. A key part of *Doctor Who* fandom in those days was trading and seeing copies of videos that hadn't yet aired locally. That's what fan gatherings were *for*.

Besides seeing blurry copies of *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7*, or other television stories would be included things from the Federation, a group of Chicago area fans. These were fan made videos—long before YouTube. They'd be filled with in-jokes that you'd get, or ones that once you research, you'd discover other additional things that you'd be interested in. They demonstrated to me that fandom was a participatory sport.

When the members of the Federation came to the *Doctor Who* convention that I helped organize in 1988, it was just as much of an accomplishment as getting any of the guests of honor.

Jennifer would continue to be a regular part of my *Doctor Who* fandom life for the following years—keeping it alive while it was off the air, and

welcoming new fans discovering costuming. I'll miss her, but also never forget her contributions to the community.

—Michael Lee



Jennifer Adams Kelley was a spirit guide for *Doctor Who* fandom. I was fortunate enough to first meet and get to know her in 1985 when I became an outer worlds member of the Chicagoland *Doctor Who* club called the Federation. Jennifer was one of the founders. The Feds were well known for their fan videos and their participation in many costume contests in the conventions of the early 1980s. Jennifer herself made, or helped make, many of the costumes that the group wore, going out of her way to ensure screen accuracy. This eventually led her to become a master seamstress, and even the con chairperson for the nationally renowned CostumeCon when it came to Chicago for a rotation. Before the word “cosplay” had been coined she was quick to remind people that “costuming” had been going on in sci-fi fandom since the first WorldCon.

In the '80s, the Federation was well known for their outrageous skits at costume contests. It was Jennifer who kept the troupe on-track and made sure that these skits did not cross the line into obscenity, which is quite easy for a group of high school and college students. When the members of the club became too rowdy at cabaret performances at cons, she would be the one to ask for calm or to make sure that there were no conflicts or bad feelings with event organizers.

Her kind-hearted soul looked for inclusion and longed to keep everyone involved. Her own guidance came from the Doctor themselves, and some of her favorite characters such as Sarah Jane Smith and Peri Brown, who she often performed as in many fan videos. Like the Doctor, she embraced all fans—regardless of the race, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, or status.

Besides acting in fan videos, she was a writer (and not just of fan videos). She wrote fiction for fanzines, she wrote and edited club newsletters (such as for The Watchers *Doctor Who* club at Northwestern University, or The Federation's own newsletter "It's It"). Her writing led her to even greater venues such as being a contributor to the Hugo award-winning *Chicks Dig Time Lords* and the *Outside In* series of books. She topped this off in a collaborative effort called *Red White and Who: The Story of Doctor Who in America*. This was the definitive effort on the history and the fandom of the show in the United States.

Some of the other editors and writers had to argue with her to include some of her own accomplishments and stories in the book. She had been responsible for, or involved in, a number of significant turns in American Whovian fandom that could not be ignored. Always humble, she reluctantly agreed that another co-author should cover some of the history she was a part of. Jennifer herself worked on events such as the 1990s Visions series of conventions. She ran the costume contest at Gallifrey One, the large *Doctor Who* convention in Los Angeles. She was one of the fans that helped to start the Chicago TARDIS convention, which will celebrate its 20th year sadly without her. She eventually was a guest of honor herself at conventions such as Concinnity, GaNGCon, and Console Room.

And she was not a one-trick pony either. She was very active in the fandom of the Beatles and the Monkees. She loved *Harry Potter* as well. She was also always willing to be a resource to people if they were planning their own events, and helped connect people across fandoms to make events bigger and better. She innovated some of those events, such as creating a game room at Chicago TARDIS, paving a bridge between tabletop gaming and *Doctor Who*. She welcomed artists into an artists' alley, and suggested a costume cavalcade to have cosplayers show off their work without the pressure of a masquerade event. Her mission was to find a way for everyone to enjoy themselves. She was also a devoted wife and mother to top it all off.

When Jennifer passed away on February 26th of this year, the internet exploded. Well, at least the internet feeds of *Doctor Who* fans. Hundreds

of fans, with no exaggeration, posted on Facebook and other social media about the loss of one of fandom’s great champions. The outpouring of love and sympathy was staggering. Many of these friends and people had been brought together because of events that Jennifer had planned or been a part of. Many of the people commiserating knew each other because of Jennifer’s efforts. Friends gave each other hugs. Kind and loving words were shared in forums. People simply wanted everyone to experience love. It was what Jennifer would have done.

Jennifer’s last fan video that she participated in was a parody video made by the Federation posted on YouTube called “It’s Still *Doctor Who* to Me”, which celebrated Jodie Whitaker’s entrance as the Doctor. It is meant to remind fans that the show is not any different now. Somehow, I cannot help but think that without Jennifer, *Doctor Who* fandom will be a bit different. But we can celebrate her by living as she would have—like the Doctor—and accepting those around us and making the world a better place for all they touch. She continues to be our spirit guide.

Still following her lead,
—Nick Seidler

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Toy Stories

by Gwenda Bond

I remember walking into the rainbow-colored coffeeshop down the street during the late summer of 2016 and finding my friend Sarah already there, hard at work on her new novel. I asked her how it was going, but somehow we ended up spending nearly an hour talking about how much we loved season one of *Stranger Things*. Little did I know that less than two years later, I'd be signing on to write the first official novel tied to the show, a prequel about Eleven's mother.

There is a pleasure known to nerds of all varieties: that moment of connection when discovering you and someone else share a love for something, whether it's a movie or a show or a book (or a painter or a poet or a restaurant, almost anything, truly). But let's stick with stories. A world filled with characters that someone or a team of someones conjured out of their imagination and figured out a way to share. That moment of connection makes you talk faster, it makes you glow. Telling the person why you love this story or character, hearing why they feel the same or differently and unpacking it all together, that's special. Then there's the flip side. There's the shared dismay when it feels like a story world goes careening off the tracks of what made you love it—whether fans are right or wrong, you can trust they'll be passionate in their opinions.

Writing what we commonly refer to in the publishing industry as IP, standing for Intellectual Property, as in it belongs to someone else instead of you (and also called tie-ins, licensed fiction, work-for-hire), is all about living in this shared space. I've done two major IP projects to date, the novel *Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds* I already mentioned, with publisher Del Rey and licensor Netflix, and a YA trilogy about the iconic DC comics character Lois Lane, with publisher Capstone and licensor DC/Warner Brothers. I'm working on a third, as-yet-unannounced now. So I thought I'd talk about what it means—for me—to write IP, what the

process looks like, and what I've learned from doing it. Again, I want to note up front that I'm only talking about my own experience. There are many, many kinds of IP projects and many, many ways to write them.

Is how I approach writing IP different than my original work? Well, yes and no.

I get asked all the time how to get work like this, whether I come to the publisher or licensor with the pitch or...? This is a tough question for me to answer without sounding obnoxious, because in my case they've always come to me with a concept and asked if I want to take it on. (My *Stranger Things* editor did answer the question of how she chooses writers on a recent panel we did together. She said, basically, she looks for someone who has built up a body of their own original work, has a collaborative spirit, and can meet tight deadlines. From my perspective, this is exactly how it's worked for me, so start there.) To say yes, I have to love and understand the IP in question enough to feel as if I can add something. I have to believe there will be some freedom. The only way I can take on a project is if I can bring my whole heart to it.

Because you never know. I've been extremely lucky, but have heard plenty of stories about IP projects that sound like absolute hell to write. I have to be invested in the property enough to know that if things go sour, my love for it will see me through the frustrations. There's a tremendous privilege in getting to work on the kind of IP projects I've been able to, and I am keenly aware that there are many other writers who would love the opportunity. I take the responsibility to bring my best very seriously. But no matter how much freedom I'm promised, it's not my story world. I'm agreeing to play in someone else's sandbox, with their toys. If I create new toys, they have to stay in the sandbox, belonging there in perpetuity. So it's not about me... but it kind of is about me.

I'm a long-time comics reader and fan, and I bring that sensibility with me. In comics, the best creators, the ones I follow, bring their voice with them to every character or group of characters they write, whether they own them or not. I'm not looking to disappear as a writer when I do IP work. I assume I've been asked to do it in part because of my voice. From

a career standpoint, it has to make sense for me and my readers. My fans may only be a fraction of the readers another media fandom will bring in, but I'm always hoping the types of work will cross-pollinate readerships. That's only going to happen if the IP work and my other work give the same kind of experience. The question becomes what can I bring to the story that's consistent with the core elements of the property but also still uniquely me as a writer? Because every writer has their own voice, a way we view the world and tell its stories, where we focus the lens.

The process itself *is* different. When working on your own things, you can outline or not outline up front (mileage may vary, depending on whether you present concepts to your publisher or write full manuscripts). You can make giant changes along the way. You can set your work schedule. If you're writing fanfic, your freedom to write whatever and however you want is absolute. Not so with IP work. The first stage involves creating a detailed outline—the more detailed the better. Why? Because if you can flesh out the story you want to tell in great detail, everyone knows what they're getting. Everyone in this case being your editor at the publisher and *at least* one additional set of eyes at the licensor. The outline helps you sell your vision for the story, but it also protects you. Surprises are not usually a good thing in this type of project. Deadlines are tight; of the IP novels I've done, all of them were written and published within the same year. That is much faster than the average novel publication schedule, where sometimes books can take years to write and/or to come out. If you get an outline approved and then write something completely different, it *might* work out fine, but at a minimum someone at the publisher is probably going to tear their hair out over whether the licensor will be okay with it. You want to avoid making people tear their hair out. I've also learned that a good outline helps *me*. On days when I don't trust myself as a writer (and those days are plenty during drafting), I trust the outline.

The first questions I ask myself once I agree to a project is: what are the core elements of this character/story world that define it? What are the things that if they're missing, it won't *feel* right to fans? What are

the things that haven't worked in the past? I treat the outline like I'm telling the story to myself, intensely focused on figuring out character arcs. With such a detailed outline, there must be less revision, right? It's still writing a novel, so there will always be revision. The editor at the publisher will give notes that may be property-specific, but are definitely about the larger story. The licensor may give larger story notes too, but much of what they send back will be property-specific. If the outline was solid and I stuck to it, hopefully there are no areas of major disagreement to work out at this stage and I get to focus on trying to make the novel better. Revision is my favorite part.

But if there were to be major disagreements? You get zero precious diva moments. The final call is not yours. And you have to be able to put your head down and work without letting the pressure of getting it right and not letting down fans paralyze you. It can be nerve-wracking, but it's also tremendously fun. There's the support team at the publisher and the licensor, working with you along the way. And all of you know that these are stories that make up our culture. They're our shared mythology, points of connection, and getting to be a part of that and add to it is a wonderfully rewarding thing.

It's difficult to overstate just how surreal it is to realize that I got to decide (with approval) who Eleven's father is, that I got to create new characters for the *Stranger Things* universe that other people now write fanfiction about. Or that when you read Lois Lane's suitably lengthy Wikipedia entry, my books are part of her story. It's also been rewarding on a career milestone level: *Suspicious Minds* is my first book to hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. I don't believe in setting goals for things out of my control, but I dream for them and that was one of my dreams. But the coolest thing for me is the knowledge that things I made live as a potential point of connection for other fans.

Doing IP has also been deeply rewarding for me on a craft level. While, yes, other projects of my own get set aside temporarily to do this work, they also buy me more time to spend on writing my other novels. This work has also helped me understand my own voice; it has helped me be

able to decide more quickly which of my ideas are ones I should pursue, because I will have something to say beyond a cool concept. They've taught me how much I love building and writing ensemble casts. But they've also helped refine my process.

I've often bemoaned the fact that the constrictions of IP sometimes make it feel easier to execute—having a target to hit, as opposed to writing to figure out what the target is and then how to hit it—but I realized recently that there's no reason I can't employ that same “what are the core elements of this story?” principle to developing my original work. I always know roughly what I want to do, but in the past have written my way around it first, tracing every circle around that middle bull’s-eye. IP has helped teach me what I need to know, to have in place, to write a relatively clean first draft. I’ve even started using new-to-me techniques across types of projects. For the *Stranger Things* revision, for the first time ever, I made a giant wall of index cards in the office, one scene per card, with what happened and any necessary changes. Right now, I can look over at the index card outline on the wall for the original YA novel I set aside to write *Suspicious Minds*, and which is almost done now. I put a sticker on each card as I finish the scene, a tangible way to mark progress. IP has helped me be able to see the course I’m plotting. But the biggest rewards are still the intangible ones.

I was lucky enough to meet Margot Kidder, my first Lois Lane, at the Superman Celebration the year before she died. I got to tell her that I didn’t think my life would be the same if I hadn’t seen her as Lois Lane when I was a young girl, and to thank her for that performance. Ultimately, being a small part of this continuum of stories that are cultural touchstones is why so many of us want to do IP work and find it worthwhile. These stories are life-changing; we know that, because they’ve changed our lives.

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Gwenda Bond

Gwenda Bond is a The New York Times bestselling author of many novels. Among others, they include the Lois Lane and Cirque American trilogies, and the first official Stranger Things novel, Suspicious Minds. She and her husband author Christopher Rowe also co-write a middle grade series, the Supernormal Sleuthing Service. She is co-host of Cult Faves, a podcast about the weird world of cults and extreme belief. Visit her online at gwendabond.com or @gwenda on Twitter. Photo credits: Sarah Jane Sanders, 2016

“You Have Only Your Trust in Me”: *Star Trek* and the Power of Mutual Belief

by Nicasio Andres Reed

I cannot remember a time before I loved *Star Trek*. I was two years old when *The Next Generation* premiered in 1987, young enough that the characters, world, and ideals of that show seem like innate knowledge. Eight years old when *Deep Space Nine* began, and those two shows raised me like a third parent, or as an extension of my mother, who watched them with me and impressed upon me what was the most interesting, the most important, the most beautiful. There’s an endless list of conversations I wish I’d had with her while I still could and some of those are about *Star Trek*. I know that she trusted Captain Picard implicitly and she thought *Deep Space Nine*’s opening theme song was exquisitely haunting. I know that she knew I had a secret crush on Doctor Bashir. I know that she liked that the characters were engaged in the hard work of being intentionally ethical—that is, not just being good people because that’s who they inherently were, but being good people on purpose, and through struggle. And I know that she enacted every day something that we saw time and again on *Star Trek*: she trusted me to know my own mind, even when I wasn’t sure of it myself. I know how lucky I was to have that as a fundamental underpinning of my upbringing.



There’s a thread in these shows that has to do with meeting people where they are, and it plays out over and over, almost always unremarked upon. It usually goes something like this:



First, a character has an experience that they can't understand or explain. Maybe they saw [an impossible creature moving with intention](#) inside the usually-empty void of the transporter beam.¹ Or they [heard disembodied voices muttering](#) when they were alone in their quarters.² Or they simply woke up feeling absolutely, unshakably certain that [the shape of reality was suddenly changed](#), and horribly wrong.³ All of these are common enough set-ups in genre fiction, and none of them are unique to *Star Trek*. It's in the next step that these characters do something that can make them seem as alien as any Gorn in a loincloth. Because their next step, almost without fail, is to take their concerns directly to their boss.



Now, certainly there are a wide variety of professional relationships in the world. Far be it for me to say that nobody outside of Starfleet has ever taken their intense feeling of *déjà vu* straight to management. That said, it's been my experience that employers have required a doctor's note to explain prolonged absence due to illness, a legal ultimatum to include transition-related healthcare in their insurance coverage plans, and would be uninterested in hearing about my unspecific-but-absolute feeling of unease. When I look at it closely, the fact is I don't trust any boss to care about me as a person, nor to believe me when I say something they don't necessarily want to hear. I don't think I trust my university's administrators in that way either. I haven't been in any organization with the sort of military hierarchy that Starfleet mimics, so I won't speak for those people. I will point out there is ample evidence that those [command](#)

1 [https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Realm_of_Fear_\(episode\)](https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Realm_of_Fear_(episode))

2 [https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Cause_and_Effect_\(episode\)](https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Cause_and_Effect_(episode))

3 [https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Yesterday%27s_Enterprise_\(episode\)](https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Yesterday%27s_Enterprise_(episode))

structures do not automatically create a safe or trusting environment.⁴ The reason it's so strange that Lt. Barclay or Chief O'Brien or Kes take their inexplicable experiences to their respective captains is that it's strange to realize they do this because they expect to be believed. And they expect to be believed because that's *Star Trek*'s baseline assumption: these are people who will not deny each other's subjective realities. They'll try their damnedest to believe each other, even when it gets weird. In more than 750 episodes of *Star Trek*, it is vanishingly rare for a plot to hinge on a crew member being automatically disbelieved or shunned.



The default-to-belief is so pervasive in *Star Trek* that it stands out the most when it works against them. In *The Next Generation* episode "Sub Rosa," Counselor Troi feels compelled to take at face value Dr. Crusher's decision first to read and recount the erotic exploits in her grandmother's diary, and second to become romantically involved with the very man her grandmother had been writing about. Troi expresses some friendly reservations, but never questions that Dr. Crusher is capable and entitled to make her own decisions. The tension in the episode comes not from anyone disbelieving Dr. Crusher, but rather from them wanting to believe her, even when she resigns her commission and leaves the *Enterprise* to live in romantic isolation with her grandmother's lover. It takes the mysterious lover attacking Picard, raising grandma from the dead, and revealing himself to be a near-immortal, alien parasite for everyone to realize that perhaps they could have questioned Dr. Crusher a little sooner.



⁴ Helene Cooper. "Unreported Sexual Assaults Surge at Military Academies, Pentagon Finds." *The New York Times*. January 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/us/politics/military-sexual-assault.html>

The same theme also helps add tension to episodes that deal in long-established genre tropes which might otherwise bog down the pace of an episode while the characters struggle to grasp the situation. While a viewer might very quickly catch on to something like a time loop episode, where the pacing is absolutely paramount, most movies and shows that use that device find themselves sinking way too much time into showing characters figuring out what's going on. (Presumably, the movie *Groundhog Day* doesn't exist in most fictional worlds.) But, because characters on *Star Trek* assume each other's intelligence and good faith, when one of them is stuck in a time loop, or a disintegrating reality, or some other brand of distressingly-alternate universe, they can tell their crewmates what's happening to them and trust that they'll soon have help in working the problem. *Voyager*'s third-season episode "Before and After" is an example of where *Star Trek* didn't waste any of the viewer's time in getting everyone up to speed. As Kes travels backwards through time, she immediately tells her crewmates what's happened after each jump, and each time they absorb the information, recognize the seriousness of the problem, and offer to help in any way they can.



There are also examples of characters who've existed outside of the circle of trust being brought into the default-to-belief culture, such as the series-long character arc of Elim Garak on *Deep Space Nine*. He came from a society, a family, and an organization that valued paranoia and distrust, had these values baked into his bones. Over the course of seven seasons, members of the crew gradually decide he's one of theirs now, and that they will trust him. Garak rails against this treatment, at his worst he spits in its face, mocks it, rejects it as hopelessly naïve. But they just keep placing their trust in him and expecting him to do the same of them. Even when he fails them, they recognize the failure and then offer

trust again. There's something so achingly hopeful about watching that work. Slow, patient, difficult years of telling someone that they will be believed, they will be trusted, and of enacting that belief until it's true.



Statistically speaking, very few of us will ever get caught in a time loop. There are other ways to feel stuck in a place where nobody can reach you, though. The World Health Organization estimates that one in four people will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives. Recent surveys of LGBT people in Australia and the US found that nearly half of respondents were closeted, a result heavily influenced by the especially low numbers of bisexual men who reported being out. The US Department of Justice's statistics show that roughly 3 out of every 4 sexual assaults are unreported, certainly connected to the fact that only 5 out of every 1,000 rapes will result in a felony conviction for the rapist. Maybe it's these facts of our world that make Garak's point of view so accessible. By the numbers, we have more in common with a society built on mutual distrust than we do with one that values each other's emotional health enough to make a mental health counselor a bridge officer. I struggle in my own life and my own writing against the tendency towards cynicism. Trust is a slow-acting salve. Or a supplement, maybe, like how you have to take melatonin every night, on and on, until your body trusts that it'll be there, and lets you rest.



My other family, the one I found later in life, is a trio of queers, their two absurd dogs, and their young son. I moved into their home as a roommate, didn't realize I was getting a family, and to my shame I utterly

distrusted the intimation that any lasting relationship among us as a unit could include me. While they were nothing but welcoming, absolutely embracing, and completely trusting, I stewed in my own paranoia. Before their son was born, I panicked and plotted means to move out, even though I certainly couldn't afford to and even though they'd made clear I wouldn't have to. I mentally cordoned off what areas of our home I had a right to (literally only my room), and which parts I should act like a deferential guest in (all other shared spaces). To their eyes, I probably acted like a bit of a weirdo. I hid a lot. I turned down a lot of hangouts. But they just kept trusting me, and inviting me, and treating me like one of theirs. They acted like a world where I was part of their family was possible, and because they enacted that belief and trust in me every day, eventually I started to believe it too. It seems miraculous when I think about it now, years later. They believed in something so much that they made it true.



Now my father, from my first family, he's not big into fiction in general, much less science fiction. After a long while he's come to accept that it's something I'm passionate about, and he respects that, but also circles back to asking why anyone should spend their time in a fantasy world when the real world is here, desperate for us to tend to its many needs and hurts. He's a man who, like my mother, has worked his whole life to further causes of social, economic, and political justice, and when he doesn't have a potentially world-saving project to work on, he gets itchy. It's funny to me sometimes that he can't see how science fiction so often exemplifies how imagination and action must work hand-in-hand: they believe in each other, and they act on that belief, and through those actions, they create a better world. *Star Trek*'s characters, like all of us, live in a universe full of injustice, suffering, and struggle—not a utopian

vision, but an optimistic one, because they also live as if that better world is possible. We have to do that. We have to. When someone tells us that they're in distress, in pain, in danger, or in a time loop, we have to say "I believe you. I'll help however I can."

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Nicasio Andres Reed is a Filipino-American writer, poet, and essayist whose work has appeared in venues such as Strange Horizons, Lightspeed, and Shimmer. Nico has gone back and forth between the United States and the Philippines over the years, and is currently pursuing an MA in creative writing at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. Find him on Twitter [@NicasioSilang](https://twitter.com/NicasioSilang).

The Cinder Girl Burns Brightly

by Theodora Goss

Each night, her mother speaks to her out of the fire:
come to me, my daughter. Come into the flames.
And the Cinder Girl, the one they call Dirty Ella,
even the housekeeper, even the kitchen maid,
steps into the fireplace. She burns
brightly, hair flaring upward,
skin as white as the heart of the sun itself.
When she emerges, she is as clean as though
she had bathed in lavender water with castile soap.
She must rub soot again all over her body
to disguise herself as the Cinder Girl.

The fire is her mother's arms, it is the love
in her mother's breast, as hot as a train furnace.
If you have that kind of love, not even death
can defeat it.

When her stepmother says, sort these peas
from these lentils, the fire says
put them on the hearth, daughter.
She does, and out of the fire
fly two birds, one red, one yellow.
The red one picks out the peas,
the yellow one picks out the lentils,
until they are all sorted.
The Cinder Girl sits there, watching
with flames flickering in her eyes.

When her stepsisters say, mend these gowns,
the fire says again, put them on the hearthstone,
and out of the flames come small white mice,
squeaking, squealing, swarming over the kitchen.
They stitch the ripped hems, the torn bodices,
so neatly and evenly that the seams
are almost invisible.

On the first night of the ball, the fire says,
wear this—it is a dress
as red as passion. If you wear this, the prince
will want to dance with you all night.
The Cinder Girl puts it on, and now she is
a forest fire. She burns through the ballroom.
The prince dances with no one else. But at midnight
she runs back home to her mother.

On the second night, the fire says,
wear this—a dress as yellow as jealousy.
If you wear this, the prince will ask you to marry him.
He does, in the moonlit garden, but once again
the Cinder Girl flees. She does not know
if she wants to spend all night in the arms
of a man she has just met
who likes to play with matches.

On the third night, the fire says,
daughter, you know what to do. This dress
is as white as innocence. The Cinder Girl will shine
like no one else, not that the prince has eyes
for any other woman. Since he was a boy,
he has been attracted to danger and sharp objects:
swords and knives, court gossip,

the game of politics, like his father before him,
who preferred to imprison recalcitrant noblemen,
including the Cinder Girl's grandfather,
in the castle dungeon. She herself
intrigues him—she is the greatest secret of all.
Who is she? Tonight he calls her
Princess Diamond. In the rose garden,
she accepts his proposal.

She leaves her shoe, covered with diamonds,
under a rosebush.

In three days, the prince and his retinue will ride
up to her door, where her stepmother
will laugh at the idea that Dirty Ella, imagine!
could be the mysterious Princess Diamond. But Cinder
will produce the other shoe out of her pocket.
Miraculously, she will be clean
under her rags, her skin as white as frostbite.
The prince will put her in his carriage, and the household—
stepmother, stepsisters, housekeeper, kitchen maid—
will gape as they drive off.

She will be married in the white dress. That night,
while the prince is sleeping in a mahogany four-poster
with brocade hangings, she will kneel before the fireplace
of their cavernous bedroom, cold despite the tapestries
on which hunters trap a unicorn with the help
of a virgin, innocent, complicit. She will say, mother,
I am here. Out of the fire will fly two birds,
one red, one yellow, and perch on the carved bedposts,
above the snoring prince. Out will come

a swarm of white mice to scamper around the room,
over the oriental carpets.

The fire will hold out its arms, saying, daughter,
come into my embrace, and the Cinder Girl
will hold out her arms in turn, saying mother, come to me.
She will wrap the fire around her
like a shawl, red, orange, yellow, safe in its warmth,
and burn the palace down.

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(*Editors' Note:* “The Cinder Girl Burns Brightly” is read by Stephanie Malia Morris on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast Episode 28A.)



Theodora Goss

Theodora Goss is the World Fantasy, Locus, and Rhysling Award-winning author of the Extraordinary Adventures of the Athena Club novels, including *The Strange Case of the Alchemist’s Daughter*, *European Travel for the Monstrous Gentlewoman*, and *The Sinister Mystery of the Mesmerizing Girl* (forthcoming October 2019), as well as short story and poetry collections *In the Forest of Forgetting*, *Songs for Ophelia*, and *Snow White Learns Witchcraft*. She has been a finalist for the Nebula, Crawford, Seiun, and Mythopoeic Awards, as well as on the Tiptree Award Honor List. Her work has been translated into twelve languages. She teaches literature and writing at Boston University and in the Stonecoast MFA Program.

The following parameters

by Nicasio Andres Reed

After the USGS pamphlet to accompany Scientific Investigations Map 3292: Geologic Map of Mars

The following parameters: the early epoch the lower latitudes the thin desert pavement the geologic haze the glass-configured winds the undivided crystalline sun the wrinkle rifting chronostratigraphic icy spiral the other spacecraft the shallow inclination the balanced guiding principles the primary versus the provenance versus the faulting and fissuring continental hydrofractures the temporally iterative mosaic the limit borne out by the bright hundredfold tectonic possibilities the multispectral obliquity the pressure the presence the guest the remote author's spatial art (or)

The eight-epoch chronology
fluvial and terrestrial
true and absolute
shield and impact
depths and dust
the inner system. **Herein, we.**

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Nicasio Andres Reed

Nicasio Andres Reed is a Filipino-American writer, poet, and essayist whose work has appeared in venues such as Strange Horizons, Lightspeed, and Shimmer. Nico has gone back and forth between the United States and the Philippines over the years, and is currently pursuing an MA in creative writing at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. Find him on Twitter [@NicasioSilang](#).

Flashover

by S. Qiouyi Lu

I am angry with myself for wanting
for needing
for being a heliotrope who turns to the sun,
believing it to be weakness,
an admission of failure,
as if the blood that the light creates
does not thrum through my veins.

I am angry with myself for being
the vine, the ivy, the leaf—
why can't I be smaller
more easily pruned
instead of always reaching out
to touch where the warmth touches,
so desperate to drink in
the faintest glimmer of morning?

I am angry with myself for wanting
for needing.
So I withdraw.
I allow my roots to wither;
I allow the canopy to grow thick above me
as if I do not need the light.
I allow it, until wrinkles vein my leaves,
until I am parched,
until I am a kindling,
until I am the barren land,
that space no one will cross.

Then, when I have had enough,
when the wind makes me shiver,

when I drink in that single devastating spark,
I will grow wild,
my presence everywhere,
red blooming boundless,
choking out every weed,
razing the air with life.

I will take the light I denied myself,
swallow it so whole until I become the sun
burning canopies,
blazing paths for new life.

I will love myself for wanting,
for needing.
I will nourish every last creature on this earth.

So speak your anger.
Your wants. Your needs.

I will hear them
and nourish you too.

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S. Qiouyi Lu

S. Qiouyi Lu writes, translates, and interprets between two coasts of the Pacific. Their fiction and poetry have appeared in Asimov's, F&SF, and Uncanny, and their translations have appeared in Clarkesworld. They edit the flash fiction and poetry magazine Arsenika. You can find out more about S. at their website, s.qiouyi.lu or follow them on Twitter as [@sqiouyilu](https://twitter.com/@sqiouyilu).

The Magician Speaks to the Fool

by Ali Trotta

Someday, you will learn
that life is mapped by misadventures
and heartbreak,
unruly as the sea, arranged
and rearranged
in waves, until everything is salt
and sand.

Someday, someone you marked as *safe*
will call the witch
out of your bones,
and leave you full of burning,
your mouth tasting like ash,
the blessing of a last kiss,
a crossroads
you don't come back from.

Someday, what's broken
will be left in shatters, a glinting
reminder of missteps, a lighthouse
of warning, a milestone
of survival—leave it
where it lies
and remember.

Someday, you will bite the apple
and find a promise, a freedom,
the sweet sleep of love—
but sometimes, too, a poison,

a soft slow song
of ruin, a beautiful
reckoning of reason
and madness.

Someday, this bright moment
will howl a dark ache
into the silence, and you will learn
how to mourn
the living, inching through
each day, a collection
of gathered will
and grief.

Someday, this.
But for now?
Show no mercy to this life,
howl it holy
for the way it burns,
your body a sanctuary
for belief, a clumsy marvel—
there is a cliff,
fly or fall,
jump.

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(*Editors' Note:* “The Magician Speaks to the Fool” is read by Erika Ensign on the Uncanny Magazine Podcast Episode 28B.)



Ali Trotta

Ali Trotta is a poet, editor, dreamer, word-nerd, and unapologetic coffee addict. Her poetry has appeared in Uncanny and Cicada magazines, with a forthcoming piece in Fireside Fiction and in The Best of Uncanny Magazine from Subterranean Press. She writes television show reviews for Blastoff Comics. These have included Agent Carter, The Flash, and Supergirl. Additionally, for Blastoff, she has written some personal essays. Ali's always scribbling on napkins, looking for magic in the world, and bursting into song. When she isn't word-wrangling, she's cooking, baking, hugging an animal, or pretending to be a mermaid. She's on Twitter as [@alwayscoffee](https://twitter.com/alwayscoffee), and you can also read her blog at alwayscoffee.wordpress.com. Two of her past Uncanny poems were a Rhysling Award nominee.

Elegy for the Self as Villeneuve's Beast

by Brandon O'Brien

I work to put away these daggernails of mine
and carve off each stain of the hurt, each line
of the black love that turned my burnished skin to furs
to sweat in, to wear as uniform'd curse—

I won't lie, I wake up snarling. I want to rend
what turned me so, I want this heat to end.

I want to feel the mem'ry of the thing burst sweet
against incisors. All I do is eat.

It's funny how nobody asks about the spell,
who uttered it, or why; or why, pray tell,
we guess the boy-turned-beast was always beast-as-boy.
If only bards would warn that bitter joy.

Hell, if I tell it? Sure—‘the black beast wants to clear
his name!’ and no one wants to keep an ear,
and that's what all her threats would always hope for most,
that each lone howl for help won't hold a host.

I loved her. This part's the hardest to reconcile.
It wasn't me that needed strength or guile
to keep us. First came judgments whispered meek and fae:
I had to love her, but she wouldn't stay.
Then, dreams she had of blood—her own, or mine, in jaws
and still eyes and dour grit without pause.
If curfew cracked at five, she'd head home and insist
I did the same, for love. There's one small twist

there: if I still walk the campus greens beyond six,
from then til twilight bore nasty conflicts,

how I've abandoned her, and she never loved me anyway, and what kind of dog would see her flustered and not change a little in their route. Surely, this is what most couples bicker about. Not that it weren't once dulcet or serene—the fable opened with sweet picnic scenes

and the stereotyped kisses in pouring rain. Young lovestruck me had won his only gain before she threw backpacks, phones, the brief switchblade turn and cursed me dog, and spoke at every turn something before a lick of fact could scrape the tongue, and soon every date turned copper-sweet, stung us both: her because she feared she'd need firmer hold and me because it made me frail when told.

“Look at you! A lagahoo, once bruised by a girl? I should believe the man was not the whirlwind?” I don’t know, the words that turn me dog are such chaotic magic. I can’t do so much. I wish I could strive to speak a witching-blister. God, I wish we hadn’t ever kissed. Her spell worked, even on me. I wake and wonder now if I dreamt it all up, and why, and how.

The knife that fashions my claws is in a tea tin: her first claw, the one that did my hope in. Each trace of her incantations has since been swept off the inboxes where they were once kept. Some loved ones even saw the witching cast. They claim blindness, say my hurt is just a grasp for fame or something, you know how he is, what else could it be? What other premise could ever fit?

And here's the truth: I have these teeth now, and love them.
I want to hold some living thing and thrum
their gristle with my fingers, rage against foibles;
I want to be angry, to make a mess,
I want to do something with all this howling gnashing,
I want to feel like I'm not just crashing
into my own ribcage, like I've lost, like I'm all fell.
I want to know what to do, how to quell

myself. I'm not allowed rage, am I? When beasts shout,
townsfolk say that's all a beast's about.
It's funny how nobody asks about the spell,
who uttered it, or why. I'm tired. Sell
me noisy peace, or a god that saves boys, or sleep,
or somewhere to keep all my howls bawled deep.
Tell me I'm the only beast—at least I keep it
with me when my tired breath's finally quit.

Tell me the dreams aren't a part of the deal, that they
will fall into fading recall someday.
I'm so damn tired. All I do is eat, and howl,
and bottle what remains behind the jowl.
I cannot put away these daggernails of mine.
They trench reservoirs of torment, divine
some truer me in knots of matte and glowing rage.
I've been made a beast, ev'ry single page.

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Brandon O'Brien

Brandon O'Brien is a writer, performance poet, teaching artist and game designer from Trinidad and Tobago. His work has been shortlisted for the 2014 Alice Yard Prize for Art Writing and the 2014 and 2015 Small Axe Literary Competitions, and is published in Strange Horizons, Reckoning, and New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean, among others. He is also a performing artist with The 2 Cents Movement, and the poetry editor of FIYAH: A Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction.

Interview: John Chu

by Caroline M. Yoachim

John Chu is a microprocessor architect by day, a writer, translator, and podcast narrator by night. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming at Boston Review, Uncanny, Asimov's Science Fiction, Clarkesworld, and Tor.com among other venues. His story "The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere" won the 2014 Hugo Award for Best Short Story. "Probabilitea" is his third story to appear in Uncanny.

Uncanny Magazine: This is a coming of age story about taking action and accepting responsibility, about small changes that cascade into larger ones, about family and politics and the Brownian motion of dust motes and molecules of tea. What was your inspiration for this story, and how did it all come together?

John Chu: The original inspiration was that I wanted to write about that moment when the child is no longer a child and their relationship with their parents has to change. Everything in this story is intended to heighten this. So, while practically every first-generation Chinese immigrant father is convinced he know best for his child, because of this story's speculative element, Katie's father almost certainly does know best for her. That means, though, he also knows there is a shelf life to him simply telling her what to do.

Likewise, to heighten that moment, Katie's decision is one that would be extremely simple for her if there were no parents involved. Ultimately, it's one where she has to risk her father's disapproval and not one where she can simply do what her parents want. (Also, the last couple of years have felt like centuries and I can't say that hasn't affected my writing.)

Uncanny Magazine: A key scene in this story is the one in which Katie and Jackson are at the train station with a group of people, waiting for one of them to take action. The group was hand-picked to be present at

that moment—can you talk a little about what characteristics you gave the people on the platform and why?

John Chu: Jackson picked the people but we're in Katie's point-of-view and he never actually tells her what he was selecting for. Between that and the fact that she's being stretched to the current edge of her capabilities means that she doesn't really see anything special, different, or unusual about the people waiting for the train. That's intentional. The language there gets pointedly non-specific with respect to, for example, gender. The folks waiting basically look like the people I see on the platform while I'm waiting for the T. There is a mix of ages and races and attitudes.

You don't need to be special, different, or unusual to take action (although, if you are, that's awesome). It's not as though Jackson has found The Chosen One. Anybody on that platform is someone who could have done something.

Uncanny Magazine: I loved the description of the meal Katie's father cooked—both the description of the food itself, and the associations that Katie has with the food. Earlier this year your *Tor.com* story “Beyond the El” was focused even more strongly on food. What makes food an appealing story element for you? Do you like to cook?

John Chu: In a short story, where you don't have many words to play with, food is a quick way to get into memory and culture. I can dive right into the nature of the bond between people.

I love to cook! I never have enough time to do anything really ambitious, though.

Uncanny Magazine: At the end of the story, Katie chooses to continue manipulating probabilities. If you had her abilities would you use them?

John Chu: Yes, if I were in literally the exact situation she's in. That is, I'm so absurdly well trained that, at least within the limits of what I'm

currently capable of, I basically have absolute control of my abilities. (No accidental mahjong hand stacking!) I have a demanding but ultimately loving father who is willing to let me make my own mistakes but oversees and evaluates what I do. There are people (albeit extremely powerful and slightly scary people) who tell me the likely ramifications of my manipulations. With all of that and an ethos that one doesn't interfere with the lives of others unless one has a good reason in place, sure.

Actually, that makes this story sound like the set up for a '90s-era specific TV show. She's a harried graduate student with the ability to alter chance. He's a big, affable goof with the literal power of life and death. (He's also supposed to be reading Political Science but that didn't make it into the story.) Together, they repair the machinery of civilization!

Uncanny Magazine: I really liked Katie's relationship with her father—he is demanding, but also very supportive. Family relationships are a recurring theme within your work; within this theme do you find there are things that you return to repeatedly? Things that have shifted over time?

John Chu: I've joked many times that, if I ever publish a short story collection, it should be titled *Unreasonable Parental Expectations and Other Structural Oppressions*. (Note: This is why people should not let me title things.) I hope that, over time, I'm writing more nuanced relationships, that I'm exploring different corners and exploring the notion of family in fresh and interesting ways.

Uncanny Magazine: What are you working on next?

John Chu: I'm always writing one thing or another. Nothing that I can announce yet, though.

Uncanny Magazine: Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us!

Interview: Elizabeth Bear

by Caroline M. Yoachim

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She has been the recipient of Hugo, Sturgeon, Locus, and Campbell Awards, among others. Her most recent novels are Ancestral Night and The Red-Stained Wings. “Lest We Forget” is Bear’s fourth appearance in Uncanny.

Uncanny Magazine: “Lest We Forget” is a war story told from an interesting perspective. I love the idea of contagious memories, spread by flatworms. There are a lot of elements here—war, consent, memory, biology—what was your starting point for this story, and how did it all come together?

Elizabeth Bear: This is one of those stories that just came together for me in a flash of inspiration. George McGovern, according to Gloria Steinem, said, “The men who love war are mostly the ones who have never been in it,” and as I grow older, it seems to me that this—jingoism—is a basic human tragedy. I’ve written several stories on the theme that if we thoroughly understand a thing, we are likely to see it as a nuanced, complex problem without simple answers, but rather with a lot of variables and a lot of ethical implications.

How often do we cry out in frustration, “If only you understood?!”
But the ethics of mind control are a little shaky. :D

I had the idea of engineering planaria to spread memories to humans—perhaps without consent—for years before I managed to put together this story.

Uncanny Magazine: What happens after the end of the story? Do you think that infecting a large portion of humanity with these memories would be enough to stop future wars, or change the nature of how they are fought?

Elizabeth Bear: That's always the question, isn't it? I don't know, frankly.

I wonder, if we shared a species-wide ancestral memory (which is certainly one possibility for how this future develops) would we be kinder and more empathic, or would we become even more dismissive and despising of each other?

I certainly think there are ethical reasons to fight a war. Self-defense, for example.

But I also think invaders justify their invasions under a lot of layers of denial and colonial entitlement. It's lebensraum or manifest destiny, not genocide. There's certainly an ethos of "It's a dirty job, but it's got to be done" that inflects certain brands of machismo.

Is knowing in advance how very dirty likely to change that? I just... cannot be sure.

Uncanny Magazine: What was your favorite part of writing this story? What was the most difficult part?

Elizabeth Bear: I really enjoyed playing with the reader's perceptions via the somewhat unreliable first-person narrator, and working out how to do the reveal at the end of how, exactly, the story is being told. That was also, curiously, the hardest part.

I enjoy writing this sort of theme-centered story that happens in fragments with a minimum of transition and exposition. It's kaleidoscopic, when I can pull it out: the narrative emerges as if from a mosaic, and it lets me write stories that are very short but full of emotional impact.

Uncanny Magazine: If it was possible to experience someone else's memories (not about war, but just in general) would you want to?

Elizabeth Bear: It's a funny question for me. Memories are, of course, unreliable and full of read-write errors and confabulations. We don't remember what actually happens: we remember a narrative we construct about what happens (when we remember anything at all).

There are huge chunks of my life where I have no idea what happened. We think we remember, but really it's a blur with a few of the high points picked out and linked to associations—and seemingly, all the embarrassing ones rendered in technicolor.

That's why, after fifty years of life, we can still manage to consistently bore our friends and family by telling the same dozen stories repetitively!

Uncanny Magazine: You've been publishing speculative fiction stories and novels for roughly 20 years—how has your writing changed over time? Have you gone in any directions that you wouldn't have expected?

Elizabeth Bear: Well, I hope I've gotten better! It's very weird having become somebody who has a solid long-term reputation in the field, because it still seems to me that I just got here. I kind of miss being one of the cool new kids occasionally, but we all have to edge over and make room for new voices and fresh approaches.

This isn't specifically about me, but I'm definitely delighted by the burgeoning diversity in the field. I feel a lot of pleasure and satisfaction that something that was considered a drawback to mainstream success when I broke in is now a marketing point—queer characters, characters of color, queer writers, writers of color—so perhaps the change that's worked on me is that I feel much more relaxed these days about continuing to write the sorts of things I've always written. There is a lot of solidarity in having a community, and markets like *Uncanny* around.

Oh, and I learned to write transitions, and less baroque sentences. :D

Uncanny Magazine: What are you working on next?

Elizabeth Bear: I have another very short story that I need to finish (of course I'm currently in Europe for Luxcon, because writing while traveling and doing appearances is so good for one's concentration!) about soft-edge climate mitigation technology, microplastics, and murder. And I am 2/3rds done with *Machine*, another book in the same science fiction far-future as *Ancestral Night* that just came out.

Because of the vagaries of publishing, I have two books out this year. *The Red-Stained Wings* is the second book in an epic fantasy trilogy, and that's out in May. So I have promo to work on for that as well. So much of writing is actually authoring, it turns out!

Uncanny Magazine: Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us!

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