

TENTH Anniversary Issue!

# ON·SPEC

more than just science fiction

SPRING 1999

\$4.95

Theme: Earth, Air, Fire, Water

**NEW  
WORK BY:**

**Melissa HARDY**  
*Journey Prize Winner*

**David NICKLE**  
*Bram Stoker Award Winner*

**Michael SKEET**  
*Aurora Award Winner*

**Peter WATTS**  
*Aurora Award Winner*

**and more!**

DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE 15, 1999

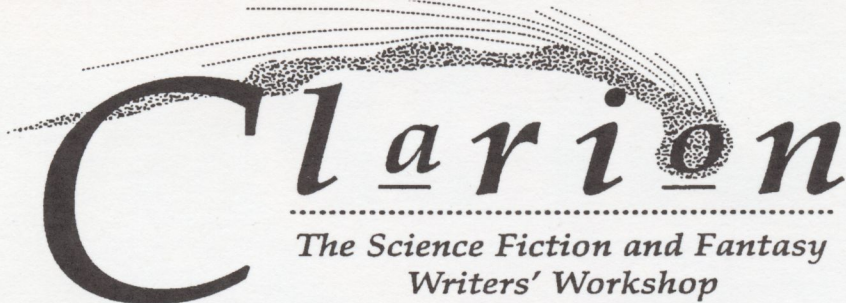
15005



7 72006 15005 7

TIM HUNNEL ©99





*Clarion*  
The Science Fiction and Fantasy  
Writers' Workshop

The 32nd Annual Workshop  
June 13 - July 24, 1999

Writers-in-Residence:

Karen Joy Fowler   James Morrow  
Tim Powers   Mike Resnick  
Michaela Roessner   Judith Tarr

Editor-in-Residence:

Scott Edelman

Deadline for Receipt of Application: April 1, 1999

For more information contact with SASE.

International applicants may send unstamped, self-addressed envelopes

Clarion 1999 c/o Mary Sheridan  
E-185 Holmes Hall  
Lyman Briggs School  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI 48825-1107 USA

Web site: <http://www.msu.edu/~lbs/clarion/>

Michigan State University is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution



# On·SPEC

more than just science fiction

## Spring 1999 THEME ISSUE:

### EARTH, AIR, FIRE, WATER



#### FICTION

Metallica .....	Melissa Hardy .....	8
art by Robert Pasternak		
Spring Planting .....	Helen Rykens .....	24
art by Nancy Niles		
Hérons .....	Michael Skeet .....	34
art by James Beveridge		
The Back Shed .....	Robert Boyczuk .....	48
art by Adam Moran		
Learning from the Wings .....	Iain Deans .....	60
art by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk		
Home .....	Peter Watts .....	68
Dust to Dust .....	Elizabeth Westbrook .....	76
art by Robert Boerboom		
Deep Blue Sea .....	Leah Silverman .....	82
art by Mark A. Savona		
Ground-Bound .....	David Nickle .....	86
art by Lar DeSouza		
Love Knot .....	Jena Snyder .....	101
art by James Beveridge		

#### POETRY

Untitled .....	Sandra Kasturi .....	47
Sea Wrack .....	Sandra Kasturi .....	59

#### NONFICTION

Empedocles and the four elements .....	Lyle Weis .....	3
--	-----------------	---

#### COVER

© 1999 Tim Hammell

[www.icomm.ca/onspec](http://www.icomm.ca/onspec)



# On·SPEC

more than just science fiction

Vol. 11, No. 1, #36

Spring 1999

<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society
<i>General Editor:</i>	Jena Snyder
<i>Guest Editor:</i>	Lyle Weis
<i>Fiction Editors:</i>	Barry Hammond Susan MacGregor Hazel Sangster Jena Snyder Diane L. Walton
<i>Poetry Editor:</i>	Barry Hammond
<i>Art Director:</i>	Jane Starr
<i>Executive Assistant:</i>	Katerina Carastathis
<i>Publisher's Assistant:</i>	Sara Bamsey
<i>Cover Artist:</i>	Tim Hammell
<i>Webmaster:</i>	Rick LeBlanc, The Infrastructure Network

*On Spec* is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$19.95 for individuals and \$25.00 for institutions. (This price includes GST. GST # 123625295.) For US and overseas rates, see p. 23. Send SASE for advertising rate card, contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details.

Please send all mail (letters, queries, submissions, and subscriptions) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph/fax: (780) 413-0215. All submissions must include self-addressed, stamped envelope. Manuscripts without SASE will not be returned. We do not consider previously published manuscripts or faxed or emailed submissions. Enclose cover letter including name, address, story/poem title, phone number, and word count (6,000 words max. for fiction; 100 lines max. for poetry). All nonfiction is commissioned. All art is commissioned; send b&w samples Attn: Art Director. We buy First North American Serial Rights only; copyright remains with the author or artist. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without the author's or artist's consent.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Department of Canadian Heritage; and Clear Lake Ltd.

*On Spec* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA) and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association (AMPA), and is distributed by the CMPA and BBR (U.K.).

Typesetting and layout in PageMaker on a Macintosh PowerPC by Jena Snyder.  
Body typeface is Optima. Headline typeface is Benguiat Gothic.  
Printed in Canada by Alpine Press Limited.

Publications Mail Registration Number 08148      Website: [www.icomm.ca/onspec](http://www.icomm.ca/onspec)  
Postage Paid at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada      E-mail: [onspec@earthling.net](mailto:onspec@earthling.net)  
Copyright © 1999  
ISSN 0843-476X



On this issue...

# Empedocles and the four elements



Lyle Weis

*Guest Editor, On Spec*



**W**HEN THE GREEK PHILOSOPHER AND POET Empedocles leaped to his death in the molten throat of Mt. Aetna, he knew exactly what he was doing. His skin and bones vaporized in a moment, merging with the bubbling lava of the volcano. He became, as he knew he would, both mortalized and immortal.

Earth, Air, Fire and Water that once were commingled within his corporeal being were released to the larger cosmos, to the primal state from which they came.

At least that is the story Empedocles would have wanted us to believe.

Hard-nosed Aristotle disagreed with the legend, saying that his philosophic ancestor died peacefully in 434 B.C. at the age of sixty. Others said Empedocles became the victim of his political ambitions, was driven into exile by his enemies, and committed suicide in despair. Cynical historians suggest Empedocles claimed immortality and to prove that he had been drawn by the gods to heaven, chose the volcano to hide physical evidence to the contrary. Some people will do anything in the name of self-promotion, it would seem.

So what does Empedocles and his death have to do with this issue of *On Spec*? Exactly everything. I've always thought that the name of this magazine is perfectly appropriate, since it deals in literary speculations. The present issue, with a theme of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, finds an eerie heritage in the life and thought of Empedocles, who first gave us a view of the cosmos built on those four elements. His influence on western thought has been so profound,





for example, that he is often credited with an early theory of evolution.

Empedocles reportedly once raised a woman from the dead, after she had lain breathless for thirty days. Whether you take this miracle at face value is unimportant. The incident has poetic truth, consistent with the philosopher's view of the universe. He believed that our world consisted of the four main elements, which were in turn acted upon by two primary forces, Love and Strife:



I shall tell a twofold tale. For at one time it grew to be one only from many, while at another it dispersed again to be many from one... And these never cease changing places continually—at one time all coming together into one through Love, at another each being borne apart again through the hostility of Strife.

Love acted to bond elements, make them vital. Blood, under Love's power, mixed Water, Earth, and Fire to give us this essential fluid. When Strife, the force that acts to drive elements apart, attacked the body, blood lost its vitality and ability to sustain life.



Raising someone from the dead, then, was not so amazing. The force of Love can revitalize, as we all know, even a lifeless body (if you don't know this, maybe you haven't tried hard enough). Empedocles is also said to have cured a homicidal madman with music, to have driven out a plague by turning back ill winds from a village. More than an emotional drive, Love for Empedocles was a force of the possible, a way of seeing into the future. It was both a social expression and a scientific force that explained why our arms didn't fall off our bodies.

Love and Strife are the heart of our speculations about the world around us, even today. We make assumptions that our ordered world will not fall apart, that natural and human systems of organization will hold. Traffic lights will always prevent tangled masses of metal and flesh, power grids will happily hum, computers will not crash. Love will prevail.



But we know all too well that for every attempt to make the center hold, there are forces—let us call them Strife—which work to shatter, dissolve and grind. We see ample evidence whenever a plane falls from the sky or a politician stumbles. Often, when we turn our eyes to the future and utter the question *what if?* there is hope for order, balanced by fears of disorder. As we close in on the millennium, visions of an approaching time of Strife are getting common.

This summer in the rugged mountains of northern Idaho, a few hundred meters from where Randy Weaver's family confronted the FBI, I met a woman whose life is shadowed by fears of the so-called Y2K bug. She believes we are headed for a crisis, as the computers that control everything from airline flights to grocery deliveries will come to a standstill. When that happens, she expects social chaos as people panic. Her cabin has five sides, each with a



huge window overlooking the valleys below. Inside are stores of food, guns and clothing. She is ready for the Strife she knows is coming.

Before you condemn the "end of time" people, can you really say you've never shared some of their speculative apprehensions? Did you have any money in the stock market when it began behaving like a dolphin on speed? Did you wonder just how low the dollar would fall? Our local power company announced recently that its reserves are very low and that we can experience "brownouts" or "powerdowns" in the near future. Oh, really? After that announcement, I saw my electrical appliances (including this computer I'm using to write this editorial) in a new (or newly appreciated) light.

When writers of speculative fiction view the future, they do so with mingled hope and fear. In brighter visions, the world is held together by human spirit and ingenuity; in darker views, things unravel due to human frailty or the inherent flaws of our inventions. Love will keep us together; Strife will tear us apart.

The legend of Empedocles' death is true. The wonderful, ordered entity of his body met the Fire and burned, releasing broken molecules. Some cooled and became part of the Earth. Still others rose into the Air, mingled with the sulphurous vapors, and fell as Water from the sky. Love gave way to Strife, which in turn yielded another form of Love.

In this issue of *On Spec* you will find visions of the ancient four elements and of the forces which bind and drive them apart. Enjoy. 🍁

#### ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

TIM HAMMELL reports "I'm working for a living again, but in a real art gallery. Also joined a ceramic studio to dabble in clay. Where this will lead I don't know but it is therapy and fun. When all the power goes out in the near future, the new world superpowers will be the Amish and third world countries since they know how to dig wells and work with low tech (this story idea is © tim hammell 1999 and may not be used without permission and appropriate fee)."

[www.icomm.ca/onspec](http://www.icomm.ca/onspec)





# Metallica

Melissa Hardy

*illustrated by Robert Pasternak*

IN THE TUSCAN UPLANDS, BETWEEN ONE RIDGE OF THE Colline Metallifere and another, stretches a valley that natives to this region call the *Valle del Diavolo* or the Devil's Vale. This is the reason: the Earth's crust is worn as thin here as the papery skin of an onion; below it pool vast lakes of underground water heated by inclusions of hot magma boiling up from the planet's deep belly like fiery redux up the acid-scarred throat of a Roman sybarite. Where there is pressure on the Earth's straining seams, the surface puckers and pops, erupting in the geothermal pools that pock the valley—belching stinking, boric waters to which human beings have resorted for two millennia to ease a panoply of aches and pains and to cure diseases of the skin, liver, and kidneys—as well as in *soffione*, *fumarole*, and *putizze*.

*Soffione* are pools of mud, billowing sulphurous, phreatic steam, diabolical puddles that bubble and hiss while, from a distance, you might easily mistake *fumarole* for a smouldering slag heap. In fact, they are a congregation of steaming vents posted in an encrustation of salts. As for *putizze*, little wells, they were common in the hamlet of Sasso Pisano where this story takes place—vents of steam that appear as if by chance in the oddest places: front gardens, back lots, and even, disconcertedly, throughout the ancient cemetery.

No, the eruption of *putizze* was commonplace in Sasso Pisano, though unquestionably annoying. Dogs avoided the smelly vents, while cats appeared entranced by them; horses shied from them, while pigs found them deeply interesting. Children, cantering and shrieking, heaved objects into them to see what would happen (nothing much). As for the adult population of Sasso Pisano, they seemed oblivious to the phenomenon, chatting over the fence to a neighbor with never a thought to the hiss of steam and the dank smell of



sulphur rising from *putizze* erupting in their vegetable patches, olive groves, and vineyards. The thick yellow smell hung heavy on the air like fetid washing, and, because it seeped into the water table, all the well-water drawn in Sasso Pisano stank like a mixture of boiled cabbage and eggs. "It was as if the Devil himself had farted over the town," Father Damasio explained the odiferous situation years later, "but everyone was too polite to take notice."

For others often remarked on the *laissez-faire* attitude of the Sasso Pisani, their habitual nonchalance, their implacable *sang froid*, and certainly that was what had saved their ancestors from perdition many centuries before. For, back when these sorts of things were likely to occur, Old Nick, frustrated in his attempts to entice the pious Sasso Pisani to sin and thus to Hell, decided to bring the mountain to Mohammed, so to speak, and made of the villagers' vineyards and olive groves a hellish landscape with the introduction of his stinking *soffione*, *fumarole*, and *putizze*.

This did not deter the stalwart Sasso Pisani from honoring the one true God with fair words, good deeds, and, perhaps more significantly, with donations to the Holy Father in Rome. God, in the midst of remarking every sparrow that falls, took notice of the inhabitants of the valley's many demonstrations of piety and rewarded them by investing the Devil's foul geysers with mineral wealth beyond comprehension ... at least beyond the comprehension of

all but a few, which has meant, over time, that certain men of the region have become very rich off the mineral wealth of the Colline Metallifere, while others have remained very poor.

As for the Devil, he still pays visits to the valley, pausing to squat toadishly atop the chestnut-clad slopes of what natives call the *Aia del Divolo*, the Devil's Porchway, and gnash his teeth and fart so loudly that the hills rattle.

Despite the general piety of the population, there were from time to time Sasso Pisani who strayed from the path of righteousness. Giovanna Pelicola was one of these. When she was fifteen years old, scarcely more than a child herself, but overripe, too fleshy and brightly colored to be quite contained, all clouds of black hair and white skin and red lips, she gave birth to a minuscule baby in the very middle of one dark and rainy October night. Her widowed mother assisted her, working covertly by candlelight in a back bedroom with all the curtains drawn and the shutters closed tight so that inquisitive neighbors wouldn't see the light and chatter, scolding the girl at the same time as she coaxed the baby from her.

In fact, the mother knew full well that she was as much to blame for the girl's condition as Giovanna herself, for hadn't she thrust her daughter at the man responsible in the hopes that he would take her off her hands? The girl would have to marry sometime and, as her only dowry would be her beauty, it might as well be to a man of substance like



Alphonse Lattanzio. It must be soon, too, before she turned twenty. Signora Pelicola knew this all too well, for, in her time, she had been just such a beauty as Giovanna and she knew it to be a temporary condition that left in its wake loose skin and sagging breasts, a mustache and dark circles of pigment like a stain around each eye.

Alphonse was thirty-seven years old at the time, just a year or two younger than Signora Pelicola herself, and, although a native of Sasso Pisano, he now lived in nearby Larderello, where he had a small pink house on a hillside and a well-paying job working the steam centrifuge at the boric acid works. A perfect match, Signora Pelicola lamented, looking ruefully down at the tiny infant swaddled in her arms. *The solution to all my problems.* She shook her head sorrowfully. *He'll never marry the girl now that she has borne him a child.* A fine upright man like that would have to marry someone at least perceived to be a virgin. Otherwise his pious old crone of a mother would have a fit and everyone would talk.

The baby whimpered feebly and cranked her little head from side to side, eyes squeezed shut, and batted ineffectually with tiny clenched fists at the material in which she was wrapped.

*On the other hand,* the idea suddenly occurred to Signora Pelicola, *what if Alphonse was not told about the child?* Never told about her? To her knowledge, no one in Sasso Pisano had known for an absolute certainty the true nature of her

daughter's condition. She herself had told no one, especially that nag, Father Damasio, and she had sworn Giovanna to secrecy—the girl had been stunned to discover that such activities as she and Signor Lattanzio had engaged in could result in so drastic a condition as pregnancy, and so had been unusually tractable. To be sure, there were those who suspected, women whose eyes were forever busy trying to ferret out the secret hidden behind folds of fabric, under the looseness of a gown. However, the fact that Giovanna was full-figured to begin with, that the baby had come a month early, and that the latter period of her confinement had taken place during the rainy autumn months when everyone wore heavy, loose clothing and stayed inside conspired to keep Giovanna's condition unnoticed. Moreover, for the past six weeks, Signora Pelicola had kept her daughter at home, not even letting her out to go to the market. "Iron-poor blood," she told her neighbors, shaking her head sorrowfully as if this were true.

Muffled snores came from the tangled, bloody sheets where Giovanna lay, dishevelled and sweaty. It had been a long labor and the girl was exhausted. She had not even asked to see the baby, but only turned her head away when Signora Pelicola had inquired. Once more the older woman looked down at the mewling infant in her arms. *Poor pink thing,* she thought, *you'll not be missed.*

Her husband, while he lived, had been a volunteer fireman. Part of his





legacy to her were a pair of big India rubber boots, a regulation yellow slicker, and a heavy canvas hat. Signora Pelicola donned these and, wrapping the baby in an old blanket, set out into the cold, dark night. A sharp wind tossed stinging rain into her face like handfuls of needles and pins and the cobbled street was slick with mud and wet leaves as she made her dogged way towards the church whose one rose window, set directly above the heavy wooden doors, glared at her like a cyclopean eye through a cataract woven of dust and cobweb. (Sasso Pisano consisted of one street which deadened in a small piazza in front of this craggy, fierce edifice. A traveller enters and exits the village by the same bumpy road. "The only other way you can get out of Sasso Pisano," some wit had sourly observed, "is to die.")

However, it was not solace that Signora Pelicola sought at the darkened church, but the small cemetery behind it. Here among the ancient crypts and eroded angels and cracked tablets of marble, a *soffione* about two feet in diameter bubbled noxiously away, hot mud burping a yellowish, sulfuric vapor into the air, hissing when the rain spiked it. Kneeling beside the *soffione*, Signora Pelicola laid the baby, still wrapped in the old blanket, in the warm fluid. For a moment the child floated, then, as the blanket absorbed moisture from the pool, sank slowly beneath the bubbling surface. Surprisingly, the little girl had not cried out, although the heat of the *soffione* must have scalded her tender flesh. In-

stead, she struggled as ferociously as her small store of strength would permit, thrashing her arms and flailing her legs and pitching this way and that, which only made her sink the faster.

Signora Pelicola drew her rosary from her pocket then and whispered three Hail Marys all in a rush. "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women..."

"Pray for us sinners," she concluded softly, crossing herself, "now and at the hour of our death."

SIGNORA PELICOLA SAT ON THE EDGE of Giovanna's bed. "I have bad news," she told her daughter. "The baby was born too soon. It was very small, my Vanna. It could not survive."

Giovanna seized her mother's hand and burst into hot tears—they were tears of relief as much as of sorrow. "My baby is ... dead?" she whispered hopefully.

Her mother nodded.

"But you're all wet, Mama!" Giovanna cried. "You've been outside! You ... the baby?"

Again Signora Pelicola nodded, looking very grim indeed.

"Where?" Giovanna asked.

Her mother shook her head. "No need for you to know that," she told her.

"What ... what was it, then?" Giovanna ventured. "Boy ... or girl?"

"I never looked," Signora Pelicola lied.

A YEAR AND A HALF LATER, FATHER Damasio married Giovanna and



Alphonse Lattanzio in the little one-eyed church at Sasso Pisano and Giovanna moved the twenty-three kilometers from the village to Larderello and Alphonse's pink house on the hillside. Alphonse's mother was altogether pleased with the match. "Indisputably a virgin," she congratulated Signora Pelicola, holding up the bridal sheets for her inspection (the latter was familiar with the sheets, having carefully doctored them with pig's blood but a few hours before). "And, as for the fact that she has no dowry," Signora Lattanzio continued, "that is good too. It means that she's in no position whatsoever to dictate to my son."

Shortly after the wedding, late at night, Father Damasio, a spare man with a pronounced beak of a nose, was sitting in his office at the rectory beside the church, chewing on his pen, his long fingers stained with blue ink as he worked on a homily in which he compared the struggle between God and Evil for a man's soul to a game of bocce, when suddenly he heard a disorganized sound coming from the back of the house, a sort of scraping, floundering noise, accompanied by small, breathless cries.

"Marianna?" he called, thinking it was the housekeeper coming back for something she forgot, but there was no reply, only a scuffling sound like a small animal might make, then silence. Probably some creature trying to topple off the lid of the garbage can, the priest thought. He must really tell Marianna to get a new can with a tighter-fitting lid. Sighing, he arose and hobbled creakily—he had

just turned fifty and his knees had long since begun to exact from him the price to be paid for a lifetime of kneeling on stone—down the hall into the kitchen. He flicked on the light and opened the back door.

There, seated on the rush mat, was a small child, not quite two years old. She was naked and dripped a yellowish slime as though she had just clambered out of a mud puddle. She was entirely covered with it.

"What?" the priest gasped. "Who is the bad mother then that let you go wandering about the town in the middle of the night?"

The child, of course, only gazed mutely back at him.

Father Damasio tried to remember which families in the village had children of this age; he should know them; he had baptized them all. Of course, there were the Stracuzzi, but it was a boy they had, and the Da Silvii and the Cavalci...

Suddenly Father Damasio blinked and squatted down in front of the little girl. There was something strange about her. Something about her eyes. Taking her chin in his big fingers, he tilted her face upwards so that he could inspect her eyes. Yes, just as he had thought, they were gray. That in itself would have been unusual in the Colline Metallifere region but not altogether unheard of given the introduction of Gallic blood into the population by some of those connected with the boric acid works. However, hers were not the usual kind of gray eyes. Rather, they were pewter-colored and, like that alloy, shone dully. As for the





whites of her eyes, they were not so much white as they were the strange silvery color that platinum is.

Father Damasio rose and, crossing to the linen cabinet, selected a sheet in which he carefully wrapped the muddy little girl. He carried her into the kitchen and set her down on the tiled floor. There was a loaf of bread lying on the counter. The priest broke off a piece and gave it to the child to eat. She studied it with curiosity, as though she had never seen such a thing before. She turned it this way and that, then sniffed it cautiously.

"Eat!" Father Damasio urged her and pantomimed chewing.

When she still appeared confused, he cut off a second piece for himself and ate it, to demonstrate. Now the child understood. Holding it with both hands, she nibbled at it with teeth as milk-white as seed pearls.

The priest hurriedly brushed the crumbs off his cassock and set out into the night to rouse his housekeeper, a middle-aged widow who lived with her brother four houses down, over the *macelleria*.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Marianna," he told the dishevelled, mountainous woman who, at some length, lumbered down the stairs to answer the *macelleria's* bell, "but the strangest thing has happened: a little girl, sitting on the back steps, dripping with mud. I need you to bathe her for me; it would be improper for me to do this."

So Marianna dressed herself, stuck a few pins in her bird's nest of a hairdo, and accompanied her

employer back to the rectory, where they found the little girl seated where the priest had left her, covered with bread crumbs in a pool of mud.

"*Madre di Dio*, and didn't I just wash this floor?" Marianna exclaimed. "And look at you, *bambina*! I've seen cleaner pigs! Whose child is this, anyway, Father? Can you tell?"

Father Damasio shrugged. "Perhaps we will recognize her when she is clean. But, Marianna, look at her eyes."

"Mary, Queen of Heaven!" the housekeeper exclaimed, bending down to look into the little girl's eyes. "Now, that's different!"

Father Damasio sat in his office while Marianna bathed the child. He tried to work on his homily, but Marianna's frequent invocations of the Virgin Mary so distracted him that he decided to smoke his pipe and drink a glass of *grappa di moscato* instead:

"Holy Virgin! I can't believe what I am seeing! If this isn't the most unusual child!"

When she was finished, she called Father Damasio into the kitchen. "Look at her, Father!" she instructed the priest. "Look at her skin ... her hair. Look at her fingernails."

The infant's skin shone like polished silver, her short sparse hair glittered like wiry strands of jet, and her fingernails were the same pewter color as her eyes.

The priest took a deep drag on his pipe. "Call Doctor DiLoreto," he instructed his housekeeper.



"INSIDE, SHE IS STRANGE AS WELL," Marianna confided to the doctor, a plump young man with a goatee who had just taken over his father's practise. "See? Look inside her mouth. Her gums are a grayish color, her tongue too and..." She lowered her voice still further. "Other parts too, *Dottore*," she hissed. "I checked them myself."

"Hmmm," said the doctor, stroking his goatee as though it were a sleek ferret that lay curled in the cleft of his chin. For a few moments he poked, probed, and prodded the little girl, all the while exclaiming, "Ahhh! ... Hmmm... Ah hah!" Then he turned back to the priest and his housekeeper. "Her tissues appear to be completely normal," he concluded, "but her coloration... Hmmm! Ah! No one can say that it is not peculiar."

"She reminds me of those statues they carry in procession in the big churches," observed Marianna. "Silvered. Gilded. They must weigh a ton, but she is very light. Like aluminum, in fact. Oh, Father, it's a miracle!"

Doctor DiLoreto snorted contemptuously. "More likely a phenomenon," he interceded. Having studied medicine in Bologna, he was of a modern cast of mind and placed little stock in miracles.

As it turned out, however, Father Damasio, being himself something of an amateur geologist, had been busily at work formulating his own scientific theory. "Shall I explain it to you?" he asked.

"Please do," the doctor replied.

"In the meantime, let us all have

some *grappa*," the priest suggested. "I think we all could use it after what we have seen. Marianna?"

"Certainly, Father!" the housekeeper agreed enthusiastically. While she was removing three shot glasses from the cabinet (eying them critically for spots before attacking them with a clean dishtowel), the priest expounded his theory. "As you know, Sasso Pisano is situated along a fault line where macigno sandstone comes into contact with jasper. Now jasper is usually red or green, but the heat arising from vapor escaping from the inside of the Earth turns it white, which is why all the jasper hereabouts is white, stained with yellow sulphur deposits, of course."

"Go on," Doctor DiLoreto encouraged him. "Thank you, Marianna," he added, taking the glass she offered.

"Now this is the question I have been turning over in my head in the past hour," the priest continued. "Could prolonged exposure to endogenous vapor have produced this strange, almost metallic effect in an otherwise perfectly normal infant?"

"Indeed! Could it have?" cried the doctor. "It's a good question!"

"If so, whose child is she? Where did she come from?" Marianna asked.

The priest shrugged. "It is very clear to me, Marianna, that she is an unwanted child. Instead of leaving her on the hillside to die, someone has laid her in some vaporous spot: maybe the *fumarole* at the edge of town, but I suspect the *soffione* out back in the cemetery. She was






covered with mud when I first saw her, which suggests a *soffione*, and as young as she is, she can't have travelled far on her own."

"Why, if what Father has just said is correct, a miracle has indeed taken place in our little town," the housekeeper concluded triumphantly. "Not the child's unusual coloring, but the fact that she managed to survive at all under such desperate conditions, for who knows how long it has been since she was abandoned?"

"She has a point," the priest observed, turning to the doctor.

THE CHILD WAS CHRISTENED ANTONIA after Father Damasio, whose first name was Antonio, but, from the beginning, everyone called her Metallica. The housekeeper took the little girl into her home for the time being, although this was hardly convenient, given the fact that the quarters she shared with her brother Adolfo above the *macelleria* were very cramped—for the butcher was every bit as big as his huge sibling.

 "Aren't you afraid that the child will be trampled on ... or inadvertently crushed?" Doctor DiLoreto asked Father Damasio.

The two men sat at one of the tippy tables which the owner of the Excelsior Bar set out in the piazza when the weather was fair.

"It's a concern," Father Damasio acknowledged. "However, given the child's sex, she cannot live alone with me in the rectory. It would be improper."

"I can see that," the doctor concurred. "Well ... what about the

orphanage in Larderello?"

Father Damasio laughed, then shook his head. "No, no, my friend. Her fellow orphans would torment her because she is different. Not to mention what the nuns would do to her. Nuns are worse than children in that regard. A nest of hissing vipers. Besides," he continued, "I have a theory: if Metallica remains in Sasso Pisano, whoever abandoned her will have to see her on a regular basis: in church, on the street, in the market... Sooner or later, guilt will drive them to come forward and acknowledge the child as their's. Do you wish to place a small bet on that, *Dottore*? Perhaps a bottle of that good French brandy you're so fond of."

AS FOR SIGNORA PELICOLA, METALLICA'S grandmother, the sudden reincarnation of the infant she thought she had gotten rid of for good eighteen months before wreaked havoc with her normally robust health: three days after Metallica showed up at Father Damasio's kitchen door, a severe attack of shingles confined the murderous grandmother to her bed for nearly six weeks.

No sooner had the shingles retreated than she was afflicted by a severe case of post-herpetic neuralgia, which made her scalp itch so horribly that she could barely endure the stinging pain. "It feels as though I have rolled my head in prickly pear," she described her condition to the young doctor.

"Here is a prescription for an antihistamine," he told her. "It should relieve the itching somewhat. What-

ever you do, Signora Pelicola, try not to scratch your head."

His warning fell on ears deafened by itch. Within days of his visit, Metallica's grandmother had pulled out her gray hair in hanks, leaving her partially bald, and the scalp that shone through was peppered with angry sores and scabs.

There was nothing for it but for her to bathe her head in the hot boracic waters of the region. Accordingly, Giovanna left her husband to fix his own lunch every Tuesday and took the train from Larderello to escort her scabrous parent to the nearby Terme di Bagnolo for treatments.

Just as this terrible affliction began to ease, however, Signora Pelicola was plagued by spells of spinning vertigo which left her reeling, nauseous and dizzy. In fact, every time she chanced upon Metallica in the street or at the market or at mass on a Sunday, she suffered one of these horrible attacks.

As a consequence of this, she stopped doing anything or going anywhere but instead stayed at home, behind closed shutters, so that she might be spared the sight of her granddaughter.

However, her woes were not at an end. The widow began to get migraines, which lasted up to four days. She was recovering from one of these when Father Damasio came to visit. He found her lying in bed in a darkened room that smelled of sickness and stale air, pulled a chair up close to the bed and sat down. "Tsk, Leona!" he chided her. "Sick again?"

"Very sick, Father," murmured Signora Pelicola. A little light leaked through the closed shutters, making her wince and turn her head away. "Sick to death. In fact, I would much prefer death to the living Hell I now inhabit!"

"Do not despair, Leona," Father Damasio advised her gently. "Put your trust in Christ."

Signora Pelicola snorted. "It's He who tortures me!" she declared. "He is punishing me for my sins, Father, and doing a fine job of it, I must say!"

"Now, Leona," Father Damasio cajoled her. "You forget that I am privy to your sins and they are hardly extraordinary..."

"That's where you're wrong, Father!" Signora Pelicola interrupted him. "There is one sin I haven't confessed to you and it is definitely extraordinary." She seized the priest by his wrists and held on tight. "Oh, Father! Pray for me! Pray for me!"

"But whatever could you have done, Leona?" Father Damasio asked.

The truth barreled out of her mouth then, like a train from a tunnel: "I drowned my little granddaughter in the *soffione* in the cemetery when she was not an hour old ... or boiled her. I'm not sure which." She burst into noisy tears. "It was Alphonse's baby," she continued between sobs, gasps, and snorts, "but no one knows. Not even him. Later, after I returned from the cemetery, I told Giovanna that the baby had died. Not even she knows that I murdered my granddaughter! Ave Maria, Madre del Dio...! And to make things worse, she didn't even





stay murdered! Oh, Father, what am I to do?"

"Why, you must acknowledge Metallica as your granddaughter!" Father Damasio replied. "It is God's will!"

Signora Pelicola let out a strangled cry. "But then Alphonse would know!" she objected. "Not to mention Signora Lattanzio! She is such a terrible woman there's no telling what she would do to me! And what about the police? *O Madonna, Madre del Dio!*" And she began to weep hysterically and tear at what remained of her hair.

Father Damasio sighed and sank down deeper into his chair. "All right, Leona," he conceded. "At least take the child in and raise her as though she were your own—which she is! She cannot go on living over the *macelleria* with Marianna and Adolfo."

"But people will wonder," Signora Pelicola objected. "Ask questions..."



"Yes," the priest agreed. "Which you will answer by saying that you are doing me a favor. I asked you to take the child and you consented out of kindness and a sense of Christian duty."

Signora Pelicola snorted. "As if anyone would believe that!" she said, poking at her tear-stained cheeks with a handful of rumped bedclothes.

Father Damasio shrugged. "That is of no concern to God," he said. "One thing I insist on, however: you must tell Giovanna. She must know that Metallica is her daughter. Do you promise, Leona?"

"Oh, all right," Signora Pelicola consented ungraciously.

"Do you swear?" the priest pressed.

"By all that is holy," Signora Pelicola agreed. "But when the time is right, Father. Not before."

"All right," agreed the priest, realizing that he had already won a major concession from this difficult woman. "I will leave that to your judgement." He stood, suddenly weary. "Now I must go," he said. "I will bring Metallica to you tomorrow morning."

"So soon? When I'm still so sick?" Signora Pelicola protested.

"You will be better tomorrow," the priest assured her.

SO METALLICA CAME TO LIVE WITH HER grandmother and, indeed, Signora Pelicola's health improved significantly now that she had disburdened herself of her weighty and cumbersome sin. As for the child's identity, Signora Pelicola stuck doggedly to the story that she had no connection to the girl whatsoever but had only taken her in at the priest's request. When anyone expressed any skepticism concerning this, she only sniffed and said, "What appears to be dross may in fact be gold, while all that glitters is not what it seems!"

This utterance usually served to derail her interlocutors to such an extent that they pressed no further, but only shrugged and said, "Well, Signora, you are right there!"

Doctor DiLoreto had speculated that, with age, Metallica's coloration might revert to normal: "People, like snakes, shed their

skins periodically," he explained to Father Damasio.

However, Metallica's condition was clearly more than skin deep, for she seemed to grow more metallic as the months wore on rather than less. In fact, on bright days, she became something of a traffic hazard, glittering so ferociously in the glancing sunlight that her grandmother had to keep her off the streets so that she would not spook the horses dragging produce carts to and from market.

There was another odd thing about Metallica: at an age when most children gabble without cease, she uttered never a sound. It was unclear whether she was mute by nature or by choice.

Doctor DiLoreto could discern nothing wrong with her vocal chords or other organs of speech. "Perhaps it is because, for the first two years of her life, she did not hear a human voice," he suggested. "Perhaps she'll catch on in time."

YEARS PASSED. METALLICA TURNED three, four, five ... and still she did not speak. She did not appear to be simple. She learned tasks as easily as other children her age. Yet, perhaps because of her muteness, the impression which she imparted was as cool as her shiny skin. She appeared for the most part unmoved by fear, affection, curiosity... She never laughed or seemed to find anything particularly humorous. She rarely smiled. The one thing which seemed to excite her unduly was the prospect of food: she ate voraciously and in huge quantities. In spite of all this, she remained small for her age and

as light, as Marianna had put it, as aluminum.

"*Madre del Dio!* She eats like a pig ... a horse! She's eating me out of house and home, Father!" Signora Pelicola confided in the priest.

Father Damasio showed little sympathy for her plight. "It's only what you deserve, Leona," he told her. "She's making up for those years in the *soffione* when she had nothing to eat. So tell me: have you told Giovanna yet?"

"Giovanna?" Signora Pelicola blinked. "It's such a bad time for her, Father. She's just lost another pregnancy! That's three in a row!"

"Perhaps if she knew about her living child, God would permit her to bring another into this world..." Father Damasio began.

"But Alphonse...!" Signora Pelicola interrupted.

"Don't tell Alphonse," the priest advised her. "Leave that up to Giovanna. She can do it later, when the time is right."

"After I'm dead?" Signora Pelicola asked. "Now that's a good idea! I promise you, Father, by all that is holy, I'll tell her the very next time I see her."

A WEEK LATER, SIGNORA PELICOLA TOOK a fit picking vegetables in her garden, convulsed, made a terrible screeching noise, and toppled over. She died surrounded by Savoy cabbages and little *fumarole*, which hissed like snakes, her eyes bulging from her face like peeled onions, and an eggplant gripped so tightly in one hand that her fingernails had pierced its thick skin and penetrated





deep into its flesh.

While Marianna attempted to cut the eggplant away from the dead woman's hand without slicing off any of her fingers (a delicate task), Father Damasio telegraphed Giovanna. She came down on the next train.

"Where is your husband, my child?" Father Damasio asked the disconsolate Giovanna, who lay crumpled on her mother's bed, weeping noisily into one of the priest's linen handkerchiefs.

Signora Pelicola had been right to think her daughter's ripe good looks would not last, the priest reflected. Though Giovanna was little more than twenty, each failed pregnancy had thickened her once-slender waist that much more and caused her full breasts to sag that much further. The young woman's olive complexion had grown sallow, her black hair had become lackluster, and the years that had passed since her marriage to Alphonse had stained the skin around her eyes the light brown color of a bruise. Above her lipline hovered the shadow of a faint mustache. Moreover, if he was not mistaken, the woman had lost several teeth since he had last seen her.

"He'll come as soon as his shift is done," Giovanna answered the priest's question in a quavering voice. "Mama Lattanzio will be here any minute." Again she burst into tears. "Oh, Mama! Mama!" she wailed, burying her face in the soggy handkerchief.

"In that case," observed Father Damasio, "we have very little time. Giovanna, tell me," he continued.

"When did you last see your mother?"

"Two weeks ago! *Aggghh!* At Francesca Rossi's wedding," Giovanna replied.

"Ah!" exclaimed Father Damasio softly. Pulling up a straight-back chair, he sat down by the bed. "Well, in that case, there is something we must discuss before your mother-in-law arrives."

"What is it, Father?" The woman pushed herself up on her elbows and looked at the priest, her face swollen and blotchy.

"I know ... your mother told me of your and Alphonse's ... of your sin, my child," Father Damasio began awkwardly.

Giovanna flinched. "My ... my what?" she whispered, her voice barely audible. Inside her breast, her heart rattled like dice in a gambler's hand.

"About the baby," the priest replied. "Your mother told me."

Giovanna burst into fresh tears. "Yes! Yes!" she declared between sobs. "It is all true."

"There was something she didn't tell you," said the priest. He paused, unsure as to how to proceed, what words to use. "The baby did not die, Giovanna."

"It didn't?" Giovanna whimpered. "But..."

"No. Let me finish," the priest admonished her. "While you were sleeping, your mother bundled the baby up and carried it to the cemetery, where she laid it in the *soffione*..."

"*Madre del Dio!*" Giovanna cried. "My mother killed my baby?"



"Calm yourself!" Father Damasio implored. "She *thought* she killed your baby. She *intended* to kill your baby. But the Good Lord was watching out for Metallica..."

"Metallica!" Giovanna exclaimed. "Metallica? The changeling? The foundling? The orphan my mother took in at your request?"

"Her granddaughter," the priest corrected her. "Your and Alphonse's firstborn."

"But she's ... she's silver!" Giovanna whispered.

Father Damasio shrugged. "Two years in a sulphurous *soffione*..."

"But what will I tell Alphonse?" Giovanna worried. "A daughter... When he thinks we are childless! And a silver one at that!"

"You must take her in," Father Damasio urged her. "She was your mother's ward, after all. No one will question your decision. Once Alphonse has grown fond of her ... then you can tell him!"

"It's an idea," conceded Giovanna. "At least she's a quiet child..."

Her words were interrupted by a dreadful pounding at the door, followed by shouts: "Unlock this door! Let me in!" For Father Damasio had taken the precaution of drawing the bolt before entering into this delicate conversation with his former parishioner.

"*Respetto!*" Marianna screeched from the kitchen, where Signora Pelicola was laid out on the table. "There is a dead person here!"

"And I'm knocking loud enough to wake them up!" the visitor at the door brayed back, "Giovanna!

Giovanna! It's Mama Lattanzio come to console you in your hour of grief! "

"*Madre del Dio!*" Giovanna murmured distractedly, mopping her eyes. "Coming, Mama Lattanzio! Coming!"

GIOVANNA TOOK METALLICA WITH HER when she returned to Larderello, over the strenuous objections of Alphonse and her mother-in-law.

"Leave her with me," Signora Lattanzio urged her daughter-in-law. "Now that my arthritis is so bad, I could use a maid."

"Have you seen how much she eats?" Alphonse demanded.

Contrary to Father Damasio's predictions, Alphonse failed to warm to Metallica. Indeed, this was not surprising. He was a hard man, inclined to bitterness and quick to judge, and she was a cool, self-contained child who gave the unsettling impression of being constantly on the alert: poised, her ears fine-tuned to danger.

"*Dio!* She reminds me of a deer," Alphonse complained. "Always padding about, looking as though she's about to bolt."

Metallica remained mute, although she made little grunting noises when she ate ... and her appetite, to Alphonse's alarm and, later, his disgust, continued to be prodigious. Giovanna, however, insisted that Metallica remain under her husband's roof. Alphonse attributed this to stubbornness; but, in fact, Giovanna had soon realized that, by admitting her daughter into the household, she had succeeded in





lifting the curse on her womb. Within four years, she bore Alphonse two living sons. A year later she died from complications in childbirth while delivering a third boy.

Alphonse began to drink.

Partially it was because of his wife's death, although, in truth, he had not loved her all that much. It had more to do with the state of his expectations. He had been pleased as a young man from Sasso Pisano to get a job driving the steam centrifuge at the boric acid works, but fifteen years later, he was tired of the incessant, insistent drone of drills and the sharp squeal of the bores made biting into rock. He was fed up with the clang of winches and the constant hiss-hiss-hissing of steam as if the lake of bubbling, stinking water over which he worked day-in, day-out, elevated on a wooden platform so that he would not boil to death like a lobster in a pot, was a pit of snakes. His little pink house on the hill, once a haven, was now filled with squalling urchins with drooping diapers and runny noses. He had a paunch and a stiff neck and a sore back and he couldn't see his way clear to anything better than this.

So he began to drink.

And he began to think that Metallica was growing up into a rather fine-looking freak. Though she was still slight and small for her age, he could detect the beginning of breasts beneath her schoolgirl tunic, and her abundant hair, like strands of jet, caught the light like the shiny carapace of an insect.

One night, when all the little boys

had been put to bed and he had been drinking *grappa* since six o'clock, he called Metallica to him. "Tale your clothes off," he ordered her gruffly. "I want to see what color you are in the places I've never seen."

WITHIN A YEAR OF THIS ENCOUNTER and many similar ones, Alphonse deduced that Metallica was pregnant. She was distracted, fretful, and bilious. There was also a faint yeasty odor to her, like wine in the fermentation stage.

As time wore on, his suspicions proved themselves all too correct. Metallica's stomach mounded out into a smooth, rounded heap, then grew bigger and bigger. Her breasts swelled to globes.

Alphonse contrived to keep the girl inside, out of the neighbors' sight, but this was not easy as he was away much of the day at the boric acid works. He worried how his mother, who had persisted in calling Metallica "The Freak" even after she had come to live in the pink house, would react to a new grandchild gotten on her son's peculiar ward.

To Metallica he complained, "Another mouth to feed! As if yours were not enough!" But the girl only looked distressed, wrang her hands and made little whimpering sounds, like a dog.

One late summer's night, when Metallica was well-advanced in her pregnancy and after Alphonse had drunk the better part of a bottle of *grappa mangilli*, the centrifuge driver made up his mind to murder his ward and be done with it. He was



sitting on a chair out in front of his house at the time, peering down into the valley below. The moon had just risen; by its light he could make out the beehive shape of the Covered Lake where he had worked for the past fifteen years, evaporating geothermal water to precipitate boracic salts. To his left, just above the Devil's Porchway, a full moon dangled, mottled silver-white, like a big mirror stained with shadow.

"I shall toss the Freak into the Covered Lake," he decided. (Lately he had fallen into the habit of talking to himself.) "That's a hot bath you don't step out of! Finish the job botched so many years ago. Best to do it on a Sunday, when everyone is home having their siesta after dinner. The Covered Lake! Now, why didn't I think of that before?"

The Covered Lake was a natural thermal lake over which a hemispherical masonry dome had been built to concentrate and hold in the endogenous vapor that steamed from it. The temperature of the water generally hovered around boiling point—212 degrees Fahrenheit. In the course of his employment there, he had seen two men fall into the lake—one a suicide, the other by accident. Both men had uttered horrible, high-pitched screams and then boiled to death within moments.

The following Sunday, Alphonse put his murderous plan into action. After the children had been fed and put down to nap, Alphonse invited his ward for a stroll. "I will show you where I work," he told her, "but we must do it on the sly. The boss wouldn't like it if he knew I'd given

you the tour."

Outside it was a fine day, clear and dry, but inside the dank, sweating walls of the Covered Lake, the air was humid, fetid, and so thick with vapor that it caused Metallica first to catch her breath, then to feel almost giddy. Swaying on her feet, she strained to make out through the thick fog that filled the inverted bowl of the enclosure the wooden platform that extended over a roiling expanse of lead-colored water. The fog was stained yellow with sulphur; it made her eyes sting and her nostrils distend. A fine perspiration glistened on her silvery skin like a scattering of moonstones, and her hair, like tangled strands of jet beads, sparkled in the dim half light.

Alphonse seized her by the wrist and half led, half dragged her, stumbling and sliding across the slick tile floor and up the waterlogged steps, to the platform. Here, posted on this uneasy perch, Alphonse drove the fierce steam centrifuge which, in turn, spiked the diamond-tipped drill down deep into the rock, seeking the huge underground reservoir of thermally heated water lying beneath Larderello, that bubbling cauldron which must be constantly tapped if the production of boric acid were to continue and the town to live.

"Here," Alphonse whispered in Metallica's silvery ear, even his whisper resonating in the enclosed chamber. "Look! Look down. Look at the water. How it bubbles. Like a pot of water on the stove, eh? Hot enough for pasta. Boiling, in fact."

Metallica stood on her tiptoes, both hands gripping the platform's





wooden rail as she leaned forward to peer into the seething water. Alphonse saw his opportunity and, backing off a few steps, he suddenly lunged towards her and lifted her off her feet and over the rail.

She made a high, screeching sound as she fell, like a cat hurled from a height, then hit the water with a smack that reverberated through the enclosure like a gunshot might. Alphonse stumbled forward, and stood clutching at the rail as he watched his ward first wildly flail her arms, then twist onto her stomach and start to swim slowly and with great effort towards the edge of the lake.

"It's no use! It's too hot! Do you hear me?" he attempted to dissuade her, thrown into a sudden panic lest the girl actually succeed in saving herself. He flung himself down the stairs, two steps at a time, and was tearing along the lake's edge when a greasy tile caused him to lose his balance and fall hard on his tailbone. When he looked up again, it was to see Metallica lying prone, facedown in the seething, steaming water, bobbing up and down like a cork. She floated about ten feet from shore.

Alphonse stood shakily, pressing his open palm into his sore tailbone. He hobbled a few tentative steps closer to the lake's edge and inclined forward, peering to get a better look at his ward's lifeless body through the thick vapor that hugged the water's surface. As he watched, the movement of the boiling water lifted her up and rolled her over onto her back.

"*Madre del Dio* and saints preserve

us!" Alphonse whispered in amazement.

For Metallica's skin had turned not red, as that of a normal person just boiled alive would have done, but a bright, shining gold; and her eyes, wide open, staring and lifeless, had changed from slick disks of a pewter color to glittering diamonds.

Alphonse gasped and stood for a moment, gaping at the dead girl; then, realizing he must hurry if he were to salvage this prize, he rushed about looking for a grappling hook with which to snag Metallica's body. He formulated a plan as he rifled through the disorganized heap of welding tools, boiler parts, rods and pipes crammed into a compartment built into the base of the platform by the steps: *I'll fish her out of the soup, wrap her in a blanket and cart her off to the old cow shed up the hill. No one ever goes there. Not even the children. I'll cut her up, pry those two diamonds from their sockets... Yes, and sell the lot to that sly Volterran ... what's his name? Nigetti! He'll ask no questions if he knows what's good for him!*

However, no sooner than he had come up with this plan than a sudden, gurgling sound caused him to twist around ... just in time to see Metallica's golden body sink into the leaden depths of the Covered Lake in a cascade of murmurous bubbles.

TEN MONTHS LATER, AT NINE O'CLOCK on a Tuesday night in late November, Father Valente of the little parish of San Giuseppe in Larderello had just sat down to a late dinner of leftover *bucatini* when he heard a



noise out back among the garbage cans: a kind of floundering, hapless sound followed by the crash and spin of a tin lid.

"Saints preserve us!" Father Valente grumbled, assuming that the cause of the disturbance to be the cheerful pack of stray dogs that wandered the twisted streets of Larderello, seeking alms and scavenging in garbage cans. The priest threw down his fork, extracted the red-checked napkin from his clerical collar and, picking the kerosene lantern, stood. He walked to the kitchen door and flung it open. "Scat! I said, shoo!" he

thundered mightily, holding the lantern before him to illuminate the darkness.

Mysteriously, there were no dogs to be seen, only a small, dark form huddled next to the garbage can.

Father Valente hunkered down. "Dio!" the priest exclaimed softly, for before him sat a baby boy not quite a year old by his reckoning and, in the yellow burr of light cast by the kerosene lantern, the child appeared gilded with burnished gold and his eyes diamantine. "Dio!" the priest repeated, reaching out his hand to touch the child. ♣

**Is your favorite bookstore always sold out before you get your copy of *On Spec*?**

***Why not subscribe?***

	<b>Canada:</b>	<b>USA:</b>	<b>Overseas:</b>
<i>1 year</i>	\$19.95	\$18.00 US	\$25.00 US
<i>2 years</i>	\$34.95	\$32.00 US	\$44.00 US
<i>3 years</i>	\$49.95	\$44.00 US	\$60.00 US
<i>Institutional (per year)</i>	\$25.00	\$25.00 US	\$30.00 US

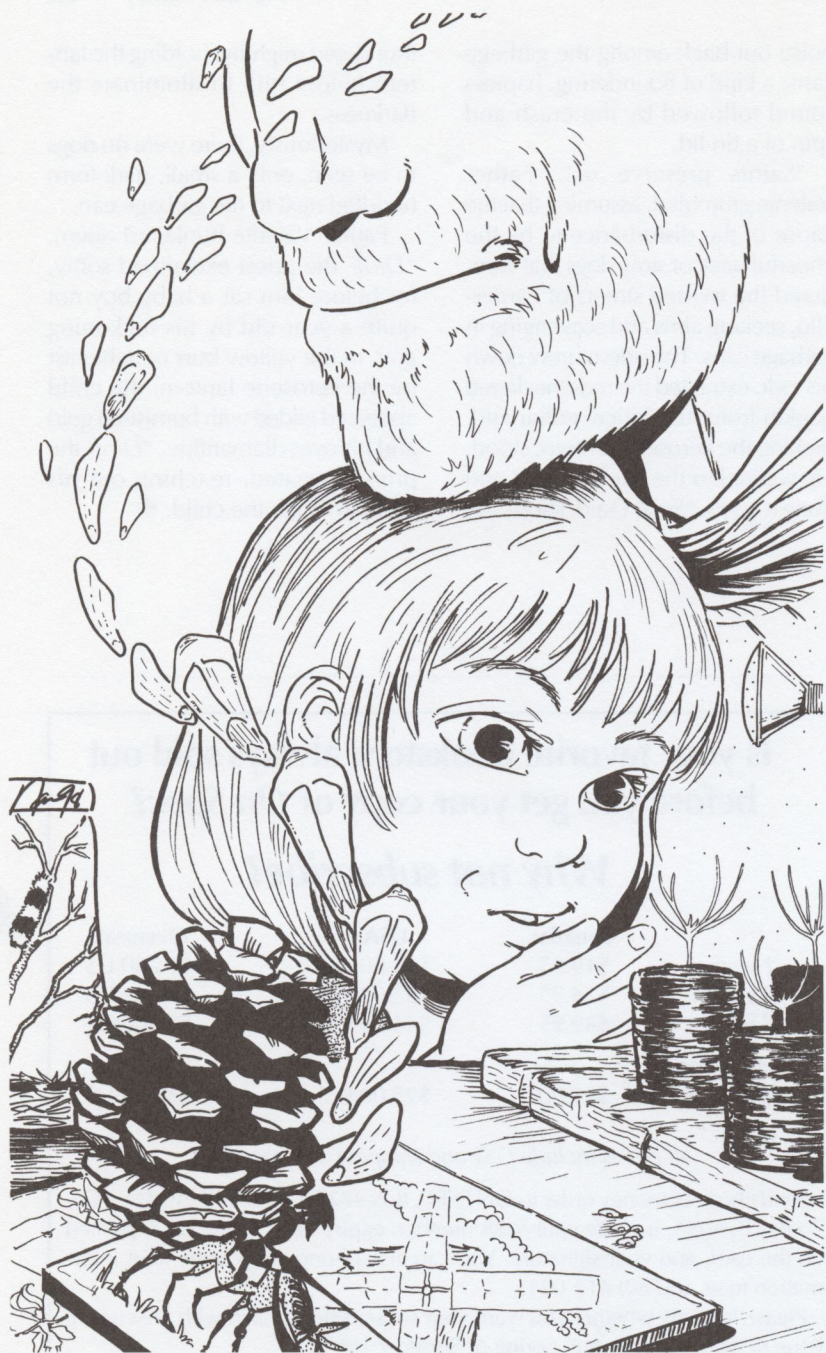
*All prices include GST and shipping and handling!*

Send check or money order to ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. To pay by VISA, include your VISA number, expiry date, name as it is printed on the card, and your signature. You can also phone or fax your VISA information to us at (780) 413-0215.

Please indicate whether you want your subscription to start with the current issue or the next issue (i.e. Spring or Summer 1999).







# Spring Planting

Helen Rykens

*illustrated by Nancy Niles*

**P**ETE TRAMPED THE SOIL AROUND THE BIRCH SAPLING until he was satisfied that the tree was securely placed. The soil was a good loam—he'd built it up himself over the years with leaves and refuse. It formed a thin layer over the concrete and asphalt that had made streets and sidewalks of an earlier time. As a boy, he'd gone to school not far from here. Back then the big houses were emptying. Dandelions and ragweed, unhindered by herbicides, had begun to squeeze through cracks in the pavement. The Earth was giving up its people, and anyone who could afford to was moving to those cylinders in space.

That was all fine with Pete. He ran his hand along the trunk of the birch, caressed the branches where the buds were bursting open. His fingers tingled with anticipation, and he sensed that this tree would thrive here. It would give leaves to enrich the earth and prepare the way for greater trees to come.

He stood back and admired his birch. Why anyone had built suburbs on this escarpment was beyond him. Of course there were grand views, the kind that developers could use to sell houses at exorbitant prices. In that last mad rush of building, these tracts were advertised as being "two short hours from Toronto."

BUT ANYONE WHO TOOK A CURSORY GLANCE BEYOND QUICK PROFITS AND fashionable homes could have seen that massive erosion would doom this neighborhood. Pete had warned them, and they hadn't listened. He was just glad that he could repair the damage.

He shook his head, picked up his bucket, and walked to the stream. He watered the birch, then looked over the trees on his wagon and considered



where to plant next.

*I'll put some together here. Bit of a clump always looks good.* He chose three crooked seedlings and dug a hole to the concrete bedrock. He arranged the birches, pushed soil over the edge of the hole, and shook the roots to settle them into place. *It would be an easier job if Gilly was here to hold the trees in place for me.*



Pete shovelled dirt to cover the roots completely, and tramped the soil with his boots. He hadn't thought of his daughter, Gilly, for years, but now that he knew she was following the others into space, he couldn't stop thinking about her. Space was the place to go if you were young enough to imagine living your life without the firm earth under your feet. Pete punched more birches into the ground, repeating his work over and over. Gilly was not going to a Near-Earth Orbiter, though. No.

He'd seen her name last week, on a news net. She would be one of thousands of passengers on a colony ship. He'd been pleased to see that she was one of many biologists, but she'd be leaving soon, heading for another star system.

All these years she'd resided comfortably in the back of Pete's mind. He had figured that one day she'd drop by to see the pine forest she'd helped plant all those years ago.

*She doesn't think she has anyone here. That's why she's going away.*

He planted the last of his small trees. He didn't want to dwell on the past, or on what Gilly was doing now. He stood back and admired the young birches, and his mind's

eye showed him the way it would look in a week, in a month, in a decade. He imagined branches filling out, showing promise of a new forest.

When the sun began to lower in the west, he watered the last of his charges and put his spade and bucket on the empty wagon. It was five kilometers from his new plantings to his RV. He trudged along the remains of an old road where a mix of sumac and live oak traced the foundations of decrepit houses. Concrete and shingle were no match for water and soil. There was room for nature to take her rightful place, now that so many people had fled the burnt-out, resource-poor planet. They could all go into space, as far as Pete was concerned. In time he would make his part of the world lush again. He wished he could find the legendary flowers of spring—trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, May apple—that he'd only seen on-screen. He longed for green shoots to come from the earth of their own accord.

Metal postal boxes, half-buried, gave him a handy resting spot. He pawed under the leaf mould with his bare hands, and felt the rich soil that had built up since he'd begun planting abandoned housing tracts—first with anything that would grow fast and rot into soil, then with trees that he liked. He knew that the forests were not his, yet he felt a kinship with these trees that he had seldom felt with people.

He got up and pulled the wagon again. Better not to think about people. That part of his life was over, had been over for a long time. He

hadn't seen Gilly since she was ten, the year her mother died. Aeline MacIntyre had been a fine woman. The only one, really, he'd ever been able to talk to. She'd been sweet, and had lived down the escarpment on the other side of Linden Corners, where some of the farm houses were still livable. Aeline, with long black hair and a ready laugh, was a talker. She hadn't minded a guy who mostly listened, who dropped in to stay when he was working in the area. She'd known he loved her; he hadn't really needed to say so. When Gilly was born, he'd been thrilled, and he'd stayed longer each time he visited. That baby had taken to him first thing, as though she'd known he was her dad. He'd never had any trouble talking to Gilly—not in those days.

They'd taken the baby on rambles through the Ministry Forests, back when the Ministry told him what to plant, and where to plant it. Back when he'd received pay to do work that any man would be happy to do.

When Aeline and Gilly were both gone, he'd come this way, away from the house where Aeline had died. Away from the house that Aeline's sister had taken Gilly from on that last, terrible day.

He'd left. He'd found an old RV to stay in, and fixed it up. The land that he planted now was far from her old house, so he rarely passed that way.

In fact, Bert was about the only person he saw anymore. Bert owned a shop in town, and doubled as a broker. Pete could easily look after his investments on the net, but Bert

was his old pal, and when they talked things over, it was always easier to make a decision.

As he got closer to home, he could hear the yard chickens squawking. They were a noisy lot, but the eggs were worth the trouble he went through to keep them. He'd finish his rabbit stew tonight, and maybe go fishing tomorrow afternoon, once he was done planting aspens.

He had to keep busy, to make himself stop thinking about Gilly.

GILLIAN MACINTYRE CHECKED INTO A cheap motel at the bottom end of Georgian Bay, remembering summer trips with her aunt and uncle. They'd rented a car every year when school got out, and had driven anywhere there was a beach, or a park, or mountains to climb. Cheap motels with a kitchenette were the best, her uncle had always said. You could afford to stay longer, because you could buy groceries and cook your own food instead of eating out.

She had loved to play at the beach, and wanted to spend her last days on Earth doing just that. There might not be comfortable places to swim on Delta Pavonis III.

It was only May, but the lakes warmed early, like everything else. She undressed quickly and got into a wrap. The sand was a short walk along a right of way—she might have stayed in this exact place as a young girl. The beach had always been wide, but now it stretched half a kilometer from the edge of the trees. The burning Earth continued to dry up the Great Lakes, while it





drowned ocean shorelines and made the tropics uninhabitable. Gillian was glad to be leaving. She hiked across the beach, keeping her sandals on to protect her feet from the boiling sand. At last she came to the bay and threw off her shoes.



As soon as the water came up to her thighs, she dove in. The cold ran down her back and chilled her crotch, but she got accustomed to it soon, and began to swim. She felt whole and clean the way she never could indoors. She swam far from shore, then floated on her back to rest. Her toes and belly and breasts made small islands. The water was as calm as it could be. If she looked west, she could see the escarpment, looming ghostlike through the haze. She'd go there tomorrow and see if she could find her mother's place, the farmhouse she'd lived in as a small child. But for now she let the sky's dome fill her eyes. She was all too aware that, after next week, she was unlikely to see this particular color of blue again.

The barren Earth was sloughing off its human cargo, and Gillian had worked hard to get on the list for the *Pavo Bound*. The Earth's resources would take decades to recover from that last population blast, and anyone who wanted a chance at a decent living was fighting for a berth on colony ships. She was ready for years of cryo-stasis, and knew the expected survival rates. The risk would be worthwhile: with mutant viruses still popping up in decaying cities to the south, she was better off leaving. Between the stasis and the journey at seventy percent light-

speed, she'd feel about as old as she was now when she arrived. She'd still have her whole life ahead of her, and a new world to explore and thrive on.

She swam back to shore, and settled in the shade of ragged pines that lined the beach. She slept there, letting the smell of the trees and the cool breeze comfort her.

THE RABBIT STEW, EVEN WITH SCRAWNY potatoes from the root cellar, was filling. Pete's limbs felt good after such a long day of work, and he knew that he would sleep all night. He liked planting more than anything, and couldn't remember the last time the Ministry had sent him money for his troubles, or even if they knew he still did their work. But it didn't matter.

He logged on to record his day's work in a private file. He filled in his weather observations on the broader net. Pete could look back forty-five years and know what he'd planted each season, what had survived, and identify the parents for each set of seeds. He had carefully monitored the warming climate and its effects on the escarpment.

He clicked to see the weather forecast, and thought about the aspens and willows he still wanted to plant.

He breezed through the news nets and focused on the stories about Gilly's ship. Several colonists had left comments on the official site, but Gilly had not left a message for anyone.

Pete read her bio again. His daughter had caught his own bug for growing things. She had studied

botany, and had even travelled to the cylinder colonies to see the effects of the new environments on the ancient plants of Earth. He envied her just a bit: she'd have all of Delta Pavonis III, with its alien fauna, to explore.

He began to compose a letter to her, revised it several times, nearly sent it, then decided not to. She'd just feel guilty about not coming back to visit, and he didn't want to burden her.

It would take her ship thirty years to get there, and he'd be likely be dead by then. He wished he could think of a way to say good-bye. He was damned proud of her—for all that she'd been taken away, she must have a bit of his green thumb.

He'd loved her for those first ten years, the way he'd never thought anyone could love. He could almost feel her hand in his, trusting, knowing. Knowing that he'd never go away. He'd held her close when Aeline died. They'd cried together like babies, over and over, until Aeline's sister from Halifax came and took Gilly away.

If he'd been thinking, he would have seen that coming. In the horrible time after Aeline died, he'd brought Gilly to the new forests, and she'd held the young pine trees while he filled in the holes. Her feet had trampled the ground firm. That plantation of pine south of town, just north of the highway, was Gilly's. He should go and visit it for her, before she left this world for good.

His screen displayed the list of people reporting in for the Delta Pavonis mission, but her name

wasn't up yet. She hadn't arrived at the spaceport in Des Moines.

*Maybe she won't leave. Maybe I won't have to figure out a way to say good-bye.*

The next morning he looked over the saplings he wanted to plant. Willows and alders would go in closer to the stream, just below the birches. He was glad that the Ministry had stopped paying him: they wouldn't approve of such commercially useless trees. They didn't care about these lands any more—no one did.

He found it hard to plant anything in neat rows these days. He took all kinds of trees and scattered them across the hills to make woods that would grow up to be beautiful places.

The alders would have to wait another day, though. Gilly would be gone soon. Even though she hadn't checked in, Pete didn't think she'd miss her ship.

He went inside and put on his cleanest overalls, then followed the path towards town. If he talked this over with Bert, he'd be able to decide what to do.

He stood in a corner at the back of Bert's store until the three people who'd been there when he arrived were done shopping. It was funny the way he always arrived during a rush, and could be pretty sure the place would empty out soon enough. Bert always said that people were like bananas—they come in bunches.

Bert came to the back of the store and looked at the cans of tomato paste that Pete was studying. Bert was good that way. He never tried to





look Pete in the eye.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Pete," said Bert after a few minutes. "What's up?"

Pete struggled. Normally he just asked for whatever he needed. Bert would tell him the price, and he'd be able to make his purchases and leave pretty quickly. Pete opened his mouth and closed it again.

"I know you watch the news, Pete," said Bert. "I know that Gilly's leaving."

"Yeah," said Pete, blushing. It was funny how Bert always knew what to say.

"You've got enough money to go to Iowa," said Bert. "Those stocks we bought are doing okay. You could go and say good-bye to her."

Pete's mind raced. He had avoided thinking about going to the launch site, and Bert's suggestion brought a brief picture to his mind: he'd lift up the little girl and swing her in the air. But she was grown up now, and writing to her was difficult enough. He couldn't imagine what he'd say to her if she was right there in front of him.

"It's May," said Pete. "I've got aspens I should be planting right now."

He wouldn't go near Iowa. First he'd have to travel there, probably on a plane. Then he'd have to find Gilly in a strange place, where she'd be surrounded by people he didn't know. She wasn't his Gilly any more.

"You could write to her. Just reply to the news net that you watch. Let her know you're proud of her."

"I can't figure what to say to her."

"But you want to write to her—

don't you?"

"Can't do it, Bert. She doesn't remember us here."

"Right, Pete," said Bert. "But you won't mind if I drop her a line. I know you're busy this week, planting aspens."

"That's exactly it. Thanks, Bert."

GILLIAN STOPPED HER CAR ON THE crumbling pavement and studied the ruined brick farmhouse. It didn't seem familiar at all, but this must be the right place. She consulted her uncle's map again, got out of the car, and walked across the meadow to the front door. Most of the windows were broken. She pushed the door open, and a scurry of bugs and rodents greeted her. The place smelled of animal droppings and stale beer. She stood there, wishing that this was the wrong place.

Aunt Cally had been right to take her away, she thought as she touched a fragment of yellow lace hanging in front of the window. She remembered helping her mom wash these curtains.

She walked across the dirt-covered floor. The living room was stacked with dusty CDs, but the screen, and anything else of value, was gone. Gillian looked through her mother's novels and the fairy-story disks that she had loved so long ago. She fingered rocks, pine cones, and driftwood that she and her father had gathered on rambles in the woods and along the beach.

Her dad's tools were gone. He must have left shortly after Aunt Cally had taken her away. Once she'd lived with her aunt and uncle

for a while, she'd learned that her dad—old Pete Vanderweg—was known as a drifter. He'd always gone from one place to another, planting trees for the Ministry of Restoration.

The Ministry offices had closed years ago. She couldn't imagine what he'd do if he wasn't making new forests. Her strongest memories were of planting evergreens with him after her mom died.

Gillian picked up a few CDs, some pine cones, and a dragon-shaped piece of driftwood, and put them in her car. She drove to the village and stopped at the store. People still lived here, far enough from the cities to avoid epidemics, scraping by on what was left over. Spread amongst fewer people, what was left over seemed almost enough.

Bert, who'd run the store when she was a kid, still looked the same. She bought a bottle of water.

"I don't suppose," she said, trying to catch his eye, "I don't suppose it'll cool off any time soon."

"Gets warm in March and stays that way through to October," he said, handing her some change.

"Thanks."

"Drive careful," he said.

She sat in the car a moment, wondering why she hadn't asked about her dad's whereabouts. If only Bert had recognized her, it would have been easy. But she looked nothing like the little kid Bert had known. And if she couldn't talk to Bert, what would she say to her dad?

She'd never been sure if her Aunt Cally had come to get her because of duty and pride, or if Pete had asked Cally to take his daughter

away. She had blamed her father often enough in the years since, for everything from her mother's death to her own desire to leave Earth. But now she suspected he'd done nothing wrong except love her, without knowing how to keep her close.

Gillian started the car, and left Bert's store behind. She drove up the escarpment through the pine forest, and couldn't be sure exactly what she and her dad had planted together. The earth and resin smelled like home, though. She could remember howling in rage when she was taken away. Dad had just stood there, tears forming in his big eyes.

She stopped at a roadhouse several hours later. She ordered a bean stew with garlic bread, and when the terminal at her table invited her to surf or check messages, she left it alone. Her box would just be full of notes from well-wishers and wannabes.

PETE PLANTED ALDERS THE NEXT DAY, and thought about what to do. There were flights to Des Moines from nearly anywhere just now. If he caught a plane in Buffalo he could get to the spaceport before the launch.

He wouldn't have to say anything to Gilly. She might be all grown up, but she'd remember him. He'd give her a big good-bye hug, and she would understand.

He sent a message to Bert, asking him to arrange the trip. He packed a few things in an old knapsack. There was room for a small gift for Gilly, a pine cone. It would remind her of the times they'd spent planting forests.

Pete walked to town the next





morning.

"Here's a card with enough credit for your trip to Iowa," said Bert, "and a little extra in case you need it."

"Thanks, Bert." Pete looked at him, grateful that he had such a friend.



"Bus leaves in half an hour. In Buffalo you can get a direct flight to Des Moines."

Pete nodded and sat on the bench in front of the store. He gripped the handle of his bag as though it would anchor him there, and keep him from changing his mind.

The bus driver pushed his card through the pay slot and handed it back. Pete took a seat by the window and hoped no one would sit next to him and start with their life story. He needn't have worried. The bus was half-empty. He watched endless urban tracts whiz by, punctuated with garbage dumps and scrap heaps. He dozed sometimes, thinking too much about Aeline and Gilly.

His flight was over more quickly than he expected, and soon he was surrounded by strangers in the busy Des Moines airport. He walked near the walls to avoid bumping into people, and he tried not to stare at the spacers in their exoskeletons. *What a lot of work to go through, to live in an artificial environment.*

He hadn't contacted Gilly yet, so he took a shuttle bus to the spaceport. He told himself that she'd like a surprise.

He was let off at the tour counter. When he reached the front of the line, he stared at a map of the port while talking.

"I'm here to visit Gilly MacIntyre,"

he said. "She's my daughter, and she's leaving on the *Pavo Bound*."

"They're all staying at the Derby. Weren't you told?"

"No."

"Look, give me your ID. I'll see if you're on the list of permitted visitors."

"Permitted visitors?"

"Standard security, sir. Each colonist prepared a list."

Pete handed her his ID, and she ran it through.

"Listen, sir," she said after a moment, "you can't just go asking to visit a colonist. You're not on the list."

"But Gilly's my girl," he said, looking up.

"We can give you a tour of the facility thirty-five minutes from now, but you can't go bothering the colonists."

"But you don't understand..."

The woman pressed a button on her console, and two security officers appeared at Pete's side. He went with them sadly. A forest path is easy to walk along, but open space, with people and buildings, can be impossible to negotiate. They brought him to a nearby hotel. His officers talked to the desk staff, and Pete suspected that he wouldn't be allowed on another bus to the spaceport.

At least there was a terminal in his room.

He found the address for fan mail. It would be open for the next few days, until time distortions made communication difficult. He searched at his own address and pulled up his letter file.

He read it over:

*Dear Gilly: I think of you when*

*I'm out planting trees. You helped me with those pines south of town. Well, they're growing up pretty strong and tall, just like you. I'll miss having you on this world, but I'll always remember you. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I wish your aunt hadn't taken you away. Love, Pete.*

He didn't have time to change it, so he pressed send.

GILLIAN WAS WOKEN FROM CRYO THREE months before the *Pavo Bound* was scheduled to arrive at their destination. She left her quarters to bathe as best she could in the ship's partial G, surprised that she could even move after all those years of sleep. While towelling off, she went to a screen.

A crew member who'd been awake for too much of the voyage had gotten bored and gone through all the fan mail that had been sent to the general box in the first few days of the voyage. There were several messages for Gillian MacIntyre, and one for Gilly.

*Gilly.*

She ran a search for *that* message, called it up, and read it.

She looked out at the pinprick of light that was her new sun, and suddenly she felt the gaping distance between her first home and the one she would make here.

Poor Pete. He'd be dead by now, and would never know that she'd remembered him.

An echo of a child's tears came to her. He'd loved her—she knew that now. She skimmed through her other mail quickly, and stopped dead at the other message from Linden Corners.

Bert had tried to reach her too. She should have asked Bert where Pete was, and tried to find him when she'd had the chance.

Fool.

She returned to her quarters once she was dressed and fingered through her belongings. They hadn't been allowed to bring much, and organics were strictly forbidden. But she knew that all the trees and flowers of Earth had been brought in ships to foreign shores. It was an ancient tradition among humans.

Her pine cones, the ones she'd picked up in the old farmhouse, were still shut tight in the stasis chamber that she'd made for them. She'd thought she was being silly and sentimental when she just couldn't leave them behind, but now she was glad she had them.

Once she was settled, she'd make a roaring fire to release the seed, just the way her dad had taught her to, and then she'd plant a grove of Earth trees near her new home. 🌲

---

SCORPION DREAMS seeks horror stories for October publication.

Paying 1/2 cent/word. For more information, send SASE to:  
 Anna Boudreau, 304-314 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3C 0S3.  
 E-mail: <valdron@escape.ca>.

---





# Hérons

Michael Skeet

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

DANIEL PADDLED SOUTH ON BAY STREET, AUTOMATICALLY angling the canoe to port or starboard as memory and instinct warned him of underwater obstacles: street light poles, drowned trees, the metal projecting from submerged, decayed buildings. From her vantage point in a window of the old Bay store, Ashe nodded acknowledgment and then turned back to her fishing. The old woman had never actually spoken to Daniel, but it was enough for him that she now accepted him as a part of her landscape.

In the distance, the old towers of what had once been Harbourfront thrust up from the lake in a kind of *condopeligo* stretching more than a kilometer out from the shoreline at Queen. To his left, the herons commented harshly as he passed the colony of nests they'd built into the latticework atrium that had survived the collapse of BCE Place.

At the gold-glazed edifice that had once been the South Tower of Royal Bank Plaza he stopped, tying up at the mezzanine under the dangling gold and white rods of a massive, painfully restored kinetic sculpture. No wind moved it today, which was just as well, because Daniel was not in the mood for music.

"How was work?" Cheryl's face appeared in her window, the wild mane of her red hair glittering as the afternoon sun reflected from the water. Bongo, her cat, strutted in front of her, his furry mass obscuring the lower part of her face as he demanded her attention.

"I didn't get much done," Daniel said, lifting his pack from the canoe to sling it over his shoulder. Again he felt the absurd guilt that came every time



someone from the tower community saw him unloading his carefully hidden computer. Today he did not want to feel shame or guilt. "Call the others together, will you?" he said. "I think we've got trouble."

"I RAN INTO THOSE IDIOTS FROM PORT Credit way again today," Daniel said. Sounds of dismay or bemusement issued from the two dozen adults around him; he had hoped for anger. "They caught a group of kids rafting on the east side of Humber Bay; probably squatter kids, judging from the way they were dressed."

"We're squatters," Colleen said. "What's wrong with the way we're dressed?"

She was wearing what looked like a mauve parachute, but Daniel maintained a straight face. "I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. But these guys obviously don't like squatters."

The entire community was here, which was a good sign even if outwardly the others still didn't show any understanding of the danger they all faced. The meeting room had once been the boardroom of the bank's head office, but there was little left of its one-time formality. The furniture was a wild mix, each piece chosen to meet the needs of its individual user. Scavenged and rebuilt devices hummed as they monitored the status of every electrical or mechanical contrivance the community had put into the tower to make it liveable. The anarchic quality of the room reflected perfectly the character of the community it represented, which was, Daniel decided,

both its beauty and its flaw.

"They charged the kids on their jetboards," he said, "and basically terrorized them into the water. They'd actually started breaking up the raft when I interrupted them. Then they came after me."

"Which is why you didn't get any work done."

He turned to Cheryl. "I told them I didn't want any trouble, but I guess trouble was exactly what they wanted. They chased me most of the way back here. I don't think I was in any danger, really, but I had to weave in and out of the old expressway pillars where I knew their jetboards couldn't follow."

His audience announced their approval, and Daniel was pleased; he was proud of his canoeing skill. But this still wasn't the response he wanted. "Look," he said. "They know where we live, now. We've seen what they do to anyone they think is weak. I think we should be discussing ways of dealing with them the next time we meet."

"Why should we consider them a threat?" Doug settled his soft bulk back into his chair. "Perhaps they're working for the people along the Humber."

"I saw two new houses going up on the river bank when I was fishing there yesterday," added Betty, Doug's wife. "Homeowners sure won't want squatters near their houses."

"I don't think these jerks are working for anybody," Daniel said. "I think they're just adolescents with too much time and too many expensive toys. I think that as long as they



perceive us as being helpless like the other squatters, we're going to be risking trouble. I think somebody could be hurt if they catch one of us on the lake alone."

"I think you think too much," someone said quietly, and the others laughed. Daniel sat down. There was no point in pushing this if no one wanted to listen.

THE PROBLEM WAS, THEY'D HAD IT EASY for too long. In the ten years since the community had first begun to come together, they hadn't even been noticed, much less bothered, by the rest of the world.

The long trend toward urbanization had ended in the early years of the new millennium. There was no clarion-call to leave the cities, not at first—though Daniel had come across writings by people such as Freeman Dyson predicting an exodus even before the end of the old millennium. At first it had just been individuals fed up with gridlock, crime, and stress. When technology allowed houses to generate their own power and process their own sewage, the exodus had accelerated. As communications technology made working life as decentralized as most peoples' personal lives already were, the movement to the country accelerated from a steady stream to a flood. If land was cheaper outside the cities, and the wired world made work come to you, why live in a city?

Especially when the seas began to rise as the ice-caps melted. Many coastal cities had had to be completely abandoned. Toronto's turn

came in 2031, when a sudden awakening in the Earth's crust around the fold of the Appalachian Mountains caused the entire Ontario basin to shift. Lake Ontario's north shore sank by nearly five meters, and nature's flooding of the city's core completed the exodus that technology had begun. The only people living in what had been Toronto were the occasional homeowner who had reclaimed space and built a modern castle within the old boundaries, and the squatters.

Technically, this community's members were squatters, since they had no right other than possession to the golden tower in which they made their home. But until now, nobody had bothered them in their choice, and they had spent ten years building a comfortable existence in the midst of the strange Venice created by what buildings had survived the quake of '31, and the water's corrosion in the seventy years since then.

Ironically, it was nature that had brought Daniel to the tower a couple of months ago. He had been canoeing near the Scarborough Bluffs when he had spotted a blue heron flying westward, its neck folded in so that it resembled nothing more than a head and tail attached to two giant, down-curving wings. He had followed its purposeful flight to the nesting colony in the shattered atrium, only to discover the human colony next door.

Not until meeting people like Doug and Betty—and Cheryl—had Daniel realized how much more life could offer than holoconferencing.





He and Cheryl had gotten along particularly well. The idea that simply touching another human being could be so much fun had never occurred to him until meeting her. It had taken him mere minutes to decide to take on the community's offer of a "temporary" apartment in the tower's lower levels.

Daniel was still painfully conscious of how difficult it was to build a community when all of the ingrained tendencies of his and the previous two generations had been to solitude. He knew little about how most of his neighbors earned their living, and the patched-together look of the building's electronic equipment made him so sensitive about his own relatively new computer that he could not bring himself to work in the building. Each day he canoed away to a place where he could safely be alone. He still found it a nerve-racking experience to come down to the tower's lower levels after breakfast and discover another person sipping coffee on the dock they'd built into the base of the old atrium, or to hear voices echoing up or down from other floors as he and Cheryl lay in the aftermath of making love. Though they spent a lot of time together, he and Cheryl maintained separate apartments, and Daniel wasn't entirely sure whose decision that had been.

But the sheer pleasure of day-to-day contact with other people was gradually eroding his discomfort, and Daniel had more than once wondered why people had ever left the cities. Having found the consonance of community, he did not feel

inclined to let anyone's unthinking stupidity destroy it.

HE THOUGHT THAT THEY MIGHT BE moved to action when Garry's canoe was destroyed during the night, torn from its mooring and smashed into fragments. But Garry shrugged at the loss. "It's only a canoe," he said. "I can get another without any trouble."

"Isn't that beside the point?" Daniel nudged the wreckage with his foot. "If we do nothing, aren't we telling them that they can keep on attacking anyone they consider weaker? Is that how we want them to think of us?"

"Ideally," said Colleen, picking something un-canoë-like from the debris, "we don't want them to think about us at all. They're trying to force us into a response, Daniel. If we ignore them, they'll get bored and leave us alone."

"Even if they do that," said Daniel, "it'll only be to pick on someone else, people who maybe can't defend themselves. And here we sit with the means to defend ourselves—or at least the numbers—and we won't do it."

"Don't be too quick to judge, Daniel," Cheryl said. "Us—or them."

"If I catch somebody damaging property or hurting others," said Garry, "I'll do whatever I can to stop them—just as you did, Daniel, and good for you. But I'm not setting myself up to judge anyone. That's a dangerous course to steer. Be very sure of what you do, Daniel."

After the others had left, Daniel



sat awhile on the mezzanine dock, dangling his legs in the cool water and picking at the wreckage of the canoe, trying to convince himself that there was sense in what they said. The rowdies, after all, had come after him on the basis of a superficial judgement; he wanted to think that he was better than they were. But it was impossible to think about this without seeing the terror in the eyes of the children as they'd thrashed in the water, trying to avoid the jetboards and waterbikes aimed at their heads. He wanted to punish the bastards, hurt them so they'd never terrorize anyone again.

Pain in his fingers brought him out of the reverie. Looking down, he saw his right hand clenched on a piece of the ruined canoe's hull. His fingers had deformed the material, actually molding it to their shape. Odd, he thought. The fragment appeared to be nothing more than the usual bonded fibre sandwich. He'd have to ask Garry where the canoe had come from.

DANIEL AWOKE TO LAUGHTER. HIS FIRST thought as he struggled up through the murk of sleep was that Cheryl was entertaining her friends in the next room. But Cheryl was in her apartment tonight. The laughter had a nasty, alcohol-fueled note to it—and it was coming from outside the building. His heart suddenly pounding, Daniel rolled out of bed. Going to the window was redundant—he knew who was laughing—but he went anyway, pulling on a T-shirt and shorts.

A latticework of lamplight

patterned the night, reflecting weirdly off the water; drunken laughter reflected off the golden glass of the towers. Below, a dozen or more jetboards and waterbikes clustered, not around the towers but around the framework of the old BCE Place atrium. Now Daniel could hear another sound, below the staccato falsetto of laughter: the hoarse, distressed croak of the herons. Lamplight flashed off razor-edged metal—a bolt in a crossbow.

"No," he said. "Oh, no." A drunken cheer pierced the night.

Cursing, Daniel grabbed the biggest knife he could find in the kitchen. Stepping into his sneakers, he shuffled toward the door, working his feet into them as he moved.

"What's going on?" Garry, his neighbor, stood at the far end of the hall, rubbing his eyes.

"Wake the others," Daniel said. He opened the door to the stairwell. "Tell them those bastards are killing the herons."

FIGHTING TO CONTROL HIS BREATHING, Daniel eased his canoe west along Wellington channel. The blade of the knife winked at him, conspiratorially, from its resting place in the bottom of the hull. *I'll probably cut my own hand off*, he thought, picking up the paddle. Still, it was better than doing nothing. He turned north when he'd put a reef of ruins between the invaders and himself. Outnumbered, his only hope lay in surprise, in coming at them from an unexpected direction. *Where are the others?* he wondered. *Or are they just going to come up with fresh*





*excuses for non-action?*

He paddled south on Bay Street, dipping his paddle as deliberately—and silently—as possible, and keeping to the shadows cast by the remnants of long-collapsed walls. The closer he got to the invaders, though, the less need there was for stealth. Their craft floated in a rough arc whose curve encompassed most of the width of the Bay Street channel between the heron colony and the twin towers. Beams of lamplight illuminated empty nests, or splashed across the darkened windows of the towers, and the invaders laughed the shrill laugh of hyenas drunk on fresh blood. *They wouldn't hear me*, Daniel thought, *if I had a brass band in this canoe.*

As he approached the revellers, Daniel was distracted for a moment by the sight of something floating, pale and lifeless, in the dark water ahead of him. The once-impressive wings now rested, limp, water ruffling the feathers in a pathetic mockery of wind. A dark stain covered the narrow body.

Daniel fought against the bile rising in his throat. The bitter taste in his mouth amplified his anger, though, and after a moment's struggle, he let the anger free. Adrenaline surged through him until hate was all he was.

With short choppy strokes, he brought his canoe across the stern of the closest waterbike. Resting the paddle on his lap, he picked up the knife. A bundle of tubes bulged out like varicose veins from the back of the waterbike's engine housing; Daniel slashed at them until they

parted. A black, viscous liquid stained his knife and hand. Daniel thought of the dead heron, and didn't care.

"Hey!" The waterbike's rider turned in the saddle; the light from his lamp blinded Daniel for a second. When the rider saw what Daniel had done, he slurred a curse—just as Daniel brought the flat of the paddle blade across his face with a wet, satisfying smack. The man overbalanced and fell, flailing drunkenly, into the lake.

Daniel pushed away from the waterbike and toward a jetboard whose rider was pulling a boathook free from its clip-mounting. Daniel thrust the butt end of the paddle into the man's midriff. With a boozy expulsion of air, another of the intruders went into the water.

Shouts and the dazzle of lamplight around him told Daniel it was time to go. Bending into his strokes, he shot away from the intruders in the direction of Queen Street. With luck, the shallower water and greater frequency of obstructions would compensate for the speed advantage the invaders had over him.

Luck wasn't with him, though. Perhaps the intruders had been expecting a response; perhaps they weren't as drunk as he'd thought. In seconds, he could hear the whine of their engines as they sped after him. He dared not look behind him, but his back and neck itched, anticipating a blow.

The canoe rocked briefly as a waterbike sped past him to port. Its rider turned to shout something—



just as, with a hollow thump, it tore out its bottom on a submerged light standard. The rider catapulted, arms and legs flailing, into the water.

There was no time to enjoy the sight, though. A second bike appeared to starboard, close enough that Daniel could see the wild hatred on the rider's face. The kid couldn't have been more than eighteen. "I'm going to rip your goddamn face off!" he shouted. Then he slewed the waterbike sideways and into Daniel's canoe.

At the last second, Daniel dug in his paddle and tried to bring his bow sharply around to avoid the waterbike. He wasn't quite fast enough. With a ghastly tearing sound the front half of the canoe disintegrated as the waterbike smashed through it. Daniel tried to hang onto the gunwales, but the shock of the impact threw him over the side. Something gave in his wrist as his left hand tore free.

For a brief moment, Daniel caught a glimpse of the knife, its blade glittering insanely in the lamplight, as it flipped through the air. He did not see it land; he hit the water before it did.

Under water, the engines of the invaders' craft sounded like a thousand tympanies beating against the side of his head. Daniel clawed his way back to the surface, ignoring the pain in his wrist. He could move the hand; whatever had happened, at least he hadn't broken bones. Not that it seemed to matter much: when he broke the surface, it was to see the waterbike that had destroyed his canoe floating directly in front of him.

Before he could take a breath and duck under, Daniel was caught in the painful glare of lamplight. He decided not to dive; better to conserve his breath and energy until he knew what the kid on the bike was going to do.

"It's payback time!" the kid shouted.

*So much for him ignoring me because I'm helpless,* Daniel thought.

"That's enough!" Cheryl's voice cut through the damp night air like a frozen knife. Awkwardly, Daniel turned himself to find her. He felt a small surge of pride when he saw a dozen canoes coming toward him along the King Street channel, each canoe bearing two of the tower's inhabitants. They had listened to him after all.

"Better get out of here, bitch," the kid shouted over the rumble of his waterbike. "Or I'll do to you what I'm going to do to him."

He gunned his engine. Cheryl may have said something, but Daniel couldn't hear it over the sound of the waterbike. He turned himself around again, in time to see the kid settle back into his saddle. Other waterbikes and jetboards were arriving, and Daniel was suddenly concerned for his friends. He began what he hoped was an unobtrusive backstroke in Cheryl's direction, his rage now completely submerged by an apprehension that was rapidly turning into fear.

With a wild yell, the kid on the waterbike gunned his engine and the shark-nosed shape leaped forward. At the same instant, Daniel saw a small white ball sail over his head





from behind him, arcing down with uncanny accuracy to the charging waterbike.

Soundlessly, the white ball burst into a spherical cloud that for a second completely enveloped the waterbike. When the bike emerged from the cloud, its engine was whining impotently and its rider was coughing and wiping his eyes. A moment later, the waterbike's engine stopped completely. As the bike suddenly lost momentum, its rider lost his balance and went head-first over the handlebars into the water.

"Get in!" a voice shouted. The voice, Daniel realized, was Cheryl's, and it was coming from right beside him.

"Get in? Without tipping you?" He shook his head. "Don't worry about me. I can swim back to the tower."

"It's too dark and too nasty to worry about being noble," Cheryl said. "Just get in." And suddenly the canoe reached out to him.

"What the hell?" he sputtered, swallowing water in his surprise. The gunwale of Cheryl's canoe pouted outward and down as something extended under him from the lower hull, nudging him toward the canoe.

"Come on," Cheryl said. "We're in a hurry."

Daniel grabbed at the canoe. Its hull was soft, yielding—just as the fragment of Garry's canoe had been. He pulled himself up, and whatever had emerged from the bottom of the canoe's hull gave him a boost. Cheryl didn't even have to lean outward to counter his weight; somehow the canoe was keeping itself

balanced. As he tumbled in, the canoe's hull returned to its former shape. "How did you do that?" he asked Cheryl.

"Later," she said. "Put these on." She handed him a pair of sunglasses.

He considered asking her what was the point of sunglasses in the middle of the night, but realized that there wasn't much point to asking such a question to someone whose canoe had just morphed itself to help him get on board. The glasses made the night as bright as noon—or at least as bright as noon would look on a blue-tinted monochrome TV. Cheryl wasn't wearing sunglasses. "Contacts?" he asked.

"Clever boy," she said, smiling. "Light-amplification lenses. We can fit you with them, if you'd like."

"If I'd like? Good God, Cheryl! Morphing canoes and night-vision sunglasses! What else can you do?"

"Watch," she said. Then she shouted "Now!"

"Now" *what?* he wondered. His answer came in a flurry of strange objects that flew from the canoes toward the waterbikes and jetboards. One canoeist opened a tin of the type that held tennis balls, but from which exploded a mass of what looked like worms. Wriggling and thrashing, the worms flew through the air toward the oncoming craft; as their momentum dropped, they fell into the water. Moments later, as the intruder craft passed through that area, grinding, choking sounds could be heard and several of the bikes and boards pitched their riders into the lake as they abruptly lost speed or control or both.



Other intruders were enveloped in clouds of the particles Cheryl had used on Daniel's pursuer; and two jetboards collided while attempting to outrun spherical fogs that followed their every movement. It seemed to Daniel that his eyes had scarcely adjusted to the peculiar crispness of the light-amplification glasses when the whole confrontation was over. Every one of their opponents' craft had been disabled, and a good many of the riders were in the water or sat immobilized, rasping and hacking as they tried to clear their lungs of the mysterious particles that had clogged air intakes of all kinds. "What the hell was that?" Daniel asked.

"Mostly off-the-shelf nonlethal tech," Cheryl said. "We've modified it a bit, of course. The fog is composed of hooked polymer chains worked into spheres surrounding nanosensors cued to a temperature of about 32° C. At speeds under a hundred clicks it follows humans pretty well. The worms are smart-string. They move toward sound and wrap themselves around anything that turns—turbine blades, for instance."

"And that first stuff?"

Cheryl smiled. "That's something I put together myself. It's a sphere of microfibers held together by an electrical charge from a small battery. It's got a proximity trigger that cuts the circuit at the appropriate moment, blowing the cloud apart and letting the fibres clog whatever happens to be in their way. It's nontoxic as far as I've been able to check, but it makes a hell of a mess of machinery.

I was inspired by Bongo; I can't decide whether to call it a furball or a hairball."

"And you guys did all of this in your spare time."

"We've been living together for nearly ten years, Daniel. Why would you think this was the first time we'd had trouble?"

Daniel held his head in his hands and stared at the bottom of the canoe. "Why didn't you tell me any of this? I've spent the last couple of months hiding my computer and my work from you because I didn't want to embarrass you. I thought I had more than any of you did. Now I feel like a complete idiot."

Cheryl leaned forward. One hand under his chin, she forced Daniel's head up until he was looking into her eyes. "The best communities are the ones that come together by choice," she said. "But bringing in new people is always risky. We wanted to be sure you were going to fit in. Until we knew that, we weren't going to risk showing you anything that might cause us harm if you ended up leaving."

*Or being sent away*, Daniel thought. "We're a pretty insular group, aren't we?" he said. Cheryl nodded, but her expression was of caution rather than approval. "Is that why it took so much to get the rest of you involved in this?"

"You're still letting your emotions run things, Daniel. Think about it: how frequently does somebody abuse or assault somebody else? Every day—and that's just in this part of Ontario. Around the world, something really horrible happens to





someone somewhere every second. If we tried to help everyone, what good would we do?"

"We'd do some good to the people we helped," Daniel said. Around them, the canoes had fanned out and were pulling young men from the water, or taking crippled craft in tow.

"We'd never get any work done, Daniel. Sure, we may be better equipped than most to deal with trouble. But if we tried to help every time we learned of trouble, we'd end up squandering our resources. We're not independently wealthy, Daniel. We work for a living just as you do."

"But you did get involved, when they came after the herons. Are you telling me that you consider herons more important than people?"

"You really have lived alone a long time," Cheryl said. She smiled, though. "A long time ago, we each made a decision to make the community our primary focus. We put ourselves first, of course; we're human, after all. But our community and its members come a very close second. And we conserve our resources and energies to deal with situations where our interests are directly affected."

"In other words," said Daniel, "you would never have gotten involved at all if I hadn't brought those bastards back with me and shown them where we live, where the herons are—"

His voice fell away as, over Cheryl's shoulder, he saw a jetboard emerge, silent, from the artificial fog. Its bow tilted upward briefly as

someone climbed back on board. When the bow dipped back into the water, Daniel saw a dripping figure crouched at the stern. The man reached forward and picked up a crossbow.

*He's been in the water, Daniel thought. The fog wouldn't have been able to track him there.*

It wasn't until he looked into the young man's eyes that it occurred to Daniel why the man had picked up the crossbow. "Look out!" he shouted. The canoe rocked wildly as he lurched to his feet. His only instinct was to save Cheryl; if it meant throwing her into the water he'd do it.

She got to her feet too. *That's not going to help,* he thought. "Get down!" Her voice was shrill in his ear; her hands pressed down on his shoulders. "Get down! You could be—"

She didn't finish the sentence. Daniel heard the whip-crack of the bolt as it was fired; it hit Cheryl with the sound of an axe splitting a log. She stiffened for a moment, her eyes screwed shut. Then the force of the impact drove her forward into Daniel's arms. His injured wrist spasmed. He heard shouts, then a whistling sound; out of the corner of his eye, he saw the archer suddenly transfixed as a blur of thin, animate cords, appearing as if from nowhere, whipped around him. Cursing, the young man fell into the lake.

Daniel wanted to be angry enough to swim over and tear the man to pieces. Instead, he lowered himself and Cheryl back onto their seats. *Please be okay,* he said to



himself. *I won't know what to do if you're dead.* Her mouth was open, her breathing coming in ragged gasps. "Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Of course I can," she said. She shuddered. "Christ, that hurts."

"Do you have a phone? I can call for help." Carefully, Daniel slid a hand over her shoulder and down. It was ghoulish, but something demanded that he know where the bolt had gone in, that he touch it to make what had happened real. *I'm so sorry,* he thought. *This is all my fault.*

His hand slid across the entire expanse of her back without encountering the bolt, or any blood, or even a tear in her shirt. "What the—?"

"Easy," she said, stiffening. "I'm going to have God's own bruise there tomorrow."

Her shirt had somehow absorbed the energy of the bolt's impact without allowing the arrowhead to penetrate. He'd looked at her and seen a plaid lumberjack shirt, and what it had really been was woven body armor. "I thought you were dead," he said. Then, because there was nothing else he could do, he began to laugh.

Cheryl laughed with him, but carefully. "I have to tell you something," she said after a while. "It's important that you know this."

She brushed a hand against his cheek. "You seem to be under the impression that we came out because the herons were being attacked. I never said that. *You* came out because the herons were being attacked. What I said was that we waited until our interests were affected before we acted as a commu-

nity. When you came out here alone, we decided our interests were being affected." She leaned forward, and kissed him.

"The herons will be back, or they won't. That's up to them. We came out here for you."

"For me," he said.

"I told you we were careful about taking on new members. When Garry told us you'd gone out on your own, it was as if we all suddenly made the decision on the spot. You were one of us."

Daniel took off the light-amplification glasses. Suddenly it seemed important that he see Cheryl as she really was, with the moonlight softening her skin and rippling across her face in waves reflected by the lake. She was biting her lip against the pain, but she smiled at him and he knew he'd be giving up the apartment he'd been in. "I still think someone should look at your back," he said. "Can the others take care of this?"

"We'll probably let most of them go," Cheryl said. "Provided they don't mind walking home, or can call for rides. We'll keep the boards and bikes until they promise to stay out of this area in the future."

"The guy who shot you is going to jail."

"Well, we'll turn him over to the police," Cheryl said. "What happens to him after that is his problem."

"And you?"

"I don't need a doctor. Doug has some equipment I can check myself out with. And we can do something for your wrist."

"Why am I not surprised?"





"Hey, we're a resourceful group," she said with a short laugh. "That's what living together can do for a community."

She touched his hand. "Now," she said, "let's go home."

Overhead, Daniel could hear the herons circling uneasily. Would they return to this colony? *Wherever they end up*, he thought, *the heron community will continue with or without*

*my help. Still, I'd like to think I did something for them, no matter how small. Maybe I can make the others see that.*

Gripping the paddle with his one good hand and resting it on his other forearm, Daniel dipped the blade into the lake. He felt Cheryl's canoe alter its bow profile; leaning into the stroke, he paddled south on Bay Street, toward home. ♣

## Writing with Style

A week-long  
workshop in  
speculative  
fiction  
with Candas  
Jane Dorsey.

April 17-23, 1999

Application Deadline: March 5, 1999

PROGRAM DIRECTOR: Rachel Wyatt

OTHER WRITING GENRES INCLUDE:

SHORT FICTION: Edna Alford

MYSTERY: Gail Bowen

MEMOIRS/LIFE WRITING: Shirlee Smith Matheson

POETRY: Christopher Wiseman

REVIEW AND CRITICISM: Max Wyman

For information contact:

Office of the Registrar  
The Banff Centre for the Arts

Box 1020-28, Banff, AB T0L 0C0

arts\_info@banffcentre.ab.ca  
www.banffcentre.ab.ca/Registrar

Phone: 403-762-6180  
or 1-800-565-9989  
Fax: 403-762-6345



The Banff Centre  
for the Arts

# untitled



Sandra Kasturi

You give me nothing but words  
*vermilion* and *verdigris* and *very*  
smooth as pebbles  
shaped by the rough tongue of centuries.  
If you were to place me in your mouth  
would I not become a word then—  
a strange sound echoing across the desert,  
my bones and consonants sanded away  
leaving nothing behind  
but hieroglyphs of wind.







# The Back Shed

Robert Boyczuk

*illustrated by Adam Moran*

SITTING WITH HIS BACK AGAINST THE HEADBOARD OF the bed, he is struck by the way the moonlight slides obliquely through the window and across the back of Naomi's calves and shoulders, framing her. Black lines of shadow cast by the muntins divide her body into twelve unequal planes of light: he considers them, imagining the feel and texture each holds—a sculpted forearm, the plateau of her small shoulder blade, the slight curve of her hip—lingering on each extent until he learns it, knows it better than he knows those regions of his own body. Sheets lie rumpled around her, between them, bunched where she has pushed them away in her sleep; in this half-light, the tiny patterns of chrysanthemums she likes so well are invisible.

She stirs, rolls onto her back. Her body is compact, narrow hips and small jutting breasts with large nipples that cast thin shadows in the moonlight. Her hair is cropped close to the skull and dyed black. She is small and naked and perfect, and he feels his desire stirring.

He wants to reach out and touch her, to run his forefinger between her breasts, around them, imagines his hand a skiff drifting lightly across the surface of her skin. Leaning forward, he extends his arm, breaking into her light, shadow fingers hovering, about to descend—

—then stops, hand suspended, as night is Sundered. A thin trail of fire outside his window, slicing from sky to earth, swallowed by the desert. *A meteorite*, he thinks, the afterimage still burning across his retinas.

Outside, the sand glows silver in the moonlight and beyond a low hill, he



believes he can still make out a soft, inviting radiance where the finger of light has touched.

"RON?" NAOMI'S VOICE IS DISTANT, sleep-filled.



"Mmm," he answers, struggling into his jeans.

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a drive," he says. "I can't sleep."

"Oh." She is awake now, propped on her elbows, watching him with large brown eyes as if she is studying him. "Would you like some company—?"

"No," he says sharply, immediately regretting his tone, softening. "No. Thanks anyway. I need some time alone." He smiles, a lopsided thing, hoping to disguise his annoyance at her intrusion—and the sudden spur of guilt he experiences for refusing her company.

She stares at him a moment, blinks, rolls over, leaving him feeling as if he should make some amends. He is about to tell her he is sorry, tell her about the light he has seen, perhaps invite her along. But her back is a wall whose purpose he cannot fathom. Instead he grabs his shirt from where it lies on a chair, pulls it on, steps quickly through the house and out the front door, the screen door banging against its aluminum frame.

The moon has set and it is dark. He is driving away from the ranch house, towards the spine of mountains where he saw the meteorite strike. In his rearview mirror the house is a lonely, dark shadow. He rented this place from Stott, in whose

galleries he shows his sculptures. A retreat, Stott called it. It is a wooden one-story affair, L-shaped, its windows long and wide, giving onto views of fifty miles of desert stretching to the foothills in the east and rolling dunes that conceal the house from the highway to the west. Isolation. Peace. Perfect lighting for his work. The foot of the L is where he made his studio. Out here, theirs is the only house, theirs the only road, and when night closes in he can almost convince himself they are the last people on Earth.

The desert surface is smooth, occasional rocks looming out of the night in his headlights, but he drives with caution, steering carefully around them. It is cold in the drafty truck, colder than he had expected, and he is sorry he did not bring his jacket with him. He thinks of Naomi lying in bed alone.

Should he have brought Naomi at all, he wonders.

When was the last time he sculpted her?

They have not really spoken since they arrived, only inconsequential civil words of no importance. He knows now he shouldn't have mentioned children again, had forgotten the sting of her silences. Two miscarriages. Not his fault, really. He recognizes the signs, the pattern that plays itself out, a prelude to yet another breakup with her, feels it like a net closing around him. Since arriving, she has been subdued and withdrawn, never entering his studio, showing no interest in his work; perhaps, he thinks, she is trying to please him, to provide him with the

solitude he told her he craved. Yet her manner has the opposite effect, makes him edgy and uncertain, less tolerant than he should be. It is for her he has rented this place, but he cannot bring himself to explain this. Can't she see this? She understands his work has faltered, his ideas dried up, and probably believes they have come for that reason. But he did it for her. Every day he sits before his sculpting table, but the pieces he executes feel lumpy and awkward under his leaden fingers, stale and unexciting. Sculptures of Naomi. One time they were beautiful, Naomi emerging like a wild and splendid creature from the clay, from the earth and water he kneaded patiently between his fingers. Back then, he believed he felt the way God must have felt, sculpting the first people.

Now, most he won't even cast.

The desert slides beneath him, a cold dry plain of hard-packed earth and gravel. The truck skids slightly as he brings it to a stop. In the west, a few miles distant, an orange nimbus is visible above a dark mound. He puts the truck back in gear.

STANDING ON THE LIP OF THE CRATER, he is sweating from the heat of the broken thing that lies almost completely buried, watching its color slowly leeching away into the night as if it were dying. His clothes are dirty and his hands are scratched in half a dozen places from his scramble up the crater's slope. He squats, uncertain what to do, staring at the thing buried in the sand, at its smooth machined edges. It is a large cylinder, at least twenty meters in

length, though it is hard to tell because its nose is buried. His heart beats quickly.

Then he remembers the military range a hundred and twenty miles to the southeast. *A missile*, he thinks, *just a missile*, and his heart settles back into its regular rhythm.

He chastises himself for letting his imagination get the better of him, then wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. He half slides, half walks down the loose debris of the slope, stumbling near the bottom, losing his balance, falling to one knee. Steadying himself against the incline he rises and curses, shaking the sand from his jeans, and swings around to where he's left his truck.

He takes one step, then stops.

In the headlights a figure sits cross-legged.

HIS THROAT CONSTRICTS IN HORROR.

*It is a dream*, he thinks, still not believing what has just happened. His clothes lie in a pile next to him, and he stands naked and shivering in the desert night. He struggles to get his leg into his jeans. *Soon, I will wake up*. He pulls on his shirt and boots.

From the back of the truck he retrieves an old blanket, and in this he wraps—

What?

*Her*, he thinks, remembering the hard, cold ground on his back, the softness of her above. Of warm, inhumanly smooth skin against his. Of the shape of thighs and breasts and belly, moving and rocking in time with his motion, knees digging into





his sides so hard he had to gasp for breath. The emptiness of impossibly large eyes, black eyes without irises, like the dark between stars.

Or has he only imagined these things? She is completely concealed in the blanket now. He lifts her, and in his arms she is light, barely there at all. Then she stirs and his heart seems to falter. Quickly he opens the tailgate and places her on the floor next to the spare. He closes the gate, climbs into the driver's seat and starts the engine.

The night speeds towards him as he grips the wheel, the truck flying over ruts and past jagged tongues of rock, his senses still shocked into numbness by that ... that moment, mind agog at what he has done, at what *it* has made him do. *It made me*, he tells himself. *I was helpless*. But he is not sure he believes this, and the notion brings him little comfort. *Yes, a dream*. And he seizes on this thought as a drowning man would a piece of flotsam, focusing on it until he can almost believe that none of it has happened, that the bundle wrapped in blankets in the back of his truck will not be there when he gets home.

AT THE FAR END OF THE HOUSE, attached to the foot of the L, is a small windowless shed built of gray-ing wood. Its door is secured with an old padlock for which he could find no key; but in his studio, behind an armoire, he discovered a low plywood door with a bolt that opened into the shed. He uses the shed as his storeroom, stacking supplies on warped, rickety shelves: bags of

terra-cotta, stoneware and plastelene clays; tins of ferro cement, vinyl-concrete and epoxies; sacks of grog, vermiculite and fiberglass strands; rolls of soft aluminum wire and varied-width steel pipes.

Now he cleans away a space, struggling with unwieldy sacks and boxes, grunting as he drags them to the side, heaves others onto shelves that creak and complain about the weight. He places an old cot and sleeping bag in the tiny room, moving quietly, afraid of any sound that might intrude upon Naomi's sleep. He feels as if he's slightly drunk, observing his movements from a distance, detached and unafraid, his heart thumping hollowly in his chest, blood singing in his ears—and something else, something unexpected.

He has an erection.

This thing—*she*, he now knows—sits before him, staring at him with open eyes. He is staggered by a wash of desire, barely able to contain his excitement as he stands over her, unable to recall ever feeling this compelling, this desperate, an urge.

He is intoxicated, and somewhere a small thought troubles him: Why? Why is he doing this? But the puzzlement lingers only momentarily before it, too, flees to a remote corner of his consciousness, chased there by wave after wave of longing that threaten to drown him.

Stepping into the shed, he pulls the door shut after him.

SOMETIME LATER HE CLOSES AND BOLTS the door to the shed.

*My God*, he thinks, *what am I*

doing?

His hands tremble, and he can taste his bile rising. He cannot tell Naomi. Not now. Perhaps later. He wants to, and thinks he might, but wonders what he could tell her, what he could possibly say?

He burns with shame at this thought, as if it were a hackneyed, commonplace betrayal. But he has betrayed her with ... with what? *No*, he thinks, *I had no choice. It is not the same. No different*, he reasons, *than if I had been drugged or coerced.*

He steps into the shower, his body wrapped in a pungent, aromatic scent, like the odor of warm cinnamon. He shivers underneath the spray of the scalding water, thinking of that small form that lies in the back room, recalling suddenly her taste that reminds him of peach, the sensation of his skin pressed against hers, horrified as his body begins once more to respond...

AT BREAKFAST HE STARES AT THE TOAST and grapefruit Naomi sets before him, averting his eyes. He's said nothing to her yet.

"Did you have a good drive?"

He feels his face flush, wonders if she can see his guilt, his fear. "Yeah, fine."

"I heard you working last night when you got in. Maybe the drive did you some good."

His heart bangs fearfully against his ribcage. *What did she hear?* he wonders. *Does she know?* Looking away, he bites into a cold slice of toast, chewing it mechanically. He wants to tell her, to show her the

thing he has in the back shed. But he is afraid. Of what? Of discovery? Of losing *it*?

"I was thinking that maybe we could go away this weekend," she says, leaning against the counter, holding the other grapefruit half in her left hand, paring knife in her right. "Book a room in town and see a play or something."

*No*, he thinks. *Not now. Not yet.* "I'd rather not. I just started a new piece, and it's going pretty well. I really don't want to leave it right now." He studies her expression, but it's blank. "You know the trouble I've been having..."

She turns back to the sink, laying the grapefruit on the counter, and he can see the muscles beneath her T-shirt bunched. She begins to cut the sections.

"A couple of weeks from now. Okay?"

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. "Whatever." Her voice is flat, toneless.

He feels as if something has just been closed off from him. A door shut. *Tell her*, he thinks. *She doesn't know. Tell her before she finds out.* But instead he drops the crust on his plate, pushes back his chair, its legs scraping across the linoleum. "Back to work," he says, and turns towards his studio.

TWO DAYS HAVE PASSED AND STILL HE has not told Naomi. He spends most of his waking hours in his studio, *working*, he tells Naomi, fearing that she sees through him and his lie. But, he convinces himself, it is not really such a lie; for, to his surprise, he is





working.

He sculpts *her*, that small figure concealed in the back shed, though curiously he cannot seem to picture her clearly in his mind, finding that she is a shadow, a dream, indistinct and nebulous when he is not in her presence. But his fingers know her, know the curves and hollows of her body, all the soft lines and angles of her form, know the sensual movement of muscle beneath impossibly smooth skin (surprising himself at the remembered touch, her skin as cool and smooth as marble), know it far better than his eye ever could, more accurately than his mind could ever imagine. Something has suddenly given way inside him, and each time he kneads and wedges the moist clay on the welding table, he can feel in the formless lump of material her incipient figure, the idea of her impatient to emerge. And when he sculpts, his hands move quickly and with assurance, rolling, pinching and moulding as he has never before, the figures almost fashioning themselves without his will, as if the act of surrender is all that is required of him, the ability to lose himself utterly in her...

But when he stops, when he no longer has the coolness of wet clay between his fingers, his hands begin to shake, and his mind is filled with nothing but the *fact* of her, that thing hidden behind the plywood door, the force of it in his studio, feeling its insistent pull like a tug on his sleeve. A great self-loathing overwhelms him then, making him nauseous, his chest growing heavy, his legs suddenly trembling, and he must leave

his studio, if only momentarily, before he collapses beneath the weight of what he has done.

During these times, he knows Naomi watches him wander through the rest of the house in her mute, dispassionate way, never saying a word to him, responding briefly only when she is spoken to, a sharp silence having opened between them like a wound. He feels the touch of her eyes, judging and condemning him, though when he tries to catch her at it, he meets nothing but her disinterested gaze. He hates this, hating himself and Naomi too, for making him feel humiliation and remorse, for forcing him into pretending nothing is wrong, one moment wishing for her to leave, the next frightened she might, above all fearing the edge of her anger, of what she will do when she finds out.

He works and so avoids that moment, leaving the studio only when he feels dizzy with hunger or fatigued beyond endurance—and for those brief times when he loses all sense of himself in that small, dark shed.

HE REMEMBERS AN OLD BIOLOGY TEXT he sometimes uses for its pictures of animals. In it he finds the section for which he's been looking. With his finger he traces the tricolored diagram, a double helix connected by strands, nucleotide bases in pairs, twisted in a familiar pattern: DNA. A genetic blueprint. One that defines physical characteristics, intelligence, sexuality, inherited disorders—and behavior? Does it dictate that as well, he wonders. Can he act in no

other way? The boundaries, the book says, are still uncertain, still unclear. Nature and nurture, wrapped up in this perplexing strand.

*SHE DOES NOT EAT NOR, AS FAR AS HE can tell, sleep.*

Three days now, yet she seems no worse, displays no signs of hunger or fatigue, is always there, waiting for him to open that door. He has proffered her food, but when he returns, the plate is always untouched. It is as if she draws all the sustenance she needs from him, from his fires, from those moments in which he immerses himself completely in her. This idea scares him, makes him wonder if she is somehow sucking him dry. He imagines himself as a husk, an empty skin like those the snakes leave scattered in their yard. It is unrestrained desire, addictive, without diffidence or reserve, and now he understands why he must hide her, why he has no choice.

She is silent, makes no attempt at communication—at least none he remembers. He has taken to calling her his muse.

*IT IS NIGHT, AND HE HAS LEFT THE STUDIO* to make himself something to eat, exhausted after working until his back ached and his arms felt as if they were wrapped in a thick layer of the dark wet clay. He sits on the couch chewing listlessly on a sandwich, thinking of Naomi, who is asleep in their bed. His head is heavy and difficult to support, nodding now, drifting in and out of sleep...

...then waking, red-eyed sun

burning through the window, a throbbing in his skull as if he were hung over. He is stiff from where he has slept, half-eaten sandwich in his lap, stomach growling loudly in the silence of the morning. It is Sunday, he realizes. The weekend has passed and Naomi has said nothing more about going away. *Breakfast, he thinks. I'll surprise her. I'll make breakfast for the both of us.* Silently he rises, moves towards their room, imagining her caught in the tangle of sheets.

But she is not there, and for a moment he is confused. Then he turns, stares at his studio, at the door he always carefully shuts, that now hangs open. He thinks of that tiny plywood door, of Naomi.

He rushes across the room into the studio, nearly colliding with Naomi as he enters. She backs up a step. Her face is ashen, an expression of shock and revulsion etched on her features, and he looks to the back of his studio, but can see the bolt is still in place, the door shut, no sign that anyone has been in the shed, but knows this means nothing. He turns to her, and for a moment they regard one another, his face coloring, embarrassed at first, then anger rising, uncertain yet how to react, while she stands there, eyes locked on his. "You bastard," she says, twisting the words between her lips as if they poison her tongue. She pushes past him and out of the studio, while he stands there, angry and confused and fearful.

The front door slams and he can hear the truck engine roar to life,





realizing he has moved across the room, now stands with his back to the plywood door, heart hammering in his chest, relief mingling with anger, grateful that the storm was not as severe as he expected.



*She must know, he thinks. Why else would she have left?*

On the tables around the room, the small gray faces of his work regard him silently.

And then he understands.

For the first time he sees his work as if through Naomi's eyes: figures with grotesquely twisted limbs, sagging breasts and engorged genitalia, distended eyes, clawed feet and hands, ravenous devouring mouths, obscene caricatures of her, of Naomi, of the two of them together, coupling like wild beasts in the night.

FOR A TIME HE SITS ALONE IN THE GLOOM of the empty house, on their bed, his clothes caked and stiff with clay, waiting. He does not really believe Naomi will return, but allows himself this hope, convincing himself that he will tell her everything if only she comes back.

But she does not.

It is too late now, the sun finally gone, hours since she departed. He knows her moods, knows that if she has not returned by now she will not be coming back at all.

Briefly, he thinks about his studio, about his work, about that cramped, dark shed. Despite his exhaustion, his body begins to move in expectation, anticipation, a body no longer his own. A loathing fills him, burning his insides

like acid; he pushes away from their bed and stumbles out the door to get away, to put as much distance as possible between himself and the shed. He staggers, stiff-legged, into the night, over the low rolling dunes to the west, away from the mountains, away from the house, pushing one leg before the other until in the darkness he trips on an outcrop of stone and falls, crying in agony as he tears the skin on palms and cheek against earth that feels like sandpaper.

He lies there, unmoving, eyes shut tightly against the pain, mind numb and blank, whimpering in the cool air. Images well up, colliding with one another, whirling slowly round the edge of his understanding, a disorienting jumble of almost-seen faces and background lights, a wobbling top about to fall over.

He rolls over onto his back, crossing arms over chest, and one image swims to the surface, crowding out everything else, that blazing line of fire; it is so real he believes he is seeing it happen again, watching it span earth and sky, listening to the muffled impact as it burrows deeply into desert sand...

But something is wrong. He sits up and rubs his eyes, thinking that he is not remembering quite right, realizing all at once that he heard no sound that first time, none at all. But he heard it just now, clearly, as if it had struck close by. He pushes himself to his feet and shakes his head to clear it, his mind still fogged, his thoughts confused, looking back in the direction he

has just come, towards the house, back to where a yellow nimbus glows in the night.

*The house, he thinks.*

He is afraid, recalling that other bloom of light, the one he had seen rising from the crater. His stomach churns with a nauseating fear, and he breaks into a run, scrambling up and down the slopes of dirt and rock and sand in his path, thinking, *No, it can't be.* A wild, uncontrollable fear pierces his chest like a needle. He is terrified that *they* have returned—that they will take her back.

He runs heedlessly, stumbling and almost falling, driven by fear and rage, the house still out of sight, pausing at the summit of each rise to see if he can make out what is happening, crying with frustration when he can't.

And when he crests the last hill, he stops.

Down the road he sees the familiar tail lights of a truck speeding off into the night. Before him, his house burns, throwing a bright dome up to the sky, flames licking the air. As he watches, the big picture window seems to waver momentarily, as if its surface is made of water, then abruptly explodes outwards with a rush of flame. The roof sags, and its splintering beams groan like a dying beast, giving way, caving in, the lone wall of his studio now left. For a moment it hangs there, as if supported by an invisible hand. Then it collapses atop the wooden shed, lifting a great flurry of sparks to the sky with a roar, almost masking an

unearthly howl that makes his bones crack, and echoes in the empty night.

THE INVASION HAS BEGUN.

He has seen the signs everywhere. In cities large and small. In faces like his. Haunted faces that look away when he tries to catch their eyes. Faces above coveralls and suits and institutional whites. He has studied them, the endlessly replicating patterns of their movements as they follow their own programs while living in the illusion of choice, clocks winding down. The paradigm betrays itself, its purpose, again and again. Stimulus, response. Testing of a carefully programmed pattern, an analysis to make sure the genetic transcription is still workable, universal, the end product governed according to its specifications.

He has returned to the desert.

He squats on the hard, unforgiving earth. Behind, the truck's engine cools, parts drawing tighter, making small sounds of complaint. He rises, stares at the cruciform shapes of cacti and humps of distant hills that break and roll towards the mountains. He has driven most of the night, crossing and recrossing the terrain in ever-wider patterns, but the crater has disappeared.

The papers have reported an unusually high number of meteorites this summer.

He closes his eyes and imagines Naomi. He envisions her naked and in their bed. In silvered moonlight she is exquisite, perfect, white





squares of flesh and sharp shadows. His chest constricts abruptly, and for a moment, breathing is impossible ... he feels dizzy ... overcome ... anticipates the rush of blood and excitement, the mounting tension of his hunger for her, for Naomi, a desperate need to possess her.

But he is numb. Knows he has been programmed to be numb.

He releases his breath.

There is nothing.

No matter how much he thirsts for her, for their lost desire, he regards her serenely, abstractly, as if he were

anaesthetized, without passion, as if she were a painting or a sculpture, no longer flesh and blood, but as empty as a clod of earth, an inanimate lump of clay.

Naomi has fled.

He stares at the sky, and thinks of that small wooden shed; his heart beats faster, and his desire rises like a swollen river overflowing its banks, threatening to obliterate him. He remembers, as if *she* lay before him now, and he wants to sob.

Overhead, the sky is slit open, and a finger of light beckons. 🍁

## **Support ON SPEC and Canadian SF!**

**FRIENDS (\$30-99 donation) receive:  
a free 1-year subscription.**

**SUPPORTERS (\$100-499) receive:  
an ON SPEC T-shirt and a 1-year subscription.**

**PATRONS (\$500-1,999) receive:  
an ON SPEC T-shirt and a 5-year subscription.**

**SPONSORS (\$2,000 or more) receive:  
special thanks from ON SPEC, T-shirt,  
and a 10-year subscription.**

Please make checks payable to ON SPEC:  
ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

**Thank you!**

# Sea Wrack

Sandra Kasturi

I once found you lying  
on a seldom-walked pebbly  
shore  
where the mercurial sea had  
flung you,  
skin pearly-pale as a cavedeep  
salamander,  
bits of shell  
entangled in your net of hair.

I remember I stood quite near  
you  
just looking  
for many an hour  
while the coy tide advanced and  
retreated,  
until I had to reach down  
and brush your still cheek  
with one finger,  
only to have your eyes fly open,  
your eyes,  
green as the bright sun through  
deep water,  
and as indifferent.

You lay there,  
watching me,  
merely waiting for the sea to  
take you back;  
I stood and walked away,  
and while I never turned to look  
I am sure your eyes snapped  
shut  
before I was out of your sight.

Later  
I did search for you  
on what may have been  
that same stretch of pebbly  
shore,  
though I never did find anything  
but some dried kelp  
a fragment of chalky shell  
and three milk-white scales.





LTFÄHNSTALK © 99

# Learning from the Wings

Iain Deans

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

**P**AULO WAKES UP TO DISCOVER THAT HE IS HOVERING a few feet above his bed. His arms hang straight down, fingernails tracing small circles on the sheets below him. Inhaling sharply, he begins to kick his feet and wave his arms. He looks much like a fish caught in an invisible net. Surprise gives way to panic and Paulo screams. He crashes down onto the mattress with a dull thud. The breath shoots out of him, and his pulse pounds in his temples. Paulo quickly rolls off the bed and gasps for breath as he crawls across the bedroom floor. His mouth is dry and he is shaking. Curling up into a ball, he closes his eyes. He prays that when he opens them again, he will be awake.

When Paulo slowly opens his eyes, he finds himself rising above the floor. Another scream, and with a slap, he is back on the floor. Very carefully, Paulo gets to his feet. He holds his eyes wide open in an expression of permanent surprise as he stumbles out of his room.

Even though it is early morning and the blazing sun has just begun to rise, it is already hot in his apartment. The tiles beneath his feet are warm and damp, and the air in the hallway feels sluggish and heavy. Paulo reminds himself to have the ceiling fan fixed, but then imagines himself drifting up into it. He decides that he will learn to tolerate the heat.

Paulo staggers into the bathroom, and showers with his eyes wide open. The shampoo stings but is better than flying. Anything is better than flying.

He is too nervous to eat breakfast, and dresses quickly for work. On the



street and in the plazas, his wide-open gaze attracts a great deal of attention. Whenever he can, Paulo ducks into the shade of a palm tree or into a damp alley to get away from the rising sun, which burns his eyes. When Paulo reaches the small pension office that he works in, he runs to his cubicle, hoping that no one will notice his red eyes and think that he is hung over.

Paulo tries to distract himself by diving into his work, moving the numbers from column to column. He does not find his work boring. Its repetitive nature is soothing. He likes to tell his friends that it is meditative, that it calms him, though there is little in Paulo's life that is stressful. His apartment is quiet and cheap, and his landlord is a fair man. He is rarely noticed at the office, but has still made steady progress, being promoted here and there over the years. He even has a lover, Louise, who wishes that they would get married, although Paulo does not want to imagine the changes that this would bring to his life. But still. It is something to think about. Paulo concentrates harder on his papers, and the numbers begin to relax him. He begins to forget his strange morning and becomes so relaxed that for the first time in his life, Paulo begins to daydream at work.

Paulo remembers something from when he was a boy. He and his father once spotted a condor hovering above a winding mountain road. Paulo remembers its great wide wings and the way it drifted along, rising and falling almost imperceptibly, as if it never had to land. His

father had stopped the car so they could watch the magnificent bird, and at one point the condor's gigantic shadow passed over them blotting out the sun. Paulo laughed and pointed to the amazing creature. His father said they should be proud to have seen such a splendid animal; something so magical rarely exists long when it lives this close to men. Paulo's father had been right; Paulo never saw another condor again.

He never gave that memory a second thought until now. Now it seems important. Paulo daydreams about the condor for the rest of the morning. Papers pile up before him, but Paulo ignores them and the people who deliver them. He simply grunts and resumes dreaming about the condor. In truth, they are ugly birds, relatives of vultures. Yet, Paulo continues to picture its incredible wingspan. A wingspan wide enough to blot out the sun. A wingspan that would catch the wind and propel you anywhere.

Anywhere.

Paulo realizes that the trip into the mountains when he was a boy was the last trip he ever made. He has not even visited his brother up north. He never had the money, or the urge. But if man could fly ... well, that would be something entirely different. A man could go anywhere. A man who could fly would be *obligated* to go somewhere. Paulo's stomach churns, and he begins to feel restless and sweaty. A man who can fly has *obligations*. This idea stresses Paulo even more. He focuses on his work and tries to stop daydreaming, but for some reason



he can't. Every time he looks down at the figures on the paper, they turn into little villages dotting a great white plateau deep in the mountains. And to his surprise, it makes him feel good.

The obligation to fly is not the same as other obligations.

Just before lunch, Paulo decides to very slowly close his eyes. He holds them closed. They burn, and then cool relief washes over them. Suddenly, he feels a sharp pain on the top of his head. Paulo opens his eyes and discovers that he has floated up to the ceiling and smacked his head against the dull concrete. This time Paulo does not panic. He takes a deep breath and pushes himself down from the ceiling. Slowly, he drifts down to the floor of his office. He looks over the edge of his cubicle and then out the doorway. No one has noticed his little stunt. Paulo closes his eyes again, and concentrates. There is a slight ringing in his ears and his guts feel as if they are being tugged upward by a big hook. A rush overtakes his body, like some superior human being has poured fresh water into his blood. It is the greatest feeling of pleasure Paulo has ever known, and it nearly overwhelms him. Before he opens his eyes, Paulo wills himself to be perfectly horizontal. He does not open his eyes until he feels the ceiling against his back. When his body brushes up against the concrete, he stops concentrating and looks around. With a smile, Paulo finds himself floating parallel to his desk. It takes all his willpower to keep from cheering, something he

did not expect to feel. He realizes that, like the rest of his life, this new power can be controlled. Paulo begins concentrating on drifting, and finds that he can make himself go forward and backward by thinking about it. If he rolls slightly to the left or right, he floats in that direction.

Paulo examines the office from above. Everyone is staring down at reports, or at typewriters. No one glances up at the man floating along the ceiling. As Paulo floats over their heads, dipping down every once in a while to dodge a light fixture, he notices that his coworkers rarely look up at anything except the clock. When they talk to each other, they examine each other's neckties instead of the other person's eyes. They look down at the floor when they walk from cubicle to cubicle, and they stare at the walls of their cubicles when they think. Even the people with a rare window behind them will stare at the door rather than out the window. Paulo has never noticed this before and it bothers him, but he is not sure whether it bothers him because they are doing these things, or because he has never noticed before.

After circling the office a few more times, he starts to return to his own cubicle. He pauses over the chief's desk to examine the dandruff sprinkled throughout the chief's thinning black hair. Paulo chuckles despite himself, and the chief looks all over the office for the source of the laughter, but never looks up. Embarrassed, Paulo rushes back to his own cubicle.

Back at his desk, Paulo tries to get





back to work, but finds that he still cannot concentrate. He keeps thinking of the great condor soaring above the roads, tied down to nothing. He imagines himself floating skyward, the hot sun against his back until his shadow is nothing but a pinprick on the mountains below. The wind whistles in his ears and his clothes flutter against his skin. When lunch hour finally starts, he rushes from his desk and out of the building.

Paulo hurries across the street to the park and rips open his lunch bag. He collapses under a palm tree that sways gently in the breeze. Flight has made him ravenous, and he devours his sandwich and banana in no time at all. What should he do with his new power? Surely a man who can fly can stop working at a pension office?

He will not return to work this afternoon, maybe never. Paulo debates whether or not to spend the rest of the sultry afternoon in flight. But where to fly? The city is filled with buildings that he could sweep between, gliding from one block to another, but the ocean would allow him to see the world stretching out beneath him like a great blue carpet. Perhaps it would be easiest to wait until after dark when no one is able to see him, but then there's the problem of phone wires and other obstacles that he is not used to. Perplexed, Paulo elects to discuss the whole thing with the one person he trusts, his lover, Louise. Paulo decides to be cautious, and takes the bus to her apartment.

When Louise greets him at the

door, she immediately demands to know why he is not at work. Paulo grins and closes his eyes and says, "Just watch." He waits for the lift in his organs and the ringing in his ears, but when he does not feel them, he assumes that maybe the sensations do not occur every time. Still grinning, Paulo opens his eyes to find himself face to face with Louise. He has not risen an inch. Louise has a look of horror on her face. Paulo mumbles something about a bad joke. Louise puts her hand against Paulo's head to check for a temperature before she invites him into her apartment. Paulo determines that it would be in his best interest to just say that he just came to see her, that the office had bugs and was closed for the afternoon to be fumigated. When Louise asks what kind of bugs, Paulo says flying ones. He is just barely able to keep a straight face. Louise does not completely believe Paulo's story, but is flattered anyway. She makes some coffee and the couple talk for a while before they decide to make love.

When Paulo mounts Louise on her bed, he closes his eyes. On a hunch, he tells Louise to do the same, seeing as she usually keeps her eyes wide open when they make love. Louise closes her brown eyes, and immediately Paulo feels their bodies shift upward. Paulo quickly tells Louise that no matter what happens, she should not open her eyes. Soon they are floating around the room. Louise's fingernails dig into Paulo's shoulders and her thighs are like a vice around his waist. Paulo gently whispers in her ear, he says



relax, enjoy, please. Slowly, Louise does relax. They sail around the room until it is over and they are back above the bed. Paulo tells Louise to open her eyes; as soon as she does, they plummet down onto the mattress and burst into laughter. Naturally, Louise is full of questions. Paulo tells her about the condor, the way he woke up, flying around the office, and the dandruff in the chief's hair, and they laugh some more.

Louise immediately begins to make plans. She believes that Paulo should hide his new power until he better understands it. He should not tell anyone else about it, and above all, he should teach Louise to fly as well. She is very insistent about this. Louise points out that as her lover, if he really loves her, he is obligated to teach her. When she says this her eyes light up like a child's do when they describe something exciting like a new pet or a toy. Paulo tries to explain that he does not know how he does it, and that he is not sure if he can teach her to fly. Louise will have none of it, and insists that Paulo stay at her apartment for the time being so that they can discuss it. It is the first time in their relationship that Louise has made Paulo uncomfortable. Despite himself, Paulo begins to dream of mountains. Of being alone in the mountains.

For the rest of the afternoon Louise demands that they make love in more unusual positions in the air. After a couple of attempts, Paulo becomes tired and says that he wants to sleep at home tonight, to get a proper rest. He wants some time to think on his own. Louise argues with


Paulo, and when he argues back, her eyebrows crinkle and her lips become very thin. Paulo tries to leave and Louise blocks him with her arm. Nervous, he pushes past her and Louise starts to scream at him. Louise accuses Paulo of wanting to leave her, that he will never teach her to fly, that he wants somebody else. By the time Paulo opens the door, she is frantic, almost hysterical, on the verge of wailing. Racked with guilt, Paulo tries to kiss her good-bye, and Louise slaps him. Paulo runs out of the apartment, leaping down the stairs instead of waiting for the creaking elevator. He does not stop running until he is back in the park across from his office.

After he catches his breath, Paulo closes his eyes and tries to fly. It takes a very long time before he rises even a couple of inches off the ground, and when he lands, he has a splitting headache. To his horror, Paulo realizes that Louise was sucking the power out of him when they were together. His heart sags. He does not want to be tied to the Earth. To Louise. He knows that now, and although it hurts to think about it, he makes up his mind to never see Louise again.

Paulo leaves the park as the sun begins to set and the overwhelming heat begins to fade to a sweaty dampness. Perhaps it is time to leave the city forever. Maybe everyone is like Louise. Even though the tree-lined streets are empty, Paulo fears all the eyes behind all the windows of every building he passes. They are hungry for him, and even their slightest glance will keep Paulo







earthbound. They are like a terrible glue. A quagmire of personalities that will take and take until they destroy him. He must escape these people. Flight is too exhilarating to give up. During flight, even the shortest flights, he feels more alive than he ever has. Paulo thinks back to how he panicked the first time it happened, and shakes his head. He had been such a fool; this power is a gift. It makes him feel drunk, but not so drunk that he cannot control himself, just that wonderful glee when things swim around you and your body feels warm and soft. Paulo thinks that if he were to really fly, really tear up the sky over canyons and roaring rivers, the sensation he felt in his body would be even better, more powerful, more desirable. Even just thinking about it makes his head swoon and fill with colors. He would feel like a god. And that is what he is now, is it not? A man who can fly is more than a man. He is better, he is a dream. No, Paulo thinks to himself, I must not give up this ability to fly. I must not stay surrounded by people with voracious stares. Paulo dreams of going far away. Maybe he should disappear into the steaming jungle. Or maybe to an island where he can fly freely. Where he can fly forever. Where he can fly to the mountains.

Paulo begins to skip along as he thinks about his wondrous future. Everything will be different. He never noticed how empty his life was. And now everything will change. And that is fine with Paulo. The night air is surprisingly clean and fresh to his nostrils, and the hu-

midity makes his shirt stick to his skin in cool patches that Paulo finds pleasant. The moon rises full and pregnant into the sky. Paulo waves at it. Soon he will be able to join it, and rival its ascent into the heavens.

At his apartment, Paulo quickly packs a small shoulder bag with the barest essentials. He then walks across the room and opens the window. On impulse, he has decided that he will fly out of the city. It spreads out below him to the horizon. A dark blue patchwork of buildings and streets lit up by moonlight and passing cars that glow orange and yellow. Paulo will miss none of this, because he is not a city dweller anymore. His power has made him different, more unique than even the strongest individual. Paulo shrugs his bag up onto his shoulder, closes his eyes and steps out the window. The city floats by underneath him. Paulo can hear the traffic below him, and distant music from a part of the city that never sleeps.

Paulo rolls and dives, dances through the air laughing, barely even thinking of where he is going. When smoke from a factory chimney engulfs him and makes him cough violently, he smartens up and starts to pay attention to what he is doing. He also stays high enough to avoid telephone wires and other hazards, but not so high that he has to worry about passing planes. He also takes care to avoid busy streets or lit apartment windows where a single glance might end his life. Even though he is being careful, Paulo has never felt so happy in his life. He takes a deep breath of air as he

passes over his old office and exhales only when he passes Louise's apartment. He is totally alive. Smiling, he closes his eyes.

And immediately begins to plummet towards the Earth. Paulo opens his eyes in horror and loses his shoulder bag; he begins to flail his arms and legs as nausea rises in him. Far below, he spots Louise and a brutal-looking policeman staring straight up at him with their arms crossed and looks of disgust on their faces. Paulo wants to yell, to tell them to look away, but all he can do is scream. He is going to die. He is going to die before his dream is even realized. Just before he closes his eyes and awaits the terrible impact with the ground, he sees Louise laugh. After he closes his eyes he imagines he can actually hear her above the roaring wind that fills his head.

When he suddenly freezes in

space, he still hears laughter, but it is not Louise.

Gasping, he opens his eyes and finds himself face to face with a small boy in the window of a ground-floor apartment. The boy is maybe five years old, chubby-faced and wide-eyed. Beside him is a telescope. He is pointing at Paulo and shrieking with joy. Paulo cannot take his eyes away from the telescope. The little boy had been watching him all along.

Still hovering, Paulo glances over his shoulder at the ugly cop and Louise. He mouths something horrible at both of them, even though looking at them makes him fall several inches. Then he turns to the laughing boy, and winks.

And with that, Paulo soars out of the city like a rocket, secretly relieved that there are still people in the world that are important for a flying man to know. 🍁



## It doesn't wear a cape or leap over buildings,<sup>OS</sup>

but it will lead you to the perfect gift faster than a speeding bullet. It's *Great Canadian Magazines '99* — the listing of nearly 300 Canadian magazines. Just about every interest you could possibly think of: politics, feminism, fashion, food, spirituality and more. So the next time someone's birthday, anniversary, graduation or housewarming comes up, come out a hero.

To receive a copy of the directory, send in your completed coupon along with \$5 (includes GST, shipping and handling). We also accept VISA or MasterCard orders by fax or phone.

**Yes!** Send me *Great Canadian Magazines 1999*. I am enclosing my cheque or credit card information for \$5 (GST, postage and handling are included).



Canadian Magazine Publishers Association,  
130 Spadina Ave., #202 Toronto, ON M5V 2L4  
Tel: (416) 504-0274 Fax: (416) 504-0437

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Prov \_\_\_\_\_

P.C. \_\_\_\_\_ Tel \_\_\_\_\_

Cheque Enclosed  Visa  MasterCard

# \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_



**A novel by Peter Watts**

# STARFISH

**From the Axial Seamount  
April 2050**

**From Tor Books  
July 1999**



at [www.globalserve.net/~pwatts/](http://www.globalserve.net/~pwatts/)

**NOW**

# Home

Peter Watts

IT HAS FORGOTTEN WHAT IT WAS.

Not that that matters, down here. What good is a name when there's nothing around to use it? This one doesn't remember where it came from. It doesn't remember the murky twilight of the North Pacific Drift, or the noise and gasoline aftertaste that drove it back below the thermocline. It doesn't remember the gelatinous veneer of language and culture that once sat atop its spinal cord. It doesn't even remember the long, slow dissolution of that overlord into dozens of autonomous, squabbling subroutines. Now, even those have fallen silent.

Not much comes down from the cortex any more. Low-level impulses flicker in from the parietal and occipital lobes. The motor strip hums in the background. Occasionally, Broca's area mutters to itself. The rest is mostly dead and dark, worn smooth by a sluggish black ocean cold as antifreeze. All that's left is pure reptile.

It pushes on, blind and unthinking, oblivious to the weight of four hundred liquid atmospheres. It eats whatever it can find. Desalinators and recyclers keep it hydrated. Sometimes, old mammalian skin grows sticky with secreted residues; newer skin, laid on top, opens pores to the ocean and washes everything clean with aliquots of distilled sea water.

The reptile never wonders about the signal in its head that keeps it pointing the right way. It doesn't know where it's headed, or why. It only knows,



with pure brute instinct, how to get there.

It's dying, of course, but slowly. It wouldn't care much about that even if it knew.

NOW SOMETHING IS TAPPING ON ITS insides. Infinitesimal, precisely spaced shock waves are marching in from somewhere ahead and drumming against the machinery in its chest.

The reptile doesn't recognize the sound. It's not the intermittent grumble of conshef and sea bed pushing against each other. It's not the low-frequency ATOC pulses that echo dimly past en route to the Bering. It's a pinging noise—*metallic*, Broca's area murmurs, although it doesn't know what that means.

Abruptly, the sound intensifies.

The reptile is blinded by sudden starbursts. It blinks, a vestigial act from a time it doesn't remember. The caps on its eyes darken automatically. The pupils beneath, hamstrung by the speed of reflex, squeeze to pinpoints a few seconds later.

A copper beacon glares out from the darkness ahead—too coarse, too steady, far brighter than the bioluminescent embers that sometimes light the way. Those, at least, are dim enough to see by; the reptile's augmented eyes can boost even the faint twinkle of deepwater fish and turn it into something resembling twilight. But this new light turns the rest of the world stark black. Light is never this bright, not since—

From the cortex, a shiver of recognition.

It floats motionless, hesitating. It's almost aware of faint urgent voices from somewhere nearby. But it's been following the same course for as long it can remember, and that course points only one way.

It sinks to the bottom, stirring a muddy cloud as it touches down. It crawls forward along the ocean floor.

The beacon shines down from several meters above the sea bed. At closer range, it resolves into a string of smaller lights stretched in an arc, like photophores on the flank of some enormous fish.

Broca sends down more noise: *Sodium floods*. The reptile burrows on through the water, panning its face from side to side.

And freezes, suddenly fearful. Something huge looms behind the lights, bloating gray against black. It hangs above the sea bed like a great smooth boulder, impossibly buoyant, encircled by lights at its equator. Striated filaments connect it to the bottom.

Something else changes.

It takes a moment for the reptile to realize what's happened: the drumming against its chest has stopped. It glances nervously from shadow to light, light to shadow.

"You are approaching Linke Station, Aleutian Geothermal Array. We're glad you've come back."

The reptile shoots back into the darkness, mud billowing behind it. It retreats a good twenty meters before a dim realization sinks in.



Broca's area knows those sounds. It doesn't understand them—Broca's never much good at anything but mimicry—but it has heard something like them before. The reptile feels an unaccustomed twitch. It's been a long time since curiosity was of any use.

It turns and faces back from where it fled. Distance has smeared the lights into a diffuse, dull glow. A faint staccato rhythm vibrates in its chest.

The reptile edges back towards the beacon. One light divides again into many; that dim, ominous outline still lurks behind them.

Once more the rhythm falls silent at the reptile's approach. The strange object looms overhead in its girdle of light. It's smooth in some places, pockmarked in others. Precise rows of circular bumps, sharp-angled protuberances, appear at closer range.

"You are approaching Linke Station, Aleutian Geothermal Array. We're glad you've come back."

The reptile flinches, but stays on course this time.

"We can't get a definite ID from your sonar profile." The sound fills the ocean. "You might be Deborah Linden. Deborah Linden. Please respond if you are Deborah Linden."

*Deborah Linden.* That brings memory: something with four familiar limbs, but standing upright, moving against gravity and bright light and making strange harsh sounds—

—laughter—

"Please respond—"

It shakes its head, not knowing why.

"—if you are Deborah Linden."

*Judy Caraco,* says something else, very close.

"Deborah Linden. If you can't speak, please wave your arms."

The lights overhead cast a bright scalloped circle on the ocean floor. There on the mud rests a box, large enough to crawl into. Two green pinpoints sparkle from a panel on one of its sides.

"Please enter the emergency shelter beneath the station. It contains food and medical facilities."

One end of the box gapes open; delicate jointed things can be seen folded up inside, hiding in shadow.

"Everything is automatic. Enter the shelter and you'll be all right. A rescue team is on the way."

*Automatic.* That noise, too, sticks out from the others. *Automatic* almost means something. It has personal relevance.

The reptile looks back up at the thing that's hanging overhead like, like

—like a fist—

like a fist. The underside of the sphere is a cool shadowy refuge; the equatorial lights can't reach all the way around its convex surface. In the overlapping shadows on the south pole, something shimmers enticingly.

The reptile pushes up off the bottom, raising another cloud.

"Deborah Linden. The station is locked for your own protection."

It glides into the cone of shadow beneath the object and sees a





bright shiny disk a meter across, facing down, held inside a circular rim. The reptile looks up into it.

Something looks back.

Startled, the reptile twists down and away. The disk writhes in the sudden turbulence.

A bubble. That's all it is. A pocket of gas, trapped underneath the

—*airlock.*

The reptile stops. It knows that word. It even understands it, somehow. Broca's not alone any more, something else is reaching out from the temporal lobe and tapping in. Something up there actually knows what Broca is talking about.

"Please enter the emergency shelter beneath the station—"

Still nervous, the reptile returns to the airlock. The air pocket shines silver in the reflected light. A black wraith moves into view within it, almost featureless except for two empty white spaces where eyes should be. It reaches out to meet the reptile's outstretched hand. Two sets of fingertips touch, fuse, disappear. One arm is grafted onto its own reflection at the wrist. Fingers, on the other side of the looking glass, touch metal.

"—locked for your own protection. Deborah Linden."

It pulls back its hand, fascinated. Inside, forgotten parts are stirring. Other parts, more familiar, try to send them away. The wraith floats overhead, empty and untroubled.

It draws its hand to its face, runs an index finger from one ear to the tip of the jaw. A very long molecule,

folded against itself, unzips.

The wraith's smooth black face splits open a few centimeters; what's underneath shows pale gray in the filtered light. The reptile feels the familiar dimpling of its cheek in sudden cold.

It continues the motion, slashing its face from ear to ear. A great smiling gash opens below the eyespots. Unzipped, a flap of black membrane floats under its chin, anchored at the throat.

There's a pucker in the center of the skinned area. The reptile moves its jaw; the pucker opens.

By now most of its teeth are gone. It swallowed some, spat others out if they came loose when its face was unsealed. No matter. Most of the things it eats these days are even softer than it is. When the occasional mollusc or echinoderm proves too tough or too large to swallow whole, there are always hands. Thumbs still oppose.

But this is the first time it's actually seen that gaping, toothless ruin where a mouth used to be. It knows this isn't right, somehow.

"—Everything is automatic—"

A sudden muffled buzz cuts into the noise, then fades. Welcome silence returns for a moment. Then different sounds, quieter than before, almost hushed:

"Christ, Judy, is that you?"

It knows that sound.

"Judy Caraco? It's Jeannette Ballard. Remember? We went through prelim together. Judy? Can you speak?"

That sound comes from a long time ago.



"Can you hear me, Judy? Wave if you can hear me."

Back when this one was part of something larger, not an *it* at all, then, but—

"The machine didn't recognize you, you know? It was only programmed for locals."

—*she*.

Clusters of neurons, long-dormant, sparkle in the darkness. Old forgotten subsystems stutter and reboot.

I—

"You've come—my God, Judy, do you know where you are? You went missing off Juan de Fuca! You've come over three thousand kilometers!"

*It knows my name.* She can barely think over the sudden murmuring in her head.

"Judy, it's me. Jeannette. God, Judy, how did you last this long?"

She can't answer. She's just barely starting to understand the question. There are parts of her still asleep, parts that won't talk, still other parts completely washed away. She doesn't remember why she never gets thirsty. She's forgotten the tidal rush of human breath. Once, for a little while, she knew words like *photoamplification* and *myoelectric*; they were nonsense to her even then.

She shakes her head, trying to clear it. The new parts—no, the old parts, the very old parts that went away and now they've come back *and won't shut the fuck up*—are all clamoring for attention. She reaches into the bubble again, past her own reflection; once again, the

ventral airlock pushes back.

"Judy, you can't get into the station. No one's there. Everything's automated now."

She brings her hand back to her face, tugs at the line between black and gray. More shadow peels back from the wraith, leaving a large pale oval with two smaller ovals, white and utterly featureless, inside. The flesh around her mouth is going prickly and numb.

*My face!* something screams. *What happened to my eyes?*

"You don't want to go inside anyway; you couldn't even stand up. We've seen it in some of the other runaways, you lose your calcium after a while. Your bones go all punky, you know?"

*My eyes—*

"We're airlifting a 'scaphe out to you. We'll have a team down there in fifteen hours, tops. Just go down into the shelter and wait for them. It's state of the art, Judy, it'll take care of everything."

She looks down into the open box. Words appear in her head: *Leg. Hold. Trap.* She knows what they mean.

"They—they made some mistakes, Judy. But things are different now. We don't have to change people any more. You just wait there, Judy. We'll put you back to rights. We'll bring you home."

The voices inside grow quiet, suddenly attentive. They don't like the sound of that word. *Home.* She wonders what it means. She wonders why it makes her feel so cold.

More words scroll through her mind: *The lights are on. Nobody's*





home.

The lights come on, flickering.

She can catch glimpses of sick, rotten things squirming in her head. Old memories grind screeching against years of corrosion. Something lurches into sudden focus: worms, clusters of twitching, eyeless, pulpy snouts reaching out for her across the space of two decades. She stares, horrified, and remembers what the worms were called. They were called "fingers."

Something gives way with a snap. There's a big room and a hand puppet clenched in one small fist. Something smells like mints and worms are surging up between her legs and they *hurt* and they're whispering *shhh it's not really that bad is it*, and it is but she doesn't want to let him down *after all I've done for you* so she shakes her head and squeezes her eyes shut and just waits. It's years and years before she opens her eyes again and when she does he's back, so much smaller now, he doesn't remember he doesn't even fucking *remember it's all my dear how you've grown how long has it been?* So she tells him as the taser wires hit and he goes over, she tells him as his muscles lock tight in a 12,000-volt orgasm; she shows him the blade, shows him up real close and his left eye deflates with a wet tired sigh but she leaves the other one, jiggling hilariously in frantic little arcs, so he can watch but shit for once there really is a cop around when you need one and here come the worms again, a

hard clenched knot of them driving into her kidney like a piston, worms grabbing her hair, and they take her not to the nearest precinct but to some strange clinic where voices in the next room murmur about *optimal post-traumatic environments and endogenous dopamine addiction*. And then someone says *There's an alternative, Ms. Caraco, a place you could go that's a little bit dangerous but then you'd be right at home there, wouldn't you? And you could make a real contribution. We need people who can live under a certain kind of stress without going, you know...*

And she says *Okay, okay, just fucking do it.*

And the worms burrow into her chest, devour her soft parts and replace them with hard-edged geometries of plastic and metal that cut her insides.

And then dark cold, life without breath, four thousand meters of black water pressing down like a massive sheltering womb...

"Judy, will you just for God's sake *talk* to me? Is your vocoder broken? Can't you answer?"

Her whole body is shaking. She can't do anything except watch her hand rise, an autonomous savior, to take the black skin floating around her face. The reptile presses edges together, here, and here. Hydrophobic side chains embrace; a slippery black caul stitches itself back together over rotten flesh. Muffled voices rage faintly inside.

"Judy, please just wave or



something! Judy, what are you— where are you going?”

It doesn't know. All it's ever done is travel to this place. It's forgotten why.

“Judy, you can't wander too far away ... don't you remember, our instruments can't see very well this close to an active rift—”

All it wants is to get away from the noise and the light. All it wants

is to be alone again.

“Judy, wait—we just want to help—”

The harsh artificial glare fades behind it. Ahead there is only the sparse twinkle of living flashlights.

A faint realization teeters on the edge of awareness and washes away forever:

She knew this was home years before she ever saw an ocean. ✨

# DARE to DISTURB the UNIVERSE ...



We invite you  
to join

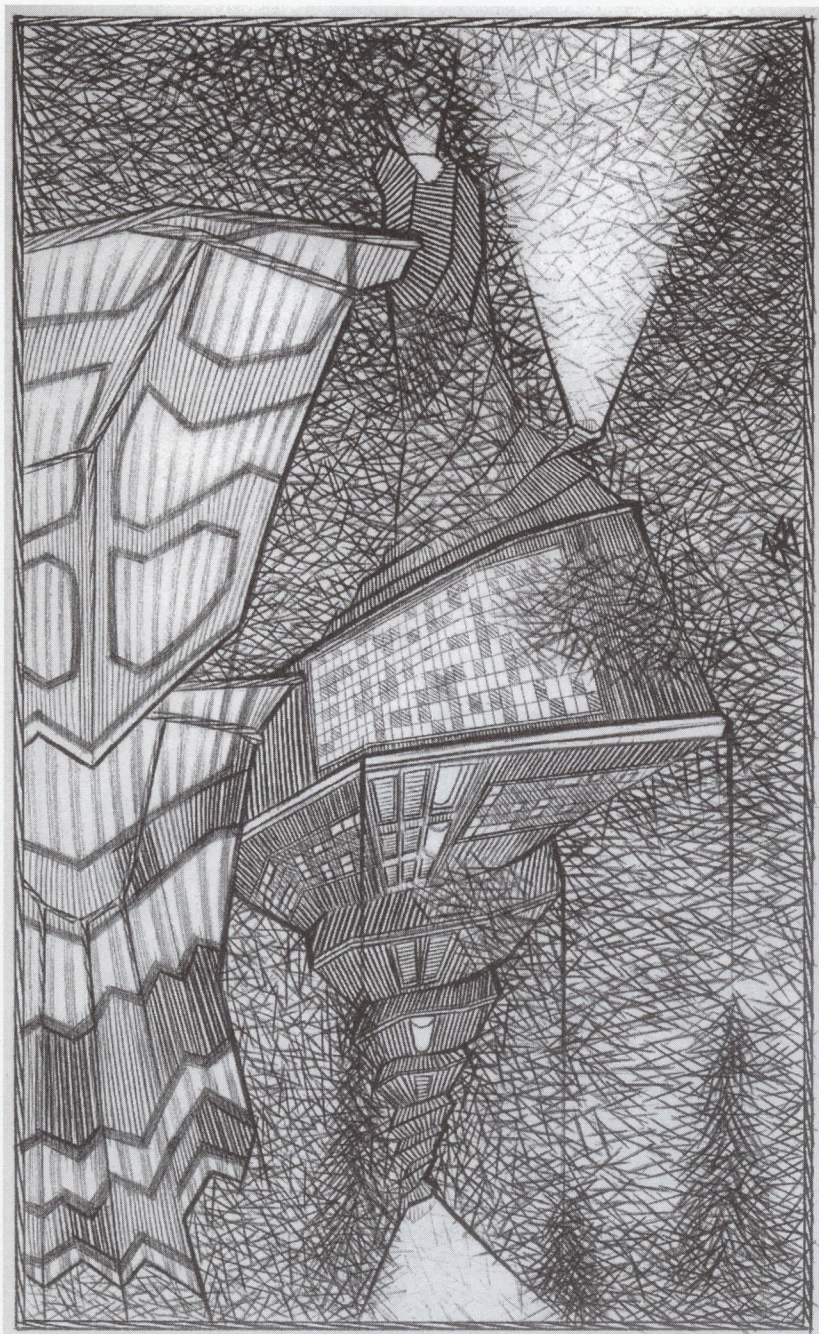
the National Science  
Fiction and Fantasy  
Society, the non-profit  
organization which  
promotes speculative  
works in Canada.

Membership \$25 per year.

For more information,  
write to The Society at:

PO Box 45063, Northtown Postal Outlet,  
5385 Yonge St.,  
North York, ON, M2N 5R7  
[www.sfsite.com/nsffs](http://www.sfsite.com/nsffs)







# Dust to Dust

Elizabeth Westbrook

*illustrated by Robert Boerboom*

**A**NOTHER TEENAGER JUMPED LAST NIGHT. AT SUNSET again. Something about the Earth's murky penumbra swallowing the sun as if it were sinking into blood, Earth's blood, our blood, that makes them dive. I can't blame them, for all I fought so long and hard to survive everything that's happened to us.

Sometimes I consider stepping out onto one of the sail catwalks and hanging over the rail till the lack of oxygen in my brain lets me topple into the gap between cables.

When the Hubble discovered the three meteors coming at us, the experts all said they'd miss by a mile. And when the meteors made their first course correction, the experts said the instruments must've malfunctioned, because such a thing wasn't possible. And when they made their second, and third corrections, so that they were hurtling straight at us and we only had four months till they reached us, there was no point in listening to what any of the egg-heads and reassuring politicians said, because we knew they weren't just falling. They were aimed.

It didn't matter that the rocks weren't all that big, just big enough to wash off the coasts inland a few hundred miles. Just big enough to raise a few years' worth of dirt. It didn't matter that some of us might survive, and if we were careful, we might rebuild. Because everyone on Earth knew in their guts that what happened would happen.

Where to hide on the days of the impacts was a roll of the dice. Sea bottoms, mountain tops, deep, deep caverns. I refused to gamble. I sat alone on my cabin deck and looked down the green slope to the valley, where the richer green of willows showed the stream's wandering course through the end of my land. Dear, beloved land, smelling earthy and alive under the gift of the



sun. I waited to die, to fade to dust and silence, along with the jays skreaking like rusty hinges in the pine wind break and the bees buzzing warm among the gallardia, yellow-fringed, red-eyed suns.



I got hit on the head by a hanging pot of ivy geranium. Of such ludicrous events are our tragedies woven. It didn't kill me, but it concussed me enough to turn the few days after the first impact into a haze of roaring and heaving waves as if the Earth were liquid, punctuated by moments of deafening pressure, rolling over me like palpable thunder. Maybe I rose and staggered around, or maybe I lay still and the Earth walked under me. The nauseating movement could've come from inside my own head, but some of it was real enough. When I woke up, the day I stopped knowing or caring anymore what days or months were, my cabin lay tilted like a beached boat. As near as I could see in the heavy dusk of brightest day, my home had tried to flee with the rest of the hillside into a gorge that had opened like a shocked mouth in the Earth, but a new rock spire had sprung up in its path. We were both too stupid or stubborn to submit to the reality of gravity, the rock and I, and where all the world went one way, we fought to go the other, and at least held still.

Most of us died, the humans and cattle and jays and bears, a whole Noah's ark of creation, biting the dust. So much dust. Whatever the animals did, the remnants of humanity trickled together, like water finding its level. Many gathered around

my miraculous rock, and from there we made forays into the dark unknown that covered what had once been familiar. We invented hasty prayers of propitiation to the unburied dead as we robbed them, we huddled against the rock when the Earth seethed, and we learned to breathe through filters when enough had died by choking in the sudden gales that were the sole variation in weather. And we prayed and waited to see the sun again, for the chaos to separate once more into separate entities, into earth and sky.

Oh, yes, the sky was dark by day, and yes, fire glowed within the darkness by night, and yes, all that was raised was fallen, and that which was low was thrust up. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Enough of this pointless maundering.

Let me tell you about my first sight of the Chokers. Everyone mobile was out on foray for supplies while Sunny and I banked silt. Dust was ubiquitous and keeping clear the space in the middle of each cell of the warren we survivors had built against the rock spire was a continual task. I collected with a snow shovel, and my little girl patted the dirt against the walls with half a broken plate. I had found Sunny under her dead mother and, since her only vocalization had been inarticulate shrieks of rage and grief mixed, an echo to my own feelings, I had named her for what was lost. Sun-Sky-Earth. She embodied these things. Hair like sunlight, eyes glimpses of blue, lashes, cheeks, lips, skin all colored like loam and flowers. The few surviving children were

as silent and shocked as the adults, and everyone was gray with the forever-present dust, but Sunny was too young to know she was living in a world gone wrong. Her vibrancy shone through the dust. She chuckled and grew and explored and copied our speech and work and made us all believe that perhaps life might one day be normal again. To be sure, she drew me out of my spinsterish withdrawal into plants and painting that had been my life before the meteors came, and filled in me a void I'd never known was there. An example, I suppose, of the human spirit's ability to make gain from loss, to rise above adversity. Rise. Such irony.

We finished the cell we were in, made sure the covers on the furniture and utensils were snug, and carried our torch into the outer passage to do the next cell. Hearing a sound like someone coughing beyond the end of the passage, I slid open the door to the uncovered outer courtyard and held up my flame. Against the dimness loomed a ragged heap of black, its velvety silhouette shifting as parts of its surface opened out like sea anemones and then clutched closed again. Slow to believe my eyes, slow to react, I stood and gaped through my dust goggles at the thing. Sunny ran out to it, our bright darling, our over-protected mascot, delighted as any toddler with novelty, convinced that the whole universe must love her as we did.

Before I could react, the thing seized Sunny, passing her up along its black body by waves of move-

ment in its many appendages, hauling her inexorably toward a larger hole opening wide in its top third. I shrieked and came at the thing with my shovel. Before I covered half the distance, Sunny gave a cry of outrage and, with the instinct for survival that kept many of us alive for the next decade or so, slashed with her broken plate at the questing polyps on the creature's body. It farted staccato snorts and dropped her. I came at it, ready to kill, ready to die, ablaze with adrenaline. It faded as it had come, disappearing into the murk, hidden by the dust and its own indeterminate dark surface. And I was left, baffled, impotent, seething with unfulfilled battle fury.

My reaction to that first encounter was to typify the interaction between our fragment of humanity, tribe, you could call it, and the Chokers. We came to call them that, I suppose, in part because their speech sounded like the coughs of a gagging basso profundo and in part because it was they who had sent the meteors to raise the dust they needed in the atmosphere to make our planet habitable for them.

Time has subsequently shown us that the Chokers were not actively malicious, but simply wanted our planet for their own purposes. We fought them, with the silly mixture of stone age and high-tech weapons that we managed to collect by genius and looting. We may have killed a few—it's hard to tell when one of them is dead, or to differentiate between them. They killed us too, almost casually, and only if we became a particular nuisance to





them as they moved through our shattered world, sucking the mix of dust and air they seemed to want into their tar baby bodies, creating machines that kept the Earth's surface crumbling and airborne. In our last battle with them, they overran our now-fortified warren, and quite easily tore down the rock spire that had withstood all the Earth's writhing could do to it.

The heart went out of us that day or night, whichever it was. We went quietly where they took us, expecting execution. Even Sunny, no longer the gold and rose of a garden in summer, but hard and bright like a diamond, even she grew gray that day.

The sky reserve was beautiful at first. To see the sun, to see blue, to see the jet streams bulge the sails of our new floating country, it raised our hopes, our spirits, our hearts. Oh God, we thought we'd found reprieve. We actually thanked the Chokers for our exile.

But we had nothing to do but exist, breed, tell tired stories of a past so long lost that the skyborn children thought they were fairy tales. We began to wonder, ourselves. The Chokers gave us everything we needed, or at least enough for food and shelter, and showed us how the machinery worked to extract water from the air, and how to save the sun's warmth in collectors. And then they left us alone, only returning periodically to resupply us, repair the damage our ignorance might have caused, and check that our weight or attitude did not draw us off our prescribed course round and round the globe.

We glimpsed but never reached other floating clusters of humans. Rarely, we drew close enough even to distinguish the portholes on the spiraling tubes that hung like giant snail shells within their butterfly-sails' embrace. But we never came near enough to see other people, who were surely pressed as we were, gazing hungrily out. A dingy pod would swim up out of the sludge below and patiently set us back where they wanted us. They collected our waste and our dead and any who thought they might be able to make a life in the underworld they'd made of our Earth.

Sunny's lover, a quiet, inventive boy, went down to work for the Chokers to see what he might gain by it. He had a notion that he might bring back seeds and soil for indoor gardens, or scrap to make wings to give us the freedom of our sky. And he did, after two years, return with a few packets he had managed to loot from one of our fallen cities, and an entire scooter engine. And he came back with many strange new stories of the Chokers, and his lungs full of dust and disease. With nothing to fuel his little engine, he spent his remaining days trying to convert the engine to solar power with what we had on the reserve. When he coughed out his last goblet of bloodstained dust, we sewed him with the engine into the tough fabric from one of the attitude sails and returned him to Earth. Sunny stood looking down too long after he plummeted with no more protection than a breathing mask, and I had to bring her inside before her blood

boiled from altitude sickness. He never saw the seeds planted because we didn't have the earth. The Chokers came up and replaced the sail. And our young people started to jump.

I feel such despair. There. I've said it. And I know my sorrow poisons the young ones who look to the elders to give them hope, reason to live. Elder. In the days before the Chokers, I would have been entering middle age. Those days are gone. The flowers are gone, the leaves are gone, the birds, the animals, the breeze, the smells, the prickles and bites, all lost to us. The horizon where gold and green hills interfold one behind the other like the flanks of lovers until they fade into the Picasso blue of mountains and sky, gone, gone, gone. I am sick with wanting it back. I move through the routine of existence in the sky, teaching about the old life to young skeptics, emptily urging them to learn and grow (for what?), making and consuming food and drink, and placing at the center of my life all those things that were once merely peripheral to my real purpose. And all the time I want, just once more, to feel the Earth against my body, if only for the split second before my death.

Sunny sits beside me. For a long time, I lived for her, to keep her alive. But now... Perhaps we can go together, smile at each other as we fall through the thickening air.

She looks at me, and the old light

flashes awake in her hill-blue eyes, her rose and tan skin, her Earth-brown brows.

"Let's go down, Baba," she says. With a spurt of regret and joy I jump up and reach for her hand.

First she's puzzled, and then outraged, and then she throws back her head and laughs.

"And let them win?" she shouts. "Never!"

She tells how we'll furl some sails but we'll hide them, replace them with some of the tattered ones we regularly have to pull in through the sail housings. We'll drop fast, and scoop silt from the air as we go.

"We'll keep back some of our shit. We have light. We have water. We'll plant the seeds." I no longer can move or even perceive at the speed which has so suddenly seized her, as if her energy has been gestating until it could spring full-formed from her brow. It all seems a blur as she breathes fire into the young ones, setting them to making soil nets from anything that might work as such. She tells them how we'll grow gardens, and trick and beguile and beg the Chokers into giving us the sails we need for buoyancy with the extra weight.

She turns to face me as I squat, wondering whether I dare let hope waken. She raises her fists over her head, radiating like a goddess born new from the air.

"Grain by grain, handful by handful," she cries, "we will take it back." 🌱







M. SAYONA © 1999

# Deep Blue Sea

Leah Silverman

*illustrated by Mark A. Savona*

**M**Y MOTHER-IN-LAW SITS ALL DAY KNITTING FOR HER husband who is drowned at the bottom of the sea.

We share a house together, she and I, since her only son died and I was fool enough to come here. That was three years ago, and I have been oft looking at the water of late and thinking it was time to be gone.

My mother-in-law's latest creation is a thick sweater all in deep grays and blues. To match the ocean, I suppose? It is almost finished, and when she has cut off the excess yarn, I will be expected to go and drop it off the cliff into the water. I will weight it by tying the sleeves around a stone. Next, she will start on a scarf for William. She scolds me, saying this should be my job, not hers. It is a wife's duty, after all, to ensure her husband stays warm.

I was good at that, once. In more ways than you might imagine. William used to call me the light of his eyes, when we were still together, his dear shore-wife. His port of call, I was, when he was away at sea on the huge merchant ships that go to the places too distant even to dream about. There was a time when he would come through the door laughing, fresh from the dock, wet through with sea-spray and rain. On those infrequent visits, I would race from my bedchamber as soon as I heard his feet on the stones, to fling open the door for him and cover his face with kisses. But I was never fast enough. I would only ever arrive just in time to throw myself into his arms. He would tease me for how dishevelled I was—he always liked me to look beautiful, as befitted a captain's wife—and in return I would kiss the salt from his eyes. Just once I would have liked to have opened the door for him, to be



the first thing he saw of home, rather than the indifferent wood of the house. But he wouldn't wait long enough for me to do that. My husband was never a patient man.

THE WIND IS HARSH HERE. IT COMES right in over the ocean and breeds a fierce, thick-bodied race with small and far-looking eyes. My mother-in-law is one such as these, as were her Paul and my William. Now age and the cold air have gnarled her hands like beach pebbles beneath the skin of her fingers. They clutch her needles like birds' claws and rest like crabs in her lap when she does not use them. Sometimes I study them when she makes me sit by her side and watch the waves smash themselves against the rocks down below. I look at her hands because I do not like to look at the water, and she will not talk to me.

IT HAS BEEN TWENTY YEARS SINCE PAUL died. Now she knits, fulfilling a wifely duty as much of a lie as her marriage was. As any marriage to a sailor must be. It is very easy to love someone you almost never look upon. I loved William because I never knew him. Not but for occasional moments, when he was home and the sea was, ever so briefly, away from him. Then his eyes would not be so distant as they looked out over the water, and he would laugh with, not at, me and my simple city ways. He would hold me and I would feel his arms strong and warm around my back, and his smell would be of the hearth and soil and not of the salt and the wind.

Then, always, the ocean would call to him again, and he would be gone.

He died as his father had: drowned with his ship in a winter storm. He lies at the bottom of the sea now, and I walk the shore as I always have. Alone.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER AND HAD FIRST come here, I believed that my mother-in-law could change the weather. I imagined that she created the storms that lashed the rocks and tormented the waves until the very cliffs vibrated with their anger. I thought this because she was never afraid, not even when the wind made the house shake. She would sit in the kitchen, her fingers bent and her eyes staring at the ocean. I would hide in William's childhood bed with my hands pressed to my ears, trembling in fear and begging the ocean to return my husband to me, so he could hold me and save me from my terror. Once, I was so convinced that she knitted up storms along with her yarn that I unravelled a pair of newly-made mittens and threw the wool into the fire. That night, the wind howled like a wolf and she told me that Paul was angry that I had stolen from him.

I am older now, and stronger. When the storms come, I am not afraid, and wish for nothing but their end. I do not know what my mother-in-law wishes for. She waits by the fire, and her eyes search the flames as if they were the sea.

LAST NIGHT IT STORMED AGAIN, THE most violent in twenty years. I could



feel the hum of the stone as the waves smashed against the cliffs, and the water roared like the world was in pain. The noise of the rain was nearly enough to deafen, but I still heard when the old woman left her bedchamber and went out the door of the house.

In the morning, it was as if she had never been, save for her knitting-basket and her wooden rocking-chair. There is a single strand of seaweed resting on the porch steps, and two threads of thick gray wool, caught by a splinter. They are wet from the rain, and of a shade that matches the ocean. The only footprints I found were man-sized, and coming up to the house. The waves blast against the rocks below the same as they ever did, where someone could fall in and

never be seen again.

SO TODAY I AM LEAVING. I HAVE packed up the few things I care about and will go back to the city, back to the safe stone walls and the things I can understand.

I suppose she knew what she was doing. I suppose the old woman hated the fact that I would not do the same. I can only hope that when Paul came to get her, she was pleased to see him, and that she took her yarn and needles with her, for I am not staying to keep her warm.

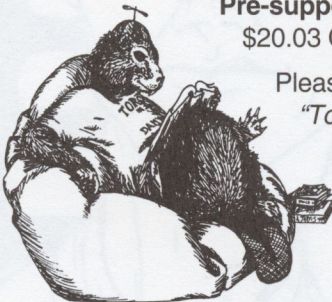
I will never come back here. I must never come back. For it has already been three years since William has last saw his dear shore-wife, the light of his eyes, and my husband was never a patient man. ♣

## TORONTO in 2003

a bid to hold the 2003 Worldcon in Toronto

Pre-supporting memberships are:  
\$20.03 Canadian.

Please make cheques payable to:  
"Toronto in '03" & mail to:



Toronto in '03  
P.O. Box 3, Station A  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5W 1A2

E-Mail: [HANCOCK@INFORAMP.NET](mailto:HANCOCK@INFORAMP.NET)

Website: [HTTP://WWW.WORLDCON-2003.COM](http://WWW.WORLDCON-2003.COM)

2003 Reasons to visit Toronto & Southern Ontario: #235 the CN Tower  
#1119 the Humber Bump, #114 the Niagara Escarpment, #253 The Beaches





# Ground-bound

David Nickle

*illustrated by Lar deSouza*

WHEN MICHAEL WAS JUST A KID, UNCLE EVAN MADE a movie of Grandfather. He used an old eight-millimetre camera that wound up with a key and had three narrow lenses that rotated on a plate. Michael remembered holding the camera. It was supposedly light-weight for its time, but in his six-year-old hands, it seemed like it weighed a ton. Uncle Evan had told him to be careful with it; the camera was a precision instrument, and it needed to be in good working order if the movie was going to be of any scientific value.

The movie was of Grandfather doing his flying thing—flapping his arms with a slow grace as he shut his eyes and turned his long, beakish nose to the sky. Most of the movie was only that: a thin, middle-aged man flapping his arms, shutting his eyes, craning his neck. Grandfather's apparent foolishness was compounded by the face of young Michael flashing in front of the lens; blocking the scene, and waving like an idiot himself. Then the camera moved, and Michael was gone—

And so was Grandfather.

The view shook and jostled for an instant, and the family garden became a chaos of flower and greenery. Finally, Uncle Evan settled on the pale blue equanimity of the early-autumn sky. A black dot careered across the screen, from the left to the right and top to the bottom. Then there was a momentary black, as Uncle Evan turned the lenses from wide-angle to telephoto. The screen filled with the briefest glimpse—for the film was about to run out—of Grandfather's slender figure, his white shirt-tails flapping behind him, all of him held high above the ground by nothing more substantial than the slow beating of his arms; the formidable strength of his will against the Earth.



MICHAEL GROANED AND LIFTED HIS hand from the cool plastic covering of the armchair. He reached over and flipped the switch on the old projector. The end of the film slapped against the projector frame and the light in the box dimmed. The slapping stopped and the screen went black, and the ember at the tip of his grandmother's cigarette was the only light-source in the basement rec room.

"I remember that day." Michael's voice sounded choked and emotional, near-to-tears, and it surprised him. He wasn't an emotional man as a rule, and he hadn't cried since ... since who knew when? Maybe the day that film was made. It also dismayed him—sentiment was a bond, and he couldn't afford more bonds. Not if he wanted to follow Grandfather.

"Do you?" said Grandmother. Her voice was deepened by smoke, surprisingly mannish in the dark. "You were very young."

"It was a formative moment," he said. "It's not every day one sees one's grandfather fly," he said, and cleared his throat. "I should think no one would forget such an event."

In the dark, Grandmother coughed, and coughed again. It took Michael a moment to realize she wasn't coughing at all; she was laughing. "What is it?" he said irritably.

"Your formality," she said, and paused. The end of her cigarette glowed furiously as she inhaled. "I'm sorry, dear—I don't mean to laugh at you. You come to visit me here, and I'd hate you to think I'm not grateful for your company, after all these

years without so much as a phone call. But I can see how you'd like to find him."

"Can you?"

Michael felt a cloud of smoke envelop him and he choked again—this time, he thought, with more legitimacy. Grandmother was a rancid old creature, stale and fouled with her age; he'd be glad, finally, to be rid of her along with everyone else when he finally took to the sky.

"Yes," she said. "The two of you are of a kind—you look alike, you walk alike, you speak alike. You, though, are a better man." There was a creaking in her chair, and Michael flinched as her hand fell on his thigh, and gave him a vigorous pinch. "A better husband, yes?"

Michael flinched—he hadn't told her about the separation yet, about the necessity of untying himself from the web that was Suzanne, and the things Suzanne had said to him on the doorstep; he hadn't told anyone in the family in point of fact, because they were part of the web as much as Suzanne was. He patted Grandmother's hand.

"Where's Grandfather now?" he asked.

Grandmother sighed. "You must know, hmm dear? No one else has his address?"

Michael didn't answer. She knew no one else had his address; how many places, how many other family-members he'd checked with, before coming here. It was Uncle Evan who'd finally sent him, told him the only one to talk to about Grandfather was Grandmother.

*Your Grandmother has all the*

*facts, said Evan as they sat in the sun-room at his lake-front condominium. Gave her the notebook, the film, oh, years ago. She's the family keeper, you know. She's the one to talk to.*

"All right," she finally said. "Turn on the light and help me up—I'll fetch the address while you wind the film."

"If you tell me where it is—"

"I'll get it, dear." Her tone left no room for argument.

Michael leaned over to the floor-lamp, groped up its narrow brass stem and pulled the chain. The room filled with a light yellowed by the dusty lampshade, and that light struck Michael's grandmother in profile. It did not flatter her.

When she was younger, Grandmother was reputed to have been something of a beauty, but from the time Michael could remember, she had fattened to an ugly obesity. Some of that weight had fallen off over the past ten years, but it had not improved her. Gravity had left Grandmother as a drying fruit, flesh hanging loose over the absent girth. It had also left her with diabetes and high blood pressure, dizzy spells and swelling feet. But for all that, she still wouldn't let her grandson climb the stairs to the kitchen for her. Michael allowed himself a smile—he obviously wasn't the only one "of a kind" with Grandfather in this family.

Of course, no one else would view it that way. Grandmother was the family's legendary victim. Everyone heard the story of how Grandfather had seduced her when she was young and beautiful, then cast her off when the birth of Michael's

father and uncle, the years spent raising them, had taken that youth and beauty. He had done more, in fact: disowned the family, disappeared from view. But never mind that—the family's umbrage was entirely directed to Grandfather's shabby treatment of Grandmother.

Listening to the family stories, one would think Grandmother had been left in some gutter with nothing but the clothes on her back and a bent walking-stick; not in a comfortable Etobicoke bungalow with the mortgage paid and two grown sons to dote on her every need.

No, Grandmother had a power to her, a gravity to her, just as much as Grandfather had the will to defy that gravity. Eventually, the will was not enough—Grandfather would have been ground-bound, as he liked to say, after a few more years with Grandmother.

He'd understood that intimately, from the first night he decided to leave Suzanne. They had been married for just three years—and as marriages went, he supposed theirs was a good one. But as he lay in bed with her, feeling the Earth impaling him on bedsprings sharp as nails, he knew it could never last. Not, he thought, if he ever meant to fly like Grandfather.

Flight, Michael was beginning to realize, was essential to his survival. When his grandfather had refused to take him in the air that afternoon at Uncle Evan's old place, he had merely been hurt; but as the years accreted on his back—along with more hurts and disappointments; slights and insults and injuries—he





began to realize his desire to fly was more than a desire. It was a need, bone-deep and compelling, like nothing else he'd ever felt. Once he'd defeated gravity, Michael was sure, nothing else could weigh him down.



"Michael!" Grandmother called from upstairs. "I found it!"

"I'm coming, Grandmother! For Heaven's sake, don't strain yourself!" he called, and started up the stairs. He was puffing when he reached the top.

Grandmother was sitting at the kitchen table, an array of envelopes and letters spread in front of her, cigarette smoldering in a brown-stained glass ashtray, a sky the color of an old bruise framed in the window behind her. She held a small brown envelope close to her breast. She was wearing thick reading glasses, and her magnified eyes looked almost comically worried, or perhaps surprised.

Michael pulled out a chair and sat across from Grandmother, smiled at her. He extended a hand across the table, and Grandmother smiled back, her dentures white and perfect in the midst of her age-sagged face. Still holding the envelope close to her, she took his hand in hers and gave it an affectionate squeeze. Gritting his teeth, Michael squeezed back.

"I haven't seen or spoken with your grandfather in years, you know," she said.

"I know," said Michael.

"It was..." She squeezed harder, and enormous tears appeared behind the lenses of her glasses. "...it

was very painful between us. You cannot know, dearest Michael. The things one must do. Your Suzanne is such a lovely girl, and you ... you are such a *good* boy. You are both so terribly lucky."

"Yes," he said. Grandmother's hand was thick and dry, and its grip was formidable. If it had been around his throat, Michael thought crazily, that would have been the end of it...

"Lucky," he said. "The address, Grandmother?"

Grandmother's eyes blinked enormously behind the glass. "Is something wrong, dear? You don't look well." She let go of his hand, and it flopped to the tabletop.

"I'm sorry," said Michael. He flexed his fingers. Although they appeared normal, they felt swollen, massive. "I'm just a little anxious, I guess."

"To see your grandfather," said Grandmother. "Of course you are. Well, I certainly can help you with that."

They sat silent for a moment, regarding each other—warily, waiting for the other to move first. Michael felt himself beginning to squirm.

"May I—?" he finally said, and extended his hand again, eyes on the letter.

Grandmother didn't move. "There is a condition," she said.

"Yes?"

The envelope crinkled as her hand tightened around it. The flesh of her neck trembled like a rooster's, and her eyes widened to fill the lenses of her glasses. A weight shifted badly in Michael's belly as

she opened her mouth to speak.

"You must go to visit him immediately," she said, "and you must take me with you."

Although Grandmother's tone seemed to preclude argument, Michael attempted it anyway. He told her a meeting now would be painful—after all, the two of them hadn't parted on the friendliest of terms, had they? He pointed out that he, Michael, hadn't seen Grandfather for many years—and he was uncertain enough as to how the meeting would go in any event. Couldn't he visit Grandfather once on his own, and then perhaps broker a meeting between Grandmother and her ex-husband for a second visit? Or perhaps he could convey a message?

"Michael," Grandmother said quietly, "I'm afraid I don't have time to wait for a second visit. Also, I'm afraid I don't care to risk, if you don't mind my saying, your good will on this matter. My condition must stand. I would like to make this trip as early as possible. Immediately."

Michael almost laughed at that—the world was crushing him, and he had planned on setting out the following morning. Now, with the added weight of Grandmother's condition on his shoulders, the pull of the Earth was so unbearable, he'd probably leave as soon as he got the address.

"Are you well enough to travel?" he finally asked.

"Wipe that smirk off your face." Grandmother's eyes narrowed and her mouth became an angry line. Michael felt his face flush—he

hadn't realized he *had* been smirking. "Of course I'm well enough," she said. "I'll get my coat."

She stood easily, pushed the chair back underneath the kitchen table, and hurried off to the closet.

SOME DAYS, MICHAEL FELT THE EARTH knew of his plans to escape it, and reached up with an extra hand to hold him ever more firmly. It had been bad the day he left Suzanne—ironic, because that was the very act he suspected might liberate him utterly, not yank him closer to the ground he had begun to despise. Now that he was so close—to Grandfather, to his secret—it felt as though the Earth was actually pushing him down, driving him into itself as if he were a stake.

God, he just needed some time alone with the old man! Simplification, isolation, was not enough—there was something else the old man knew, and Michael needed to know it too.

He remembered the day Uncle Evan shot his movie, the day he saw the miracle of his grandfather's flight. His father, genial sadist that he was, had built him up for it, on their way over to Evan's: *Grandfather's a miracle-worker, Mikey—just like Jesus. Maybe if you ask him nicely, he'll work a miracle for you!*

He remembered his mother trying to shush his father. *That's not why we're going; don't get Mikey's hopes up*, she said, and to Michael: *Grandfather's not like Jesus.*

As it turned out, Grandfather showed up almost four hours late, and Michael was the only child







there—so of course the waiting had made him crazy. It had in fact made everyone crazy. Michael's father drank too much, and wound up spending what seemed like an hour sick in the bathroom, and his mother paced, feigning interest in Uncle Evan's movie camera, which he loaded film into, in a black cloth bag, or the notebook. It was filled with crabbed handwriting, mathematical equations, and an array of charts and diagrams Evan had assembled to try and explain the phenomenon of Grandfather's seemingly miraculous flights. She flipped through the book with Aunt Nancy, then called Michael over and made him go through it too, and finally shut it and put her fingers to her eye-sockets and shooed Michael away.

*We'll work it out*, said Aunt Nancy, resting her hand on his mother's shoulder. *Once we've got it on film, we'll work out what's happening... Make it right.* From the bathroom, Michael heard a retching sound and the toilet flushing, and his father's drunken cursing that everyone in the living room strove to ignore. Michael had finally asked to be excused, and went outside to watch for Grandfather's car, from the sweet quiet of his uncle's garden.

The car finally arrived, and Michael watched as his parents and aunt and uncle hurried outside to meet him. Uncle Evan opened the driver's door—which was opposite Michael—and at first Michael thought he was helping Grandfather out. But he wasn't; an enormous, round arm reached out and grabbed his arm, and that was followed by thick,

hunched shoulders topped by a head plastered with black, sweaty hair. There was some fumbling below the roof of the car that Michael couldn't see, and finally the immense woman started toward the house, borne by two canes and dwarfing even Michael's father, who Michael thought was the biggest man in the world. The woman, Michael realized, was his grandmother—who he had not seen since he was very small.

Grandfather emerged next. He was wearing a neatly pressed suit, and he straightened it as he stood next to the car. He glanced briefly to the house, where the family were all occupied herding Grandmother through the side door, glanced at the sky, and skipped—actually *skipped*—over to the garden, where Michael sat. He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and looked again at the sky.

Michael waved at him. *Hello, Grandfather*, he said. He waved again. *Grandfather, it's me!* Finally, when the old man still didn't respond, Michael reached out and grabbed the fabric of his pant-leg, and pulled.

There was a crunch, and Michael jumped back as Grandfather's feet came back into contact with the ground. It was true! Grandfather could fly—he was flying just then, even if it was only an inch above the ground! Michael looked up at the old man with awe. He was like Jesus!

At the tug, Grandfather did look down, and his eyes, furious points of black, met with Michael's. His lips

pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. *How dare you!* he snapped, and raised his hand, as if to cuff his grandson.

The hand lowered again, however, as Uncle Evan shouted hello, and strode over, camera in hand, to begin.

*We're ready to go,* said Uncle Evan, and Grandfather straightened, pulled his suit flat.

*I don't know why I agreed to this,* he grumbled. *You're not going to send this to the television, are you?*

*Don't worry, Dad—this is just for the family,* Uncle Evan said.

Grandfather nodded, grudgingly satisfied. *Where shall I stand?* he asked, and glared at Michael again.

Michael trembled, and felt as though he was going to cry.

Later, Michael did cry. Michael's mother held him, glaring at Grandfather's back as he skipped back to the car, his flight finished and his corpulent wife reinstalled in the driver's seat, to bear him home.

*You're ground-bound, boy,* Grandfather had said when he landed, and Michael had asked him if he could fly too.

Oh yes, Michael had cried that day. *Ground-bound,* Grandfather had called him, and he had been right—about him, Grandmother; about the whole pathetic family. They were all bound to the Earth; gravity hooked their flesh and winched it, inch by inch, year by year into the ground.

All of them, that was, but Grandfather.

Grandfather knew how to remove the hooks, free himself from the

tyranny of Earth. He wouldn't tell Mikey the boy. But he would sure as hell tell Michael the man.

"We must take Highway 400," said Grandmother as Michael started the car. She wouldn't give him the address—she insisted, rather, on giving directions from the passenger seat, so Michael might better concentrate on the road. Michael backed the car out of the driveway.

"Will you tell me where we are going?" he asked. "At least generally? It helps me to know."

Grandmother put a fresh cigarette in her mouth and fumbled with her lighter.

"Generally?" She chortled, and the car filled with fresh lung-smoke. "Generally, we're going to see your grandfather."

The car filled with Grandmother's rancid lung-smoke. Michael tightened his hands on the steering wheel, and thought, not for the first time, about putting them around Grandmother's throat.

IT SEEMED AS THOUGH THE DRIVE TOOK a day, the traffic was so heavy and the conversation so sparse. In fact, it was just barely over an hour before they reached the appropriate exit and Grandmother told him to leave the highway.

"You know your way," said Michael as they waited at the stoplight. It was snowing now—vectorlines of white crossed the beams of his headlights, and little eddies swirled close to the asphalt. Now that they were stopped, Michael cracked open his window and savored the fresh, clean air. "You must





have been out here before," he said.

"I used to drive here quite frequently, as a matter of fact." Grandmother regarded him, cigarette pinched between two fingers. Her skin was yellow in the dull instrument lights. "You will turn left," she said. "Then I must concentrate on the landmarks—the next turn is difficult to find."

"I don't know what landmarks there are around here," said Michael. Ahead of them was nothing but November-bare fields, and town lights making a sickly aurora on a flat horizon.

"The light's green," she said. "Turn left."

Michael made a wide left, and tapped the gas pedal to push the car up the slight rise over the highway.

"It's good you left Suzanne," said Grandmother as they accelerated along the dark stretch of road.

"What?" Michael felt the blood drain from his face. "What did you say, Grandmother?" he managed.

Grandmother stared out the front windshield, smoke falling from her lips like water from a cataract. "Watch the road, Michael."

Michael turned back to the road. As they drove, the darkness had completed itself—even the lights from the town to the north seemed impeded here, although Michael didn't see the trees that might have blocked it at the edge of the roadway.

"What did you say?" he repeated. "About Suzanne?"

"Only that it is good," she said, "that you left. I often wish your grandfather had taken that route

himself."

Michael was about to argue—Grandfather *had* taken that route, hadn't he? He'd left Grandmother, presumably to take to the skies and never look back. He opened his mouth to say so. But he couldn't force the air out; the jealous Earth pulled it to the base of his lungs.

"Why are you slowing down?" Grandmother asked. "We aren't there yet."

"S-sorry," he whispered. He glanced at the speedometer—they were down to 30 kilometres an hour. The road was posted at 80.

The car's engine strained as he stomped the gas pedal, and he held the steering wheel as though clinging to a ledge. Grandmother laughed.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said. "It's just that I never thought I'd be urging my grandson to *speed up*. But never mind—go as slow as you like. We're coming to the turn-off soon."

THEY TURNED ONTO A NARROW ROAD of cracked pavement and stone and deep wheel-ruts. The sky was dark, but there was nowhere really dark on this land; there were no shadows, no trees to cast them. Nothing grew higher than a few inches here—so the town light reflecting from the clouds painted the landscape a dim, silvery green.

Michael was breathing better now, and he could speak easily again. But he still felt the Earth pulling at his arms, his feet. A filling in his molar ached mightily, and the pain of it leaked across the inside of his skull like a bloodstain.

At length, he broached the subject of Suzanne again with Grandmother. Had Suzanne called before he'd arrived? Or had she spoken with someone else in the family who'd reported the separation to Grandmother? How had Grandmother learned of the situation with Suzanne? Michael was certain he hadn't told anyone...

"I'll tell you a story," said Grandmother instead of answering the questions directly. "I met your grandfather when he was in university. It was the Depression—1933, and no one had any money, certainly not my parents. But his family was one of means, even in those times. So Grandfather was able to go to school. He was lifted by the toil of his father. Do you understand, Michael?"

"Grandmother." Michael spoke in a low voice that sounded too much like a threat. He tried again, this time achieving at least a plaintive tone. "Grandmother, I understand. But—Suzanne?"

Grandmother motioned ahead. "Eye on the road, Michael. It's difficult along here."

Michael massaged the steering wheel, and looked ahead. The glow of his headlights illuminated cones of a complicated and undeniably damaged landscape. Keep his eye on the road? It was hard to tell where the road was in this jumbled plain of rock and asphalt. He let the car slow again while he peered into the dark, trying to make out a roadway.

"I met your grandfather along the boardwalk by the lake, near the Sunnyside Amusement Park," she

said. "There was a dance hall there—it was called the Palais Royale, and the price of entry was too dear for any of us, my friends and I. Even should we have scraped together the fifty cents they demanded, none of us owned a dress fine enough for the gentlemen who would frequent such a place. None of us owned a gentleman who would make a suitable escort... But we coveted it, all the same—we stood upon the boardwalk, the lake at our backs, listening to the fine songs and the gay laughter. Wanting the thing we could never have."

"Imagine that." Michael muttered it, barely a whisper, but Grandmother heard anyway. She raised her eyebrows and the car ground to a halt. Michael felt his fingers slip from around the steering wheel. His hands pounded down onto his thighs, and he winced in pain. He bit his lip against the urge to cry out, though. The quicker Grandmother finished her story, the quicker they'd find Grandfather—and God, he needed to find Grandfather.

"Please—" He shut his eyes and pulled his hands from his thighs. "—go on."

"Your grandfather also stood outside the dance hall sometimes," she said. "Only nearer the lake; we would sometimes see him, a strange and mysterious man, staring out at the waters. On the night we met, in the midst of June, I remember my friends were late. It was still dusk when I arrived, and the music had not yet started—although the motorcars were already pulling up to the front door, the beautiful ladies





already stepping from the cabs with their dashing escorts. And there he was, your grandfather, standing in his place by the beach. Seeing me alone, he called to me. 'Please, madam, I seem to require some assistance,' he said. 'Why, me?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said, 'please come down now.'

"Were I with my friends, I should never have done so—imagine, an unescorted young lady, going to the side of a perfect stranger!—but I was alone for the moment, and curious; there was something odd about him.

"As I drew nearer, I saw he was near the waterline, his trousers rolled up and his feet buried up to his ankles in the sand. He wore a white dinner jacket, I remember, and held his shoes and socks in one hand." Grandmother put her hand on Michael's arm. "'Thank you,' he said. 'I'm afraid I've gotten stuck.'"

"Help me," said Michael, who was feeling increasingly stuck himself.

"Yes," she said distractedly.

Grandmother's fingers squeezed on Michael's arm again, and as they did, he felt a great rush of fresh, cool air swimming into his lungs. Grandmother's eyes locked with Michael's. "I felt myself sinking a little in the soft sand," she said. "As though I'd just been loaded down with a parcel. My back bent, and my belly sagged. Then, easy as that, your grandfather stepped out of the mud."

Michael lifted his hand, flexed the fingers and drew a deep breath. He looked at Grandmother wonderingly.

"I must finish the story," she said.

"Grandfather stepped out of the mud, and onto the water."

"You mean—" *Into*, Michael was going to say, but stopped himself. He could tell by her eyes that Grandmother had meant what she said: Grandfather stepped *onto* the water. Grandmother nodded.

"He walked out a dozen yards, and danced a little jig. I remember how his toes splashed the water so delicately. 'Just like Jesus!' he shouted, grinning like a fool. 'And I couldn't do it without you!'

"Of course, I was enthralled. As was he—for that evening was when he learned to fly," she said. "Suzanne, bless her, has been spared the suffering—for you haven't yet thought it through, and you've left her. Intact."

"What are you talking about?" Michael's voice conveyed threat again, but this time he didn't bother to correct it. "Grandmother, this is a dreadful game you're playing. Now answer my question, please—how did you find out about my, ah, situation with Suzanne?"

Grandmother's smile was thin and cool.

"Why, Michael," she said, "we have known about your situation since you were a small boy."

"You can't have known—Suzanne and I only just separated a month ago. Why didn't you let on earlier? In your house?"

"Don't take that tone with me." Grandmother glared at him through wide lenses. Now something in her tone had become as threatening as Michael's had earlier. "Suzanne is incidental. Your true situation is that

you were a selfish, stupid boy then, and now you have grown into a selfish and stupid man. We decided you bore watching since the day we made this place."

"You—made this place?"

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you don't recognize it," she said. "It has changed since that afternoon."

"This is enough," he snarled, and opened the door. Whatever spell had ensnared him a moment ago was gone now—he could walk as well as anyone, air came and went in his chest with ease, and his arms were strong and mobile again. He slammed his door, and strode around the front of the car to the passenger side. Anger grew tumorously in his belly. Hadn't he waited long enough? Grandmother had been playing games with him all evening—*just one condition*, she said; *take me with you; I'll tell you a God-damned story*. And ...

And now, she insulted him. Called him selfish, stupid. Then and now.

"Get out!" he shouted, pulling the door open and grabbing Grandmother by the arm, squeezing deliberately too hard. "You said you'd take me to see Grandfather, and now by hell you will do so! Is he even here?"

She came out of the car easily—almost too easily for a woman of her size. Lifting Grandmother was like lifting a heavy coat, nothing more, and Michael stumbled back with wasted momentum when her feet landed on the ground. He regained his balance, and made a fist at her.

"I have to see Grandfather!" he shouted. "You'd better take me to him!"

She coughed again. Her eyes seemed enormous in the flat cloud-light. Infuriatingly, they didn't seem particularly frightened. She regarded him levelly as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a package of cigarettes.

Michael managed to hold his rage in his fist while she dug out her lighter, lit the cigarette; while she puffed the cigarette to life; up until the point where the smoke came cascading from her lips—and then it was no good. The anger leaked away, and left only a crumbling kind of shame behind. Michael grimaced at it. He'd threatened his grandmother—manhandled her! What could be worse, more base, than that? His hand dropped, open and empty, at his side. When he finally spoke, he did so quietly.

"Please Grandmother," he said, "I need to fly."

At that, Grandmother let loose another coughing laugh. "Evan told me this would be difficult," she said. "Come on," she said. "I'll take you to your grandfather. He's in the garden."

"The garden?"

"You remember, dear—from the movie."

At once, it came together for Michael. He looked around the landscape—now nothing but a flattened plain, mottled with stone and debris but fundamentally equalized by the force of the Earth. In his memory, he drew up the past—the house with its wide glass doors, and





the trees and the garden, the chaos of greenery there. The memory of it floated over the ruined ground like ghost towers.

Grandmother walked through them easily—she wasn't even using a cane—and Michael followed. After a time, the ground beneath his feet altered, and Michael realized he was no longer walking on gravel. The ground was brick now, smashed brick and masonry, mixed with the occasional splintered piece of wood.

"This place," said Grandmother, "was an unfortunate side-effect. But it was early, and we didn't quite understand the forces involved. And we did have to act quickly—so I suppose we really can't blame ourselves."

"Why did you have to act quickly?" Michael thought he might know the answer already—as he looked around, as far as he could see there was nothing standing above ankle-height. There was nowhere for Grandfather to hide. Not above-ground.

Grandmother stopped then, and turned around—turning, Michael saw, as though she were standing on a lazy susan. Or floating above the ground, just an inch. She fished into her purse, and pulled out a coil of what looked like rope. She tossed it in the air, and it unravelled slowly, drifting to him as though floating in water. Michael reached out and caught it easily. As he held it, he saw it wasn't rope at all—it was a length of plastic hose, ribbed with wire.

"If we hadn't done something soon," said Grandmother, "then your grandfather would have driven

us all into the Earth, with his foolish indulgence."

"Where is Grandfather?" said Michael. "I have to talk to him."

Grandmother smiled in a way that was not very grandmotherly at all.

"Look down," said Grandmother.

Michael looked down—and immediately realized his mistake. Gravity seized him with two strong hands around his skull, and he fell hard to his knees. He dropped the hose and put his hands out to break his fall—

And they sank into the ground.

Michael yanked back with his shoulder, but his hands wouldn't come out. It was as though they were set in cement. He tried to lift his knees, but they were embedded in the ground as well.

"Help me." The words came out as a whisper, but Grandmother heard them.

"Of course, dear," she said, and then he saw her feet beside him. She bent down and lifted an end of the tube she'd tossed him. "I'm sorry—I should have explained. It goes in your mouth—that's very important." Michael felt a hand on the back of his head, and Grandmother's other hand set the tube firmly between his teeth. "Clamp down," she instructed.

Michael sank further—his groin was pressed against the ground, and as far as he could tell, his thighs were almost completely submerged. In the distance, he heard the sound of a car engine.

Grandmother let go of the hose and his head, and moved further back. Her cold, strong hands pushed

down on his behind. There was a crunching sound as his pelvis slid through stone and wood and dirt. "You'll thank me for this later," she said. "It's better to go down feet-first."

The car engine grew louder. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael could see the glimmer of headlights. Finally, they grew very bright, illuminating the ground beneath him like a moonscape, and the car engine stopped.

Michael heard a strangled moan then—dimly, he realized it was his own, carried through the tube that began in his mouth and ended a few feet away.

There was another tube, he saw—sticking out of the ground, just a few feet in front of him. If he listened, he was sure he could hear the faint noise of breathing coming from it.

The car doors opened and closed, and Michael heard voices:

"Mother," said one—sounding very much like Uncle Evan. "Are we too late?"

"You *are* late," said Grandmother, grunting as she continued to work at Michael's back, "but I am managing."

"Well, now you can take a rest," said a woman—Aunt Nancy? "We can take over from here."

"Very well." Grandmother let go of Michael, and he tried to struggle. But he was at an odd angle—bent forward about forty-five degrees. He could thrash his shoulders, wave his head around, but that was as much as he could hope for.

Soon, he felt more hands on him. Together, they pushed down harder

than Grandmother could—so very soon he was nearly upright, waist-deep in the ground. His breath whistled through the tubing, cut by sobs.

He could see the other car now. It was a big American sedan, a Lincoln maybe, and as he watched, the back door opened, and a third person got out.

It was Suzanne.

He tried to spit out the tube so he could speak with her, *plead* with her—but as quick as he did, Uncle Evan pushed the tube back in.

Suzanne's feet crunched on the debris as she walked over to him. He couldn't see her face well—as she approached, she became not much more than a slender silhouette in the Lincoln's headlights.

"Do I have to do this?" Her voice was quavering as she bent to her knees, put her hands on Michael's shoulders. Michael thought he could see the glint of moisture on her cheeks—and was absurdly touched by it.

"It is the only way, dear," said Grandmother. "Don't worry—he'll be fine. The Earth looks after its own."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I thought we could work it out."

Suzanne pushed down on Michael's shoulders, and he felt himself sinking further—the Earth tickled his collar bone, enveloped his throat and touched his chin. Suzanne had moved her hands to the crown of his skull, and now she pushed down on that. Desperate, Michael spat out the tube.

"Suzanne! Wait! Maybe we can





work it out!" he gasped as the ground came over the cleft in his chin, pressed against his lower lip. "Help me up!"

Suzanne took her hands from his head at that.



"No," she said—although her voice was uncertain. She reached down, picked up the tube, and jammed it into his mouth. "Your grandmother explained what happens when I help you up." And then her tone changed, and it sounded very certain indeed. "I can't let you use me like that."

Then she pushed once more, and Michael was into the ground past his nose. He sucked cold, stale air through the tube. All he could see now was Suzanne's boots, her blue-jeaned knees, and the inch or so of space between them and the flattened ground.

"That's enough, dear," said

Grandmother, her voice sounding far away. "The Earth can do the rest."

Suzanne's hands lifted from Michael's head, and he watched as her feet, her knees lifted further from the ground. He heard laughter from above—liberated, unbound from the Earth—and then that same Earth came up to fill his ears. The only sound was the beating of his heart.

The beating of his own heart, and faintly, the beating of one other.

"Grandfather," he said, but the words were mangled through his tube and must have sounded like a bleat to anyone who lingered above. His tears made little pools on the ground in front of him. Although it was cold and hard that night, tightly packed in its own formidable grip, the Earth swallowed them greedily. ❁

## "Future Crime"

-- ON SPEC Spring 2000 Theme Issue --

In our parents' day, no one would have believed that a killer could be identified by matching a swab of saliva to a single hair, saliva on a cigarette butt, or a fleck of skin found at a crime scene. In the future, what technology will be available to solve crimes? To commit them? Will certain types of crime increase, while others disappear altogether? What will be the next wave in crime--media manipulation by corporate or government bodies, environmental terrorism, genetic tampering? You guessed it: the theme for our next special issue is "FUTURE CRIME."

The deadline is August 31, 1999, for publication in the Spring 2000 issue of ON SPEC.

(Please, no "hard-boiled private dick with a ray gun and a fedora" stories. We've read enough P.I. stories to open up our own agency, thanks.)

For general submission guidelines, send SASE to:

On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton AB Canada T6E 5G6.

# Love Knot

Jena Snyder

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

**T**wo hours ago, the square filled with folk from our town and every other town within a morning's brisk ride. Two hours ago, the sun reached its zenith in the sky, white and hot as fierce as the face of God, and the Reverend Williams and his deacons took my innocent Bethlehem from the dark place where they had kept her, and they bound her with heavy chains to the post that had already held so many. They spoke pious words, offering forgiveness and mercy and the glory of God, if only she would confess. She said nothing, of course, could say nothing: the questioners, in their perversity, always cut out the tongues of accused witches so their cries at being tortured would not distract the goodmen from their task.

Two hours ago, my beloved Bethlehem writhed and struggled, tearing her wrists bloody. The dry fabric of her sackcloth dress caught with a soft gasp, wicking the flames up her legs, her hips, torching her hair with a roar. Two hours ago, tongue or not, she screamed like a child as the fire slowly took her. She cried out for me, pleading and pleading for me to make it stop hurting.

And I did nothing.

WHAT COULD I HAVE DONE? To even admit more than a passing acquaintance with her was to damn myself to her fate. Three days ago, when I heard they had taken her, I put my hand into the fire to see how long I could bear the heat. I was sure my love of her was so strong, I could withstand the pain long enough to rescue her.

I was wrong. Barely a second passed before I jerked my hand back, the smell of singed hair and scorched flesh foul in my nose. I wept then, knowing I was a coward, that I would do nothing.

*If you'd had time, or warning...!* I tried to tell myself, but I'd had plenty of





both. A coward and a liar. I'd heard the whisperings, seen the way the goodwives' faces sharpened with suspicion when my Bethlehem, smiling, always smiling, drifted through the market, basket on her arm. She was such a scatterbrained sweet thing, her pretty head too full of dreams to hold any sense. Some called her slow, even stupid. I alone saw the beauty in her, the delight she took in simple things like the sound of rain or the crooked way a butterfly moved from flower to flower.

I still remember the first time I set eyes on her. I'd been gelding Goodman Bradford's yearlings that hot morning in July, and was tired and dirty and badly in need of a bath. To heat water on my stove would take forever and leave the house stifling; I'd wash myself in the river instead.

But as I stepped out of the willows onto the bank, I saw the abandoned water bucket and rage flew up in me like a flame. Someone was trespassing on my land! I angrily snatched up the bucket, forgetting the horse-stink on my clothes, the dried blood on my hands, everything but my fury.

And then I saw her on the edge of the grassy spit, dabbling her fingers in the water, a pale-haired girl with an apron full of harebells and tansy and goat's-beard. Her face was hidden in the shadow of her bonnet, but the color and twist of her hair told me she must be one of Goodman Stirrett's brood, from the neighboring farm. She must have been distracted by the pale, nodding harebells that grew on my side of the shallow river, and waded across to pick them, I realized. Her boots and stockings lay

on the far bank.

Teeth clenched, storming toward her, I wasn't halfway across the spit when I caught sight of her face. She had Goodman Stirrett's pale hair, to be sure, and his goodwife's small form, but beyond that, there was nothing of her parents in her. She was as lovely as the mass of flowers in her lap, and she was weeping.

A butterfly lay motionless on her hand, her palms dusted with color from its wings. "I killed it," she said, lips trembling in guilty sorrow. "I just wanted to look at it, and I killed it."

My breath caught in my throat, hot and searing, as if I'd sucked in a breath just as the fire caught on the hearth. *Don't*, a voice in my head said, but I ignored it. Kneeling beside the girl, I put my hands round hers, cupping them closed over the crumpled butterfly. "It's just stunned," I said gently. "You didn't kill it, child. Here, open your hands and see."

Reluctantly, she did. I sat back on my heels, watching her face light like the sun as the butterfly spread its wings and staggered into the air above her open hands. It danced there a full minute, glorious and magical, and then finally blundered away over the river.

"Did you see it?" She leapt to her feet, spilling her lapful of flowers as she caught my hands in hers. "Did you see it?"

"Yes," I said, laughing as she pulled me into a skipping, whirling butterfly dance. "Yes, I did."

IF ANYONE HAD FOUND OUT ABOUT us, a half-grown simpleton girl consorting with the likes of me, we





would have danced our last dance side by side at the end of the hangman's rope. Jesus forgive me, but I loved her. I guessed she was near fifteen years of age, with firm little breasts and soft hips and a tiny rounded belly I loved to use as a pillow when we lay in the field, the wheat blowing round us the same golden-pale color as her hair. It was wrong, what I did. She had a woman's body but a child's mind, simple and empty and so sweetly innocent. It was wrong, but she took such delight in me, in everything, I let myself be persuaded no harm could come of it.

She called me her dear one, her beloved. It breaks my heart to think of it, the way she cupped my dry cheeks in her hands and kissed the crow's feet around my eyes. "Your skin is as soft as goose down," she smiled. "And your hair is pretty as my mama's mirror, all silvery white."

But, blessed God, she made me feel young again, and desirable. No one had desired me since my wedding day, and that desire had only been for my land and holdings, not my face or body.

Young. Desirable. Could I be? Could her love do such a thing? Witch me into being young again? It was a kind of witchcraft, I knew. Not spells and love philters and potent mandrake root, but woman-craft, even if she was just a child.

It may have been witchcraft that drew me to her, but it was the bruises that made up my mind to take her away. Purple-black ones, new and tender; old yellow-green ones; the thin white switch marks up and

down her back, her legs—when I asked her about them, she would only say that she tried her best to be a good and dutiful daughter, but she failed.

Duty. Well I knew about that. I had had enough of duty in my forty-eight years to choke me: from my father, from the church, from the townsfolk... I gave myself a fierce shake, my mind made up. Bethlehem was a free spirit, a joyous child who deserved to be loved and cherished. I could give her a better life. But to spirit her safely away and start our new life together, I would have to move slowly, carefully. Casually mention in church that my father's sister was ill and begging me to come care for her back home. Sell my land to Goodman Brown, who'd been pestering me to do so since my father's body was laid in the ground. Pack only the necessities I could cram in my wagon: hoe and tiller to break new farmland; axe and hammer to build a new house for my beloved; the quilt I'd stitched for my wedding bed to keep us both cozy and warm all winter long. I began at once, hoping to leave this place behind before the leaves turned.

BUT ALL MY PLANS WERE FOR NAUGHT. A fever crept into the town on silent, invisible feet, and the children began to sicken and die. There had been no passing strangers, so it must be the devil himself who lay his hands on the innocents, flaming their faces and small bodies. When they died, it was claimed, they spoke in tongues, gabbling and muttering to that same devil who surely must



have snatched their senses.

I knew it was nothing but a fever, plain and simple, the one the natives treated with a strong tea they brewed from goldenrod and willow sap. It took a few of their children, the very sickly ones, but only a few. Reverend Williams must have known about the medicine from the baptized natives, but he would never have allowed anyone to brew witchy teas from trees or flowers. I suppose he must have thought it was better to lose a child to God than to save her by heathen means.

I cared nothing about the town's children, even Bethlehem's small sisters and brother. If God wanted them, well, then, He could have them. But when Bethlehem herself fell ill, I brewed a pot of the native tea and made her promise to drink it all over the next few days until she was well. She screwed up her nose at the sharp odor it gave off, proclaiming it nasty. The only way I could convince her to take it at all was to say it was a magic tea made of butterfly wings.

But saving one and not another was God's choice to make, not mine, and He punished me for being so prideful: He made Bethlehem quickly well again, leaving her with more than enough tea for her small sister, a babe in arms blue for lack of breath. A babe too small, too sick already, too young to tolerate the strong dose I'd brewed for her sister.

And Bethlehem, my poor empty-headed and guileless Bethlehem, told her mother that the magic butterfly tea hadn't worked.

→ ←

THE SMELL OF BURNED MEAT STILL hung in the air when I drove my wagon into the town. My hands on the leather reins trembled as I stopped beside the still-smoking pyre and saw what little was left of the girl who had called me her dear heart, her handsome one, her precious Lizabet. I leaned to the edge of the seat, and could just reach the pathetic burnt thing hanging from the chains.

"Widow Harris!" a woman called from not two feet away. I jumped, straightening on the spring seat, and clenched my fist to hide the greasy black soot on my fingertips. A thin-faced woman grinned up at me like a weasel in a gray dress and bonnet.

"Forgive me," I said, my voice only shaking a small bit. "I didn't see you there, Goodwife Merriam." Her husband was one of the deacons of the church.

"You missed the witch's burning," she said. "It was your duty to be here to see the good Lord's work done."

"I think the good Lord will forgive me for missing one burning," I said, "when I've seen so many. Besides, I had to deal with a party of natives who had a mare they wanted to breed with my chestnut. It's not my fault they came unannounced and stayed half the morning to make sure the mare was mounted properly."

Her tight little mouth squeezed into an unpleasant shape. "Breeding animals and entertaining heathen men in your home! It's ungodly, Widow Harris, a woman living alone, no husband to guide and protect her."

I would have liked to run her





down with the wagon, to feel the heavy wooden wheels grind over her bones and hear them crack like walnut shells. But I pulled my face into a smile, and clucked at old Leviticus to start moving again. "I had a husband, Goodwife," I told her. "He died many years ago, and God has never seen fit to give me another. Excuse me. I have some deliveries I must make."

Ungodly. I put my fingers in my mouth, punishing myself with the bitter taste of soot and ash. Beneath the foulness was the taste of Bethlehem's innocent kisses. They would pay for what they had done in the name of God. No matter what pain it cost me, I would make them pay.

My first stop of the day was at Deacon Plummer's house to deliver two jars of currant preserves. With the stream running through it, my farm was rich with fruit trees and bushes, and I did a brisk trade in preserves and dried fruit. The pin cherries were especially good this summer, and the cranberries too. I had five dozen jars carefully packed in the back of my wagon, enough for everyone. It took me nearly four hours to get to every house on my list, and Reverend Williams's housekeeper was putting dinner on the table by the time I got there.

When Goodwife Lovett called over her shoulder that it was just Widow Harris with her preserves, the reverend came to the door himself. "Lay another place, Goodwife Lovett," he said, smiling and shaking his head at my protestations. "Widow Harris, you look as if you're

nearly fainting with this heat. I must insist you stop awhile and break bread with us. And you've brought your preserves—how marvelous! We've been out of the raspberry and plum for a week."

Handsome. Bethlehem had once called me handsome, but it was a better word for one such as him, tall and straight with a clean-shaven face and clear gray eyes. He was perhaps fifty, only a little older than me, but his life had been considerably more pleasant. His hands were more womanly than mine, his skin more smooth and pale. He smelled of hard-milled lavender soap and tobacco, and the buttons on his city-tailored coat shone like gold. Handsome, I would have thought, if I hadn't recognized the way he tipped his chin and looked at me in an indifferent, measuring kind of way. My father had looked at me in the same way, my husband, too. Perhaps poor Bethlehem had been forced to speak, after all? The reverend was not one for idle invitation, no more than I was one for entertaining conversation: either there was information he wanted from me, or—it made me smile to think of it, and he smiled back, broadly—perhaps that lick of black soot was already working its magic.

I let him lead me into the narrow hallway, and to the dining room. No spare and spartan rooms in this house, I saw: the furnishings were all of the finest quality, soft leather and sleek velvet, the woodwork lustrous and dark. Wedgwood tableware, each piece as lovely as a cameo, graced the lace-covered table. I had



known the reverend enjoyed the finer things in life, but I'd had no idea just how much. As I lowered myself into one of the dining room chairs, I let my callused fingers soak up the smoothness of the polished wood. *Beautiful*, I thought. *So very beautiful, like my Bethlehem.*

As he paused to pour me a thimbleful of tawny sherry—"A medicinal glass,"—I caught the whiff of smoke from his black wool coat, and the smell of burnt flesh. And more. Just as he had straightened, the lead crystal decanter in his hands, I'd caught the scent of something else on him: harebells and tansy and goat's-beard. So he wouldn't see what was in my heart, I stared down at the sharp-tined fork beside the china plate, and imagined it plunged into his eye. I was smiling again when I looked up.

Goodwife Lovett served chicken roasted brown and crisp, and I smiled to think of what happy chance it was I'd brought him cranberry preserves today, so perfect with the chicken. I put a little on my own plate, leaving it untouched while he spooned it over the meat with relish, exclaiming over how tart and sweet it was at the same time. I ate little—a biscuit, some greens, a bite of chicken, what he would expect an old woman to eat—and concentrated on the sunset red of the jelly. Bethlehem's lips had been that color.

The sun was long down before Goodwife Lovett bore away the eggshell-thin bowls that had held trifle thick with cream and more sherry. The reverend did enjoy his luxuries.

I allowed him to convince me to join him in a cup of tea before I started home. His housekeeper might have wondered at his effusiveness that evening; after all, the solitary mid-aged widow who lived on the edge of Indian territory wasn't known for her scintillating conversation or handsome face.

I had been, though. Handsome, in my day. As handsome as my Bethlehem had said, when my hair was the color of the reverend's tawny sherry and shone like the polished cherrywood of his chairs. My eyes had never been quite the same blue as his Wedgwood china, but they were tonight. Cream and cranberry were my skin and lips, and not even his pretty embroidered cushions were as full and round as my breasts. Somewhere between the tea and moonrise, he uttered some small sound of dismay, knowing all this was very wrong, very ... ungodly ... but in the same breath, he dismissed the puzzled Goodwife Lovett for the night. Even before the door closed behind her, he pulled me to my feet and into his arms.

It had been a very long time since I'd been with a man, and it was no less unpleasant than it had been with Goodman Harris, hurried and painful and noisy and wet. For all his charming and refined airs, the reverend was no tender lover, in fact was far less tender than my stallions mounting the young mares in their first season. I hated to think of him grunting and sweating like this on top of poor Bethlehem. I turned my head when he tried to kiss me, and kept my mouth resolutely shut tight





on the taste of soot.

When he was done, he rolled off me with a great sighing gasp. His slack mouth tried to shape words, but his head lolled, and he fell into a deep sleep right there on his velvet sofa. "Perhaps you shouldn't have been so gluttonous with the cranberry preserves," I murmured. It wasn't the cranberry, but the chamomile and yarrow and belladonna I'd added to the preserves that made him sleep so soundly. I left him snoring, trousers at his knees, a pretty sight to explain to his housekeeper come morning, and hurried back downstairs to put Leviticus back in his traces and hie myself home. I could have tried to run, but the outcome would have been the same no matter what. This way, I could make sure I paid my debt to Bethlehem.

Working by lamplight, knowing I had but till morning when the reverend awakened and realized he'd burned the wrong witch, I gathered the ingredients I needed for one last and very special recipe.



First, the reverend's seed, carefully saved on my handkerchief. Then a little of his hair, small locks clipped while he was sleeping, from his head, from beneath his arms, and from round the root of his sex. Some fresh earth, rich and black, still warm from the August sun, from the spot by the stream where I had first seen Bethlehem weeping over her dead butterfly. A handful of the greasy black soot that had been my beloved, gently scraped in the dark from the charred bones still hanging from the stake in the square. I mounded it all on the sticky hand-

kerchief, and tied the bundle with a long lock of my silver hair. Finally, a drop of my spittle, a drop of my blood, and a kiss to seal the promise.

"We are tied now, Reverend, in a love knot. You and me and my beloved," I whispered. "What you did to Bethlehem, you did to me tonight, taking your pleasure, spilling your seed. We're one now, you and me and Bethlehem, too."

THE SUN WAS BARELY ABOVE THE horizon before they came for me, Reverend Williams and his deacons and half the town. The reverend looked as if he had slept very poorly, perhaps troubled by violent dreams and even more violent cramps. Belladonna can do that, if one uses too much, and I'd made sure I had. A few faces were missing—Deacon Merriam and his wife—and more would be gone tomorrow, and tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that as they ate my preserves, all laced with slow-killing poisons: golden bean and skullcap and the deadly ground-up stones from pin cherries. They'd all pay, even long after I was gone. The reverend's expression told me he remembered quite clearly what we had done last night. Somehow, looking at me now, those memories were repulsive to him.

"Kiss me, my darling," I murmured to him, and he struck me across the mouth with the back of his hand. I tasted blood and, by the shock on his face, could see he did as well. He turned his head—much as I had, refusing his kiss last night—and spat in revulsion on my clean floor. As they dragged me into the

yard, I saw the gob of his spittle was dark and bloody, and it gave me strength for what was to come.

They threw a rope over a stout bough of the big apple tree in my front yard, and pushed me up onto the wagon, which they were piling round with every stick of wood they could find: firewood, furniture, bales of straw, anything that would burn. The rope with a crude slip knot was put round my throat and pulled taut so I had to stand on my toes, precariously balanced, on the spring seat. I shivered with the cruel choice they'd given me: I could burn in the fire, or I could leap from the seat and hope the noose would break my neck, quick and clean. If not, I would dangle at the end of the rope, strangling slowly, engulfed by the flames.

"Don't you want me to confess, Reverend Williams?" I called to him as they crammed the space beneath the wagon seat with small sticks. "Don't you want me to tell you all the pleasures I took with young Bethlehem, Goodman Stirrett's halfwit daughter? Or do you already know, because you did the same thing, kissing the pretty pink tips of her breasts, just like you did with me last night? Do you rut with all the witches you test, Reverend? Does it take you closer to God to climb atop a weeping halfwit girl and spill your seed in her? Did you let my Bethlehem keep her tongue until you finished, or does the taste of blood stiffen you?"

I would have said more, but someone gave the noose a sharp jerk and choked me into silence. It gave me great pleasure, even through the

pain, to see the Reverend's face go suddenly red, then purple, and watch him claw at the invisible noose round his own neck. Dark spots floated before my eyes, my chest aching as I struggled to draw a breath, but the sudden flare of the kindling sharpened me.

*For you, my beloved,* I whispered, no sound coming. I could feel the heat creeping toward me, could hear the crackle of the small sticks catching, and then the flames were at my bare feet *oh Bethlehem forgive me snatching at my dress I should have come for you* and the Reverend's face was wonderful in panic as he too felt the fire.

He began to shriek, stamping his feet and slapping at his clothes, smoke rising from his elegant jacket and sparks lighting his carefully-combed hair. The pain was hideous, beyond bearing, and I was glad for sharing it with him.

*I should have come for you,* I wept. *Oh Bethlehem, I can't bear this!*

The reverend was flailing and screaming like something possessed, his hair on fire, the townsfolk too stunned to think to put it out.

*Lizabet!* I heard a happy voice call, and I looked up into her sunny, shining face. *Lizabet, come dance with me!*

And I went to her in one great leap, my heart full of joy, my body left behind, forgotten like the pain, no more a part of me than the reverend hopping and twitching at the end of an invisible rope, black and fiercely burning in the dust of my yard. ❁





ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Authors

ROBERT BOYCZUK ("The Back Shed") Everything you need to know about Robert Boyczuk, you can find at:

<[http://pandora.senecac.on.ca/~boyczuk/writing/writing\\_main.html](http://pandora.senecac.on.ca/~boyczuk/writing/writing_main.html)>

IAIN DEANS ("Learning from the Wings") is a writer from Halifax, Nova Scotia. His work has previously appeared in *Prairie Fire*, *Zygote*, *Black Cat 115*, *Yield*, and *Dig*. He has work forthcoming in *Prairie Fire*.

MELISSA HARDY ("Metallica") was born and raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She has published two novels, *A Cry Of Bees* (Viking Press, 1970) and *Constant Fire* (Oberon, 1995). A third novel, *Demon Barrow*, is scheduled to come out with Quarry Press in 1999. She has published over twenty short stories and her work has been included in several anthologies. In 1994 she won the Journey Prize for the most accomplished work to appear in a Canadian literary journal for "Long Man the River." Now a Canadian citizen, she lives in London, Ontario, with her husband, Ken Trevenna, and their golden retriever, Buddy.

SANDRA KASTURI (untitled poem and "Sea Wrack") sulkily ekes out a living at a day job in Toronto. She spends a lot of time quitting smoking, wearing blindingly red lipstick, trying out single malt scotches, and dating unsuitable men. She has a theory that everything ever written is really about love—even the stuff that isn't.

DAVID NICKLE ("Ground-Bound") is the co-winner of the 1998 Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Short Fiction (with Edo van Belkom for "Rat Food," which appeared in the Spring 1997 issue of *On Spec*) and co-author of *The Claus Effect* (with Karl Schroeder). He lives and works in Toronto.

HELEN RYKENS ("Spring Planting") dropped out of a promising political career in order to write speculative fiction. She lives in Toronto with her partner, Dan, and has a day job in a downtown community center. Horticultural ability runs in her family, but she avoided gardening until the age of thirty-five, when she impulsively destroyed her front lawn to make room for perennials. She joined the Cecil Street writers' workshop a few years ago, and this is her first sale.

MICHAEL SKEET ("Hérons") is a writer, editor and broadcaster. With his wife, Lorna Toolis, he lives in Toronto. This is his fifth appearance in *On Spec*.

LEAH SILVERMAN ("Deep Blue Sea") is enjoying her third year free of the University of Toronto and is slowly getting over the trauma. She now has her own digs, a job, and two cats. Just like real folks.

JENA SNYDER ("Love Knot") has a novel coming out from Ravenstone, the new genre imprint from Turnstone Press, in the fall of 1999. More information will be available on the Ravenstone website <<http://www.turnstonepress/ravenstone/>> later this year.

PETER WATTS' ("Home") life (or lack thereof) has already been documented in previous

biographical notes; seek those out if you've any interest in scrotal cysts or the sleazy duplicity of UBC's marine mammal unit. "Home" was originally written as part of a novel (*Starfish*, Tor Books, July 1999—see [www.globalseve.net/~pwatts/](http://www.globalseve.net/~pwatts/)), but its ending was way too upbeat. Instead, in the novel, Judy Caraco gets beaten to death by a bunch of cattle-prod-wielding physiologists in giant condoms. Really. Kind of makes you want to buy the book, doesn't it?

LYLE WEIS (Editorial: "Empedocles and the four elements") was one of the instigators of this 10-year-old magazine. He has published a poetry collection, short stories, three young adult novels, and is currently working on a novel for the adult market.

ELIZABETH WESTBROOK ("Dust to Dust") delights to indulge her taste for life and writing SF in Calgary. She has published in other genres as well as in *Parsec* and, previously, in *On Spec* ("Bullbreaker," Winter 1997).

### Artists

TIM HAMMELL (Cover) Please see page 5.

JAMES BEVERIDGE ("Hérons" and "Love Knot") dwells and creates aesthetic anarchy in Edmonton. He has been decorating walls and vehicles with visions from, well, we're not really sure we want to know. Jim is also working on computer game backgrounds and his comic will be available on the net soon. <<http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>>

ROBERT BOERBOOM ("Dust to Dust") lives in Brantford, Ontario. In the past six months, he has been sculpting imaginary birds, painting heads for the wax museum, and building ornamental bird houses.

LAR DESOUZA ("Ground-Bound") is an award-winning artist who has diplomas in Interpretive Illustration and Computer Graphics. He has 10 years' experience working full time and freelance, and has been active in the SF art community for closer to 15.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK ("Learning from the Wings") has been a professional illustrator and cartoonist for eighteen years. Her artwork recently appeared on the cover of Monica Hughes' anthology *What if... Amazing Stories Selected by Monica Hughes*, published by McClelland & Stewart.

ADAM MORAN ("The Back Shed") says, "I'm an avid reader of SF. It would be difficult for me to decide what I like more, reading SF or illustrating it. Probably both."

NANCY NILES ("Spring Planting") has just moved to Carstairs, Alberta. Her first illustration for *On Spec* appeared in the second issue, Fall 1989.

ROBERT PASTERNAK ("Metallica"), an illustrator living in Winnipeg, recently had a couple of covers on *Science Fiction Chronicle*, worked on a promotional CD package that was taken to France, and had some comics printed in a Finnish underground comic.

MARK A. SAVONA ("Deep Blue Sea"), a resident of Toronto, has spent two years of illustration at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and presently spends his spare time "either writing screenplays or hanging with my beautiful girlfriend, Cindy." 🍀



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The donors listed below have all given generously in the past year. We are grateful for their support.*

### SPONSORS:

Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch;  
The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts;  
The Department of Canadian Heritage;  
and Clear Lake Ltd.

### PATRON:

Rick LeBlanc and the Infrastructure Network

### SUPPORTER:

Randy Reichardt  
Roger Moore

### SPECIAL THANKS:

*The continued success of ON SPEC is possible only because of the help of friends, volunteer workers, and colleagues who donate their time and energy. We would like to thank these special people:*

Timothy Anderson, Candace Jane Dorsey, and The Books Collective; Sara, Matt and Colin Bamsey; Jane Bisbee; Merrill Distad and the University of Alberta Book and Record Depository (B.A.R.D.); Marlene Hanson; Tobey Morris; and Donna and Lyle Weis.

Financial support provided by  
the **Alberta Foundation for the Arts**, a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries



**The Alberta  
Foundation  
for the Arts**

**Alberta**  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS

Financial support provided by  
the **Canada Council for the Arts**



LE CONSEIL DES ARTS  
DU CANADA  
DEPUIS 1957

THE CANADA COUNCIL  
FOR THE ARTS  
SINCE 1957

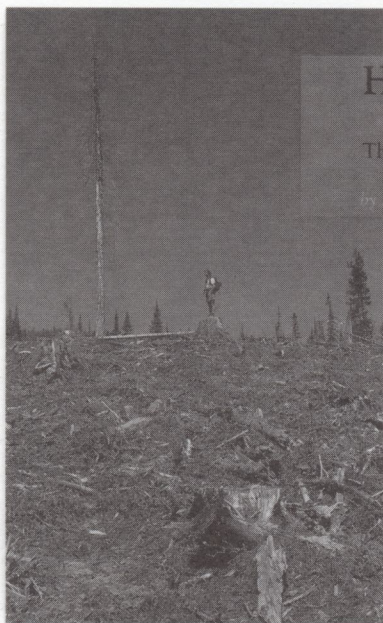
THE MAGAZINE OF THOUGHTFUL COMMENTARY ON  
THE CULTURE, POLITICS AND ECONOMY OF ALBERTA.

• FICTION BY KATHERINE GOVIER •

Vol. 1, No. 4 • Fall 1998 • \$4.50

# ALBERTA VIEWS

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT ALBERTA FOR ALBERTANS



## How Special is This Place?

The promise betrayed—  
Special Places 2000  
by ANDREW NIKIFORUK

## The Next Alberta

The future envisioned  
by Generation Next  
by MYRNA KOSTASH

## Home on the Range

Alberta rocks for Jann Arden,  
Ian Tyson and James Keelaghan  
by DAVID VEITCH



Opinion, Humour, Reviews, Arts Events, Garden,  
Plus: Ralph Klein, Ian Urquhart, Robert Kroetsch

**SUBSCRIBE NOW!**

Box 23030 Connaught P.O., Calgary, Alberta T2S 3B1  
website•[www.albertaviews.ab.ca](http://www.albertaviews.ab.ca)



*Press*

**ALPINE**

complete printing services

design and typesetting

phone: (780) 435-9394

fax: (780) 436-8464

9790 - 51 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta

designed by Advance Graphic Art Services Ltd.

 **Alpine Press** LTD.