

on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

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Hayden Trenholm and
more...



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summer 2005 vol 17 no 2 #61

fiction

Rat Patrol	Kevin Cockle	5
The Land	Patrick Lestewka	19
Woman Born Fully Formed	Marlene Wurfel	32
The Promised Land	Antonio Ruffini	39
Boys Night Out	Rob Hunter	49
Surrealist World	Cliff Burns	64
Search	Ceri Young	72
Like Monsters of the Deep	Hayden Trenholm	77
A Moment Before C	Tanya Allan-Johnson	92
Testing Edon	Robert. J. Santa	99

poetry

Period Between Points	Kasey Kieler	31
Vivisection	Anna Mioduchowska	37
The Ghostly Nymph of Creignish	Amy Julia McCormick	63
Contexts	Sophie Joe	70
Alternate Narrative	Elizabeth Bachinsky	76
Happy There in My Agony	Jude Dillon	91
High Priestess	Alyxandra Harvey-Fitzhenry	107

nonfiction

Editorial: The New Cornucopia	Steve Mohn	3
About our contributors		110

cover

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The New Cornucopia

Steve Mohn, Fiction Editor

Literary agencies online occasionally offer more than contact info. *Manus & Associates*, under submission guidelines, ventures this definition of SF: “The genre is highly beholden to the culture and expectations of its cult-like, primarily young male audience [and] has gathered a reputation as an essentially unliterary genre.”¹ A big slick agency wants you to get this so don’t shrug it off. Instead, hear Manny Coto, creator of Showtime’s *Odyssey 5* brought in to co-executive produce a floundering, soon-to-die *Star Trek: Enterprise*. “It’s like there’s a certain number of science-fiction fans, and that’s it. It’s a genre that appeals to a certain type of individual, and there’s not a lot of them.”²

I suspect most science-fictioners would bristle at these generalizations. I don’t. They feel true. The agency wants you to know what an SF book is, and is not. Don’t write *The Handmaid’s Tale* and call it SF; the fan base will not read it, which means the agency can’t sell it to them. And the TV producer is speaking as a fan, one of those cultish young males who’s also made a lot of money in SF. Take what they say as fair warning. There’s a market out there for what you do, but it may be full for now, and it may not want you anyway, no matter what you do, nor even how well.

My own experience is neither wide nor deep. But after you've sold a few bits, and had many more rejected, after you've been reviewed well and poorly, a picture develops like a Polaroid of a business that functions the way it does, regardless of what you want it to be or hope it might become—mainly for the sake of including you in it. Norman Spinrad said somewhere that the worst thing to ever happen to SF was fandom. Most fans, including his, have always shrugged off that one too, but have done so at the risk of SF itself. They might also shrug off what I'm saying here at a time when fewer publishers and agencies are even willing to look at SF, which they mean to include both horror and fantasy.

I'm not throwing down any gauntlets, but consider: the big-box book stores (to say nothing of Amazon.com) sell lots of books, or they wouldn't exist. Yet book and television people of some heft say of SF: This is a sleepy pond, with a few big frogs (writers, agents, editors) croaking in it, while trying to ignore the edges of the pond shrinking toward them. To maintain themselves, SF's publishing elders are loath to lose the fan base just to entice new readers, who might not hang around, yet might become the writers with new ideas to reinvigorate a dwindling and lightly respected genre, and even expand its market share.

Then again, things do just wind down. No one writes much narrative poetry anymore. Who cares about black-and-white TV or film? Drip painting is over. So is Cubism. Silent movies, anyone? This page and a half will not become the stoneless grave of science-fiction, nor would I mean it to be. I continue to feel that magazines like *On Spec* in Canada, and *The Third Alternative* in England, are trying to let new work (which must call itself something so why not SF?) bring some next and better genre slowly into being. SF, horror and fantasy, as we know them, were born in the pulps of the 1920's. May the new cornucopia descend from journals such as ours. •

Sources Referenced:

1. Manus & Associates Literary Agency, Inc.

<http://www.manuslit.com/flash/index.html>

2. "Television; It's Long Trek Over; The Enterprise Pulls Into Dry Dock"; *The New York Times*, May 1, 2005, Dave Itzkoff, Arts and Liesure Desk

Maybe if a kid got a sense that there's something bad at the end of the road for kids who make lousy decisions—maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Rat Patrol

Kevin Cockle

"Well, that oughta do it," Arthur Low said, arching his stiff back after placing the last of the warfarin-laced rolled-oat squares in Travis McGuinn's massive bale stacks. Could have used barium carbonate or zinc phosphide out here, but Travis had grandchildren and warfarin would be safer if there were any mishaps. The bait squares were also obviously marked—little pieces of brightly coloured confetti woven into the oats. Most kids knew that meant rat poison, kept their hands to themselves.

"Yep," said Travis, squinting up at bright blue sky, measuring the chance of precipitation through force of habit. "Well, thought I'd better have you check. Could'a sworn I saw a rat amongst the bales, day before last."

Probably a hedgehog, thought Arthur. *Or a ground squirrel.* "Did the right thing," Low said as he removed his ball cap, revealing an almost entirely bald head—a thin gray line held its ground from ear to ear at the back. False sightings were common, but keeping Alberta rat-free was no joke and even though Arthur Low was the pest control officer in these parts, it was up to everyone to be vigilant. Arthur didn't mind the false alarms. He'd have to check these farms and ranches anyway—every building, every structure at least once a year—but coming out when people called made things more social.

"Looks like a sprinkle on the way, prob'ly around 5:00 or 6:00 or so. Good to..." Travis prattled on as Arthur nodded, shifting his gaze and attention back to the truck. Jake Saunders was toeing dirt, looking restless. Low felt the twinge of a smile on his lips, fought it down. Kid was itching for mischief right about now—have to give him something to do.

"...you know?" Travis said, waiting for response. Arthur double-clutched, opened his mouth to say something, when Jake hollered from the truck, "Hey Arthur—phone's ringing."

"Excuse me Trav," Arthur said, big hand reassuring on the smaller man's arm: saved by the bell. Low ate up the distance with bow-legged strides, getting to the cab and taking the big hand-held unit from the boy.

"Ya-lo—this is Arthur." John Lockey's brassy voice scraped loud over the cel—even Jake could hear it. "Calm down, son," Arthur said, dropping his voice to instill some order. He listened as Lockey screeched, Jake staring up with an interested frown. Arthur's face had gone rigid, blue eyes steeling-up as he nodded, taking in the info.

"Sit tight Johnny, okay?" Arthur said when the voice finally stopped squawking. "I'm over at McGuinn's right now, but I'm on my way. You get Agnes and Jean back in the house and tell 'em to stay there. And you stand up to Jean if you have to John, you hear me? You tell her to stay clear of Hank until I get there. You understand me?" There was throttled agreement—as though the prospect of standing up to Jean Dolan was only slightly less daunting than facing down the minions of hell.

Arthur switched the phone off and made eye contact with Jake long enough for the kid to say, "What?"

Arthur didn't know what to say right off the bat. He went with, "Get in the truck," and promptly followed his own advice.

They pulled out of McGuinn's with a tornado trail of dust beneath the Ford's back wheels, Arthur driving fast, the wind rushing in through Jake's open window.

Jake Saunders. Arthur Low was sixty years old, had never had kids, his first and only wife having died in the attempt some forty years ago. Never remarried, and as the years went by, he'd forgotten about wanting certain things—got so he didn't need them. He was friendly enough, not what you'd call cold, but he kept his distance from folks, until eventually, things just got smooth and even and easy. What people knew of him, they tended to like, and Arthur stopped them right there. So when Todd Evers had asked him to take Jake on for the summer, Arthur had said the only thing that made sense: "No bloody way!"

"Come on Artie." Todd had grown up not so far away in Brooks, knew Low through family connections. Evers had fought his way up Tory ranks to Minister of Agriculture under the McCullough administration, and the old "Mr. Low" of Todd's youth had been replaced by "Artie" in lock step with the rise. Arthur didn't much care for politicians, but as he was the 'rat patrol' for the South-Eastern edge of the province, he dealt with the Department of Agriculture on a regular basis. Evers wasn't bad, as the breed went.

"What do I know about kids?" Arthur shook his head.

"What does anyone know about kids? Look, my sister Tracy's got her hands full. Husband bolted, she's got two younger daughters to look after and this kid Jake's on the verge, you know? Caught him with a little weed—nothing serious, but she doesn't know where he got it, who he's hanging with. This kid needs some old-time upbringing, Art. You're the steadiest hand I know, and I'll bet you could use the help over the summer. Think of him as unpaid labour."

"I pretty much got that covered."

"That's funny—you're a funny cowboy—I like that. Seriously."

"But... where will he stay? What will he do?"

"Mattress on a floor Art—the harder the better. Put him in a tent out back the cabin. Make him mow lawns and carry heavy shit, you know? He's thirteen. He needs to get his act together or he'll get to a place where I can't step in any more, you know?"

On and on like that. Todd Evers hadn't gotten to where he was by being unpersuasive, and Arthur knew eventually he'd be taking on an apprentice, but before he gave in, he fixed Todd with a meaningful stare and asked him pointblank: "What if I have to take care of some badness while he's around?"

Evers had smiled indulgently, like young men new to power always seemed to do. Like they knew all the answers. "Oh. Yeah, that. When was the last time you had to deal with any of that?"

"Maybe five, six years ago," Arthur admitted. "But that's only counting when It takes shape so you can handle It. You can't tell me It hasn't been active for the last little while. You can't tell me everything that's happened the last few years—that's all just been bad luck."

"Yeah, well. From what I understand, the peak threat from the region came back in the thirties—It doesn't have the juice to seriously hurt people any more. Look, if it so happens the kid sees something scary, maybe that's not so bad. Maybe if a kid got a sense that there's something bad at the end of the road for kids who make lousy

decisions—maybe that's not such a bad thing. But you and I both know the worst he'll see is some traps and a whole lot of hard labour."

"That ain't the worst," Arthur had said, having seen "the worst" first hand. "Not by a long shot."

Jake busted up the reverie with one of his sudden questions, forcing Arthur to refocus on the present. "Why you got so many hats?" the kid blurted. Johnny Cash rumbled on the radio, barely audible over the wind.

"What?" Arthur said.

"You got about fifty ball caps hanging on the wall at the cabin. But you always wear this same old beat up 'Toro' cap. What's with all the hats?"

Arthur shrugged. "People give me hats—I collect 'em."

"You collect hats," Jake grinned, shaking his head. Arthur grinned too. Couldn't help himself. Kid brought it out of him.

It hadn't been as bad, as awkward as Arthur had thought. Jake wasn't some juvenile delinquent—he was shy, reserved, but he wasn't hard-bitten or looking for trouble. He was lazy by nature, and drifted where the wind tended to blow, but he wasn't like those kids Arthur saw on the news, shooting up stores and rampaging through schools. Jake was the kind of kid who took his cues from the strongest person in his immediate vicinity, for good or ill. And when Arthur had been the only person around, and Jake had learned how the townsfolk, farmers and ranchers all respected 'the rat-patrol man', Jake had responded in kind. Kid hadn't enjoyed the 5:00 a.m. starts, hardy Scottish porridge breakfasts and manual labour at first, but he'd come around. Got so he'd dry dishes without being asked, while Arthur washed. Seemed to enjoy watching CFL games—Arthur in his big old E-Z chair, Jake sitting crosslegged on the floor. By and by, Arthur had to admit, taking care of the kid wasn't a chore. He hadn't realized how empty his little cabin had become, until he'd let someone else in.

The Ford surged off gravel onto blacktop, roaring alone down Highway 41 as Arthur coaxed the engine to sixty (he still reckoned in miles per hour). He'd been putting off buying a new truck for a couple of years, wanting to squeeze every last drop of utility out of the existing one, but now he could have used some brand new horsepower. Out of the corner of his right eye, Arthur spotted an abandoned farm house leaning atop a low hill, gray and seemingly fragile, yet refusing to go down. Countryside was full of such stubborn relics. Reminded him of the people. Reminded him of Hank and Jeannie Dolan.

Hank Dolan. Arthur shook his head. Stress of the mad cow scare,

the ongoing crush of financial problems, and a sudden stroke had used Hank up in a series of unrelenting hammer blows. It had been sickening to watch—Hank making desperate moves, working harder, worrying more—and every decision just turning on him and biting him back like fangs in the face. Death had come as a release after all those trials—for Hank, and for Jean—but of course, even then, there had been mistakes to be made.

Jean Dolan was as shrewd a business person as you could find—had no qualms about making pragmatic decisions. Some of the local ladies even accused her of being *too* pragmatic—like she enjoyed the feel of making tough decisions, and having everyone know she was making them. After the funeral, she'd wasted no time restructuring—got the books prettied up for final liquidation, started divestiture with single-minded focus. She was getting out, and neither her love of the land, nor her memories of her previous life could stop her from making the best damn deals she could. But what Arthur still couldn't figure was why she insisted on handling the funeral the way she had. She'd been ruthless, even merciless with every other consideration since, but when it had come to Hank's remains, Jeannie'd been downright sentimental.

They'd buried Henry Dolan whole, in the little cemetery that bordered on Smith's and Crowley's—the one that held bodies stretching back to the flu epidemics of 1918. Some of *those* bodies hadn't stayed put either, had to be handled by the men who would eventually be legitimized and funded by the province as 'rat patrols'. Arthur had warned her against it, but in the end, Jeannie Dolan did what Jeannie Dolan wanted. Truth is, the harder Arthur had pressed, the more resolved Jean had been to go ahead. Couldn't really blame her, but Arthur had had a bad feeling about the whole thing—the queasy inevitability of it, like getting Hank into that particular ground might have been the point all along.

Jake fiddled with the radio, searching for and finally picking up a weak signal out of Lethbridge: the monotone thumping of some rap-artist. Arthur winced. Jake started nodding his head in time with the so-called music, riding his arm out the window like an airplane wing in the wind.

"You know the Empire State building in New York? The top of it?" Jake said, nimble mind taking off on its own tangent. Arthur and Jake had logged a ton of miles in the old Ford over the summer and Jake's abrupt musings had helped to make that time fly.

"Yeah?" Arthur said, perplexed, but knowing that resolution was right around the corner.

"It's supposed to be a docking port for airships. Is that wild or

what? In the thirties, they figured Zeppelins would cross the Atlantic and anchor-up on the Empire State Building. Guess they tried it once and it didn't work. But still. That's cool."

Arthur chuckled—the kid's curiosity was mind-boggling. Some of that had gotten him into trouble, but overall, it was an endearing quality. Arthur wondered how many kids knew that about the Empire State building. He wondered how many kids thought about airships at all, these days.

Suddenly, the feeling hit Arthur like a sandbag in the stomach: how fond he'd grown of the kid in a few short weeks. It had been nothing but early mornings, chores, long drives, routine border checks, trap-laying and investigations, but the gaps had been filled in by Jake's inquisitiveness, good natured grumbling and quirky sense of humour. It had been a unique summer for Arthur Low, the most memorable, maybe the best of his life since Emily had passed. He wouldn't ask, wouldn't even bring it up, but if Todd Evers suggested that Jake should spend next summer helping out on patrol, that would be just fine with Arthur.

There was however, the little matter of Hank Dolan come back to life that needed to be tended to first.

Jake wouldn't necessarily be in danger over at Dolan's—most of the time, people rarely got more than badly spooked by these events. Evers had been right about that—badness was reduced to mean little tricks and illusions these days, but this thing with Hank—it was positively muscular, bringing him all the way back like that. Arthur hated having to expose Jake like this, but there wasn't time to take the kid home first, and besides—when it came right down to it—Arthur wanted him where he could see him. "Jacob," Arthur said, reaching to turn off the radio.

"Yeah?"

"When we get to Jeannie Dolan's, you stay right with me until I figure out what's what, all right?"

"Sure, yeah."

"Yeah. Don't go wandering off."

"They got rats? Real rats? Finally!"

"Yeah," Arthur said, face grim. "Maybe they do."

• • •

"Up at Crowley's they had that dog went wild and killed a couple hogs

then went after Jimmy Crowley, remember?" John Lockey said, trying to recall other instances of badness in his lifetime. Agnes Dolan, Jean's older sister, sat in the rocking chair, gently squeaking back and forth. Jean sat with one broad hip on the porch rail, rifle across her lap, occasionally turning and looking over her shoulder past the circular barn.

"And when I was little, supposedly this drilling crew went missing, just left all their stuff out in the open," Johnny continued. Nobody found anything except the rig and the sheds and tools and stuff." Jean nodded. "Yep, that's true. The dog wasn't nothing though—just rabies. Nobody got hurt."

"You remember grandma telling us those stories about the flu?" Agnes piped up, eyes wide, looking frail and small in her pink summer dress. With her white hair tugged back into a disapproving bun, she was just about as opposite in build and appearance to her sister as a woman could be. "Whole towns got killed off around here and then just disappeared. There's towns around here that ain't even on maps anymore—just old houses and broken down fences. Died faster than the census-takers could keep track."

"The flu's the flu—nothing supernatural about that," Jean said, brushing a fly away from her ear. "True enough about the ghost towns though."

"And you don't want to be going to those towns either," Agnes said, warming to the recollections. "Maybe they got cleaned out and maybe they didn't. That was before the rat men you know." She took a sip of coke, then kept on babbling. "I 'member grandma telling me, 'It's just bad land, Agnes'—that's what she'd used to say. Just something about this place don't like people living here. Saves Itself up till times get bad, then comes on strong, gets people when they're at their most vulnerable." That got a look from Jean, because it sounded right. Times had sure as hell been bad lately. On top of that, she'd been missing Hank, what with making plans to go and leave all the memories behind. She'd been missing him, and now... here he was.

"Jesus!" John shoved himself up off the wall and pointed—Jean stood and turned. Coming around the western curve of the round barn, trailing his hand along the wooden wall of it, Hank Dolan wandered, like he'd never seen the place before. Jean swallowed, clutched the gun up tight. Agnes caught her breath, stopped rocking, and gripped her woven God's-eye the harder.

Hank looked around, shuffled to the old water pump, ran his hand across it. Occasionally as he turned, his eyes shone silver, and his

face bore no expression. He scuffed at dirt, rubbed his hands on the sides of his jeans. No plan, no hurry. He seemed lost, aimless, random.

But eventually, he saw them on the porch.

"Get inside," Jean said, bringing the gun barrel up. She was a big woman, Jeannie Dolan was, shoulders and forearms like a man. When she barred your way, you paid attention.

"But Arthur said..." John began.

"You take my sister inside, you hear?"

"But Arthur said you should go inside too—I told you that—we all should."

Hank began walking towards the porch, eyes shining. Eyes staring. Fixated now, no longer random.

Jean moved to the steps and primed her weapon. She felt her own eyes get moist at the sight of the only man she had ever loved, spat out from this spoiled ground and returned to her like some massive, cosmic taunt. She cursed herself for not having listened to Arthur Low on this. "Henry John Dolan!" Jean shouted. "Don't come any closer. I'll put you down Hank, you know I will."

Hank stopped. Nodded. He raised his right hand in an old familiar gesture, the one that said, "All right, Jean, you win," and turned away. Now he was interested in the barn again. Started heading over towards it.

Jean felt her throat tighten, forced herself to swallow down those tears. *Hurry Arthur*; she thought. *For God's sake, hurry.*



The Ford cut off asphalt and tore onto loose gravel again, churning up a comet's tail of dust as Arthur took the backroad to Dolan's. Coming in from the North, they could look across the grazing field with its clumps of foxtail and crocus, see the distinctive round bow of the gray-green barn, and as they progressed, they could see the main house in back. The Dolan place was old, but elegant, with white clapboard siding and a pointed turret on the western side. They drove right through the open gate, geared down as they passed 'round the back of the house then took a curling route into the courtyard out front. No dogs to greet them, Arthur noticed. Nobody around anywhere. Arthur took a good look at all his compass points before he cut the engine.

Arthur and Jake got out of the cab, went 'round the back of the truck. Jake wasn't bow-legged, but he walked as though he were—he'd picked up a lot of Arthur's mannerisms over the last few weeks. In the

back of the truck there were lock-boxes nailed into the bed—long and white—holding the poisons, traps and tools of the rat patrol trade. Jake was nonchalant as he assumed he'd seen the contents before, but when Arthur hauled out a sawed-off, large-bore shotgun, Jake whistled and said, "Holy shit!"

"Watch your language," Arthur mumbled by rote. He reached for another object from the same box: a foot long knife in a leather scabbard. Arthur pulled the thick blade out to check the edge, and the fierce steel gleamed in the sunlight.

"What are those markings?" Jake asked, taking in the bone pommel and queer designs on the sheath.

"Zulu wards, I'm told," Arthur was low key, didn't want to get into it. The knife had been handed down from previous rat patrol men, originally brought to the country by an RCMP officer who had served in the Boer war and spent some time exploring Africa afterwards. Something about the weapon solved certain problems peculiar to Southern Alberta—Arthur had no idea why. But if Hank Dolan really were up and around, Arthur would likely need the knife more than he would the shotgun.

They headed towards the house.

Steps creaked under foot as they made the porch, tired old nails groaning under the weight. A half-empty plastic bottle of coke stood beside the rocking chair. Arthur progressed to the door, knocked on it.

The curtain at the window to the right of the door moved, then the door opened: Jeannie stood armed and ready, eyes red, but stern.

"Arthur," she said, tone warning him not to say he told her so.

"Where is he?" Arthur asked.

"He's in the barn. Went in about fifteen minutes ago, hasn't come out."

"Who you got with you?"

"Just Agnes and Johnny. I called and cancelled the other fellah I had coming in today."

"Alright. You remember Jacob?"

"Surely. Afternoon Jake."

"Mrs. Dolan."

"Take him inside, will you?"

Jake perked up, sensing an adult conspiracy to cheat him out of a rat sighting. "Hey—man, I'm your back up!"

"Hey 'man'—you're staying inside. Have a cookie. I'll be right back."

Jean opened the screen door wide for Jake, exchanged a hard look

with Arthur. Arthur set off towards the barn without a backward glance.

The doors were open. Arthur approached cautiously, but his boots announced his presence by crunching gravel—whatever was in there would know he was coming. He came in off the left flank, shotgun forward, then stepped past the threshold.

It was gloomy, but not dark—open loft doors illuminated golden motes of hay and dust suspended in mid air. Great spools of wire lay off to the left, alongside old hand-tools, branding irons, gas cans, couple old kerosene lamps, wooden planks. The animal pens had been dismantled to make room for storage, but the steel stanchion posts were still there. Center of the barn was taken up by the silo, but Arthur knew the tack room lay on the far side. He could smell hay from the loft, and cattle musk still prevailed despite the absence, forever, of the animals.

Just to the right of the silo, stood the Dolan's green and yellow '49 Farmall Cub—still the finest vintage tractor this side of Empress. And on the runner of that classic machine sat Hank Dolan, hands on his thighs, head inclined as he stared at the ground between his legs. Made sense he'd wind up at the Cub. Even pragmatic old Jean hadn't been able to bring herself to sell it, Hank had loved it so.

"Hank?" Arthur said.

"Come on in," Hank said, voice thick with phlegm, but clearly recognizable as the man who had once been Jean Dolan's husband. He was young again, brought back at his best.

Arthur stalked cautiously into the relative cool of the barn. He could hear Hank's breathing, the rattle of it, thick and croupy in his chest.

"How you doing, Hank?" Arthur asked, close enough to blow the man's head clean off his shoulders, if it came to it.

"I'm all right. I'm handling it." Hank looked up, and his eyes, nose, and mouth shone with a silver light, as though his head were a jack o' lantern, lit with a harsh magnesium bulb inside. "This is why they pay you the big bucks, hey Art?"

Arthur smiled. "Guess so."

"You ever wonder about it? How the government knows about this land, always has known? Weird ain't it? Why wouldn't they just warn people outright? Make it official."

"Easier to just have a rat patrol, Hank. Have us look after things. Just easier, that's all." Arthur thought of Todd Evers. Current generation of politicians weren't even sure there was a problem—were starting to doubt there ever had been.

"Yeah. 'Spose so." Hank rubbed his jeans, a nervous gesture with-

out any anxiety attached to it. More a memory of a mannerism—doing the things that Hank Dolan would have done. Arthur repressed a shudder. "You gonna shoot me, Arthur?" Hank added. "That how it's done?"

"Depends. You gonna hurt anybody?"

"Maybe, yeah. I feel it, you know? Deep down, this feeling. Like I want to hurt Jeannie. Burn the house down. Head on over to Crowley's and do some things there too. It's ugly, but I'm still controlling it."

For now, Arthur thought. "You still angry?" Arthur said, referring to the mad cow disaster that had ultimately killed Hank Dolan in the first place: the desperation and the macro-economic lunacy of it all.

"I guess so. There's that rage, yeah. But that's not why It chose me."

"No?"

"Nah, It ain't interested in me. It's using me 'cause I'm weak. Knows I wanted to see Jean again before she left for good—used that on me to get me here. But mostly It wants Jeannie. You know that's really what It always wants: the strong. Don't come any stronger than Jeannie. It'll cut me loose on her if It has to, but It's hoping to break her instead."

"Break her?"

"Sure—get to her. Can't be easy on her, seeing me again. That's what this land does—disheartens folks, discourages 'em. Gets 'em to quit. That's what it's really all about. Take on the strong and beat them down. I still can't figure why."

"Well, not much to figure," Arthur reasoned. "Something doesn't want us here. Never has."

"Yeah." Hank straightened, looked around. "It's so strange, seeing things from this side. Everything's all bright, washed out, until you get to a building or a piece of machinery or something. Then it's kind of shaded, like black and white TV. I think I can see why It hates us, just can't put it into words."

"Hank," Arthur paused, not knowing how to put it, not knowing how much longer to wait. "When you want to go, you just tell me alright?"

Hank nodded, face stiff, but conveying the essence of sadness in eyeless sockets, glowing mouth. "I appreciate that Arthur. I'm glad you're here."

"No problem."

"Arthur? You know you're one of the strong too, right?"

"What?"

Hank turned to stare at Arthur, looked as though he might be

struggling with the words. "You're one of the ones It really wants. You and Jeannie."

"What are you talking about?"

"Something's different about you now, I can see that, and It can see it too. You're open, Arthur, just a bit. It's sniffing around you these days, sniffing at something It ain't smelled on you before."

"What's that?"

"Weakness. You got a weakness buddy. I think it's that kid."

Arthur shifted his weight. He didn't like Hank talking about Jake. Jake wasn't part of this discussion.

"That don't make any sense, Hank."

"Sure it does. That's how It operates. Looks for something It can use on you, then gets after you with it. Like me and Jeannie. Only you haven't had anything It could use. Till now."

"Nothing's getting after me, and nothing's getting after Jake. I can guarantee you that."

"Let me do you a favour Arthur. Let me show you something."

"What?"

"Let me show you something. I'll show you something before I go. I think you have to look me in the eyes to see it."

"Hank..." Arthur raised the shotgun on instinct.

"You look, and I'll show you something. I think it's important Arthur. If you can't see your own weakness, maybe you can see it through me."

Arthur looked. For three steady heartbeats, all he saw was starlight pulsing out from a dead man's head, but on the fourth beat...

The barn door tilted open just a bit further—rusty hinges singing out a tortured tune—revealing a figure so brightly back-lit that Arthur couldn't make it out. Then, as the figure stepped forward, it was clearly recognizable as Jake. It was Jake with his face and his yellow tee-shirt covered, just drenched, in blood. Only when the kid started to smile, and raised his right fist in a gesture of awful triumph, could Arthur understand. "Couldn't have done it without you..." a voice gurgled in Arthur's head. The sound was throaty and ragged—lungs bogged down in mucus and blood.

Arthur staggered back a few feet, mind reeling from the vision: *that wasn't real! It hadn't happened.*

It hadn't happened...

But it could.

"Hank..." Arthur said, warning at the edge of his voice. He hadn't seen Hank stand up from the runner, hadn't seen him take that prowling

step forward.

"You better get to it," Hank said. "Don't think I can hold on much longer."



The Ford's engine idled, shaking the truck as Arthur gazed across the road at the silhouette of that old abandoned farm house on the low hill. Sun was setting, casting thrilling shadows around the house, spilling in golden between the cracks. House had no business standing upright after all this time, all that weather. The wood had been burned gray by seventy-odd years of prairie sun, withered by seventy-odd years of prairie winter.

Arthur had dispelled Hank with the Zulu knife, and Dolan had gone easy, painlessly—not wanting to fight it. Then Arthur had spread symbolic bait-squares around the barn, blessing—at least that was the term he used—the squares with the knife and memorized ritual. The words and gestures meant nothing to him—he assumed both were African, but he really had no clue. Whatever the origin, the practice would make the Dolan farm safe for a while.

He'd had a long heart-to-heart with Jean, about a lot of things. Put her mind to rest about Hank, but also, squared things about Jake. Jean had agreed Jake could stay the night while Arthur gathered up the boy's things. In the morning, John Lockey would drive Jake back to Edmonton, back to his mother, and away from this particularly nasty stretch of land along the Southeastern border of Alberta. Arthur hadn't even said goodbye, hoping the sting of it would keep the kid away for good and all. The look of Jake's face, his mouth glistening black with blood was never far from Arthur's mind, and every time he caught a glimpse of that vision, his skin writhed enough to make him twitch.

But Jeannie'd rattled him just before he left. "What if," she said, after they'd gone through it all, "what if, *It wants* you to send the boy away? What if you're stronger having him here? You can't trust a vision that came from... you know. *That*. Could be just a trick, like *It* does. A trick to manipulate you into giving up something that could make you even tougher than you already are. Having a kid around's like a second chance for you Arthur. Maybe *It* doesn't want to see you happy—you ever thought about that?"

Arthur hadn't known what to say. The implication was that maybe all along, decisions he had made about his life and his situation had somehow been... guided, nudged along without him knowing, but in

the end, he couldn't get his mind around it. It was too subtle, too cute, and he didn't have a chess-player's mentality. He was stone steady, that's what he was, that's what he brought to the dance. He knew the land around here measured its victories in inches, got to people one sadness, one doubt at a time, and it had the patience to wear a man down like rain on rock, but Arthur wouldn't play those games. *I'm still here*, Arthur thought. *Jake or no Jake, you still got me to deal with.*

Couldn't take his eyes off that old house though, and truth was, he had no idea why he'd stopped. Seen the damn thing a thousand times, and countless others like it. Arthur Low was no poet—his mother quoting Blake was about as close to the stuff as he'd ever gotten—but looking at the wooden ruin with the sun going down behind it, he had what he assumed must be a purely poetic impulse...

I'm just like that house, Arthur thought.

So picturesque.

So empty.

He shook his head, felt himself blushing, wondering where the hell he'd gotten a fool notion like that. Arthur pulled his arm in, kicked the Ford into drive. He accelerated off the shoulder, headed down highway 41 like a man with duties, responsibilities, and purpose. Behind him, something that did know a little poetry, something that was subtle, and ancient, and didn't mind playing games at all, laughed a vicious laugh in the warm prairie wind. •

The land provides, as is
its duty. But we misjudge
its capacity for charity.

The Land

Patrick Lestewka

The land is as vast and sweeping as the sky itself. A scouring wind blows from the tundras to the north, stirring every sedge and flower until the air is laden with the scent of thistle and firethorn, white sage, Cherokee rose. The only sign of movement: water coursing down a brook winding through the plain, the faint rippling as it flows over the riverbed and around rocks left millennia ago by a departing glacier. What little noise there is—the slow creep of stalks pushing through the ground, the ceaseless industry of insects beneath the soil—is sub-audible; the ears fill with a silence so absolute that one feels compelled to clap one's hands or stomp one's feet, fearing sudden deafness.

Animals graze here, and pass on. Birds nest in the branches of elm and maple, flying south for the winter. Sometimes even people.

But the land... the land is ongoing. The land is ever.



A man walked across the land, feet shod in a pair of mud-caked bluchers. Medium height but solidly-built, wide shouldered with a massive head looming forward from the rest of his body like the jagged outcrop from the edge of a cliff. He did not stand erect, but instead leaned constantly forward; he and the ground always met at an

angle of less than ninety degrees. Though relatively young, the skin of his face was tanned and wind-burnt, creased as an armadillo's snout. He peered up at the milky scud shading the horizon, pale blue sky above. The wind-flattened timothy grass was white with frost. The man's name was Caleb. It was April.

Following in a wagon drawn by a pair of swayback geldings were Caleb's wife, Amelia, and their son. Amelia wore a blue sackcloth dress hemmed with mud and axle grease, a bonnet to keep the blackflies at bay. The boy, Matthew, sat beside his mother. A small frail child of five, pigeon-toed and prone to illness. Caleb sometimes wondered whether the boy was truly his own.

They came upon a span of arid land. Ground open and level, no sinkholes or creeping buckthorn. A fast-moving brook flowed from north to south, cutting across the flat prairie. Clumps of green milfoil and milkwort grew along the banks, glaring against the blunt mahogany landscape.

Caleb crumbled a clod of earth between his fingers, smelling it, touching it to his tongue. Closing his eyes, he imagined long clean furrows crosscutting the land, oats stirring like a tawny sea under the sun, acres of barley and rye and flax swaying to the touch of a calm summer breeze. He could make the land his own.

"Here," he told his wife, "we make our home."

The rest of that spring they worked building shelter and cultivating the earth. Caleb took the horses and adze down the bluff to a copse of oak. The chuck chuck chuck of the adze carried across the flat plain to where Amelia and Matthew cleared a square of earth, scything duckweed and fleecflower, crushing the tiny yellow petals underfoot. When the setting sun was hammered nearly flat to the horizon Caleb would return with logs lashed to the saddlehorns, horse's frothing, eyes rolled to the whites. He was the type of man who mounted his horse as though it were a machine, as though flesh and blood did not exist.

Before the cabin was built they spent nights in the wagon bed, heads cradled on oat sacks. Sometimes, unable to sleep, Caleb would walk down to the brook and sit by the waterside. The clean pale light of the moon reflected off the dark water in glittering humps and swells, the sound of motion soothing, the tricklings and gurglings; mirrored stars shone where the water lay still along the shore. He would look off over the land—his land, now, his land—and think of the many sturdy things he would buy.

Caleb ran a fence line down his property, posts dipped in creosote

to deflect the wind and rain, three lines of barbed wire pulled tight. He saddled the horses to a plow and, son in tow, furrowed the rich earth surrounding the homestead. At one point Matthew reached down into the dark loam and came up with a bleached shard of bone.

"That's good," Caleb told him. "Plenty minerals in there."

The bone ancient, a white ossified curve. The surface riddled with holes, as though tiny creatures had bored through. Matthew clutched it tight. The bone broke to pieces in his grip.

The first harvest came in late; having spent his allowance for the season, the grain dealer could only offer a few dollars. Caleb bought a barrel of flour and another of salt cod; also sugar, salt, coffee, lard, and—a rare luxury—squares of chocolate for Amelia and the boy.

That winter snow came in howling gales raging all night and all day. Storm followed storm as north-east gales swept across unsheltered land, enclosing the plain in a glistening white crust.

Every day Caleb forged out onto the land in search of game. Every night he came home empty-handed, frozen clothes crackling like dull metal. The wildlife that seemed so plentiful in the summer—deer bounding through the pasture, fox chasing hare through the tall grass, birds circling constantly overhead—had vanished. Meals consisted of a small biscuit, a thin filet of cod, and a few withered partridgeberries. One horse died of exposure and was eaten. Caleb eventually shot the hardier one as well. Their clothes hung off thinning frames, hardly betraying the bodies beneath. Amelia lost three teeth. One night she woke to find Matthew eating the oakum chinked between the log walls.

One evening sometime in late February, Caleb caught the glow of a lantern swinging low along the earth. He was outside at the wood pile, gathering an armload for the potbellied stove. As he watched, the squat, heavy-topped form of a man broke free from the twilight.

The man walked a line straight as a plumb bob to Caleb's door. He wore a black duster and boots that looked to have covered untold miles. His face was sleek and angular and hairless, pale eyes set like wood into his wooden face. He carried nothing save the lantern and a shovel.

"Yours the only homestead in these parts?"

Caleb nodded.

"Pardon me, then, if I beg the succor of your roof tonight."

Caleb—a hard, but not heartless man—ushered the man into his house. Amelia fixed a plate, which the man ate silently, without relish,

without thanks. Afterwards he took a pipe from his duster and packed the bowl. A blue feeler of smoke went up to wreath his head.

"You look lean," he told Caleb, stating it as a fact, assigning no particular emphasis or emotion. "Your woman and the little one, as well."

"A hard winter," Caleb admitted.

"Every winter's hard. Next one'll be no different." The man's eyes fell on each of them in turn before flickering away. In that moment there was a life to them, brilliant color shot through the corneas, before they dulled to a sheen of opaque grey. "I can help, if you want."

"Don't take no charity," said Caleb.

"I don't deal in handouts. What you get, you earn." The man gestured to the cabin's lone window, the pane hemmed by white skeins of frost, night pressed tight to the glass. "The land provides, as is its duty. But we misjudge its capacity for charity. The land must be fed. Hungry land stops giving."

The land must be fed. These words, so softly spoken, curdled the skin on Amelia's throat.

"Feed the land and it'll provide again."

"Feed it?" Caleb jabbed a thumb at the window, at the fields he'd toiled all summer and Fall. "It's fertilized and tilled, left farrow if need be."

"You got to feed it of yourself." The following words passed over his lips tonelessly, as though lack of inflection might somehow deflect their chilling absurdity: "A finger, a toe, a tooth. Something small."

Caleb's first instinct was to laugh. Then he looked closely and saw, in the man's eyes and posture, the hope he'd do just that: laugh and call him a crazyman, grab him by the lapels and toss him out into the snow. Those ashy grey eyes begged Caleb to act as any rational man would.

Caleb looked at his wife and child, their bodies wracked with starvation. How much longer would they live? He imagined yellow springtime light washing the cabin, revealing three lifeless bodies curled on a pallet of sour-smelling hay.

He heeled his boot off and doffed the sock. His middle toe was nearly dead from frostbite, skin the grey-green of a rotted potato. "Fetch the hatchet, Amelia."

"Oh, God," she said. "Caleb, don't—"

"Fetch me it quick, get it over with."

A solid whack of the hatchet was all it took. Amelia tied a length of butcher twine around the stump.

Caleb and Amelia followed the man outside. The man cleared a spot in the snow and sunk the shovel into the earth. The blade went in

easily, despite the frozen ground. He set Caleb's toe at the bottom of the pit and shoveled earth in. As soon as he was finished, a medley of sounds arose from the darkness: a sound like a sigh, and beneath that a stealthier sound, like the scuttling of beetles.

The man gathered his torch and retreated into the night.

"Won't you stay?" Amelia called after him. "It's so cold..."

The man kept walking. The light of his torch dwindled to a pinprick before winking out.

The next morning Caleb spied an elk at the window. The beast pressed its nose to the glass, as though curious about the cabin's inhabitants. Caleb rushed outside in his longjohns and shot the animal where it stood. For the rest of that winter, not a day passed that Caleb did not bring home meat.

Winter ceded slowly to spring. The earth was uncannily fecund: green shoots pushed up wherever seed was scattered. By July great swathes of barley, flax, and wheat quilted every field, swaying in the calm warm breeze as Caleb had once imagined. Come Fall, the harvest was so robust the grain dealer spent his entire allowance on Caleb's output.

This unnatural fertility continued for five years. Caleb became prosperous, envied by his fellow sharecroppers; he watched them retrieve the dirt thrown off his boots, touching and tasting it, trying to decipher his secrets. He built a house with shuttered gables and an oculus window so Amelia might sew in the mellow midday light. He and Matthew erected a pen to house ten head of cattle, with a gate so they could graze the fallow fields. During the Fall of the fifth year Amelia gave birth to a girl, who she named Helen.

Many nights Caleb walked out onto the land, wrapped up dark, lantern swinging at his knees. He rambled over the moonlit nightscape, following the path of starlight bent upon stalks of frost-glazed wheat. He'd press his hands to the cattle's flanks, stealing their heat. He felt the land move beneath him, slight shifts and eddies. In the darkness just beyond the lantern glow he glimpsed odd movements and shapes, things pulsing and tumbling. At those times he felt a union with the land: his blood moving, his hair, his skin, his heart pounding with the rhythm of the place. He felt the roots beneath his boots and wished they might grow up into him, anchoring his body in place. Always he heard the gentle voice of the land, a low craving coming from beneath the waking world, deeper than dream, a place where

logic dissolved.

The most natural sound in the world.

Something happened during the sixth summer. The land curled in upon itself, taking nothing, giving nothing. All the color washed out of things, pale grays blending into deep iron grays, the once-rich soil lightening to the color of calluses. Planted seeds were spat from the clammy earth, where they rotted in the slate-toned water puddling between the furrows. The plains were vacant of life: no deer or rabbit, no ducks paddling the brook or squirrels dashing about in the monkey-puzzle and copper beech. The copse of trees to the west came down with Dutch Elm disease, dirty silver bark dappled with weeping black scabs. The Angus bull was plagued with heelfly larvae, boils the size of teacups blotting his hide. It got so bad, the animal in such abject misery, that Caleb guided it to the brook and put it down.

The harvest was so poor Caleb was forced to spend nearly all his savings on winter supplies. Snows settled over the land, deep and blindingly-white, untracked by man or beast. Caleb sat up late at night, gazing out over the plain, crystalline snow glittering under the moon and stars. His gaze rarely wavered from the faraway fields, hoping to see the pinprick glow of a lantern sweeping along the earth.

Then, one evening in early December, it did.

Illuminated by the last pale light of day, the man appeared not to have aged. He wore the same duster and boots, his rust-dark skin thick and creased. His eyes were grey and indistinct, the colour of low fog mantling spring fields.

"We know why I'm here," he said.

Amelia came to the door with Helen swaddled in her arms. Matthew, now ten, stole cautious glances from behind his mother's apron.

"I know." Caleb bent to untie his boot laces.

"No." The man made a sweeping gesture with his arm that took in field and sky and water. "The land has provided for you and yours. Pay what you owe."

"What do I owe?"

The man's eyes flicked to Caleb's face, to the bundle in Amelia's arms, and back. He made a gesture, looking away and rubbing a thumb over the bridge of his nose, the type of gesture made by a man deeply shamed by his actions.

Caleb led his wife into the kitchen. Standing under a sheet of dirty lamplight in the front hall, Matthew heard his father's harsh words—

still so young and only a girl. Caleb exited the kitchen clutching the white cotton blanket. Amelia ran out, grabbing her husband's shirt, clawing, screaming. Caleb's hand closed over his mother's face, knotty fingers clamping down like an owl's talon gripping a walnut, shoving her away.

Caleb led the man around back of the house. Matthew crept down the porch stairs, shivering in the cold; wisps of snow fell from the sky and melted to water as they touched his cheeks. He saw the men's shapes moving in the heel print of darkness. He heard the crisp tinkle of ice breaking in the rain barrel. There were hollow splashing sounds, the sounds of children playing in a distant brook. The man-shapes walked past the Angus carcass and down a gully behind the shed.

After a few minutes Matthew saw a bowtie of lantern light swinging across the prairie. His father came round the shed. His teeth chattered and his shirt was wet to his skin. His hair was soaked to his skull in dark ropes.

"Inside," he told Matthew. "Check up on your ma."

When Matthew awoke the next day, he saw a knot of deer drinking from holes broken in the brook ice. His father threw open a window and shot them all. The deer didn't scatter at the first gunshot; instead they held to their tight knot, eyes staringly listlessly as they went down.

When the spring came, the fields once again burst into life. By April the plain resembled a green carpet. The only spot the seed would not take was a small patch in the shape of a kidney bean on the brook bank, behind the shed.

Amelia was never the same afterwards. She took to spending her days in the far fields, walking the fenceline where Caleb's land ceded to the vast fringing wilderness. She listened to the sighing of the elms and the rustle of sweetgrass. She fashioned a cross from tamarack branches and pounded it into the patch of cracked earth behind the shed. Caleb kicked it down. Amelia fashioned another. This went on throughout the summer, until Caleb relented and allowed the cross to stand.

In August of the eighth year, Amelia disappeared into the land. She never said a word; one day she stepped over the fenceline and kept walking. She crossed to the other side, becoming part of the land, blending with the bloodroot and witch hazel and moss and jackpine, lost inside the land, inside herself. The only trace of her was a scrap of blue fabric snagged on a point of barbed wire. Caleb carved her date of birth and presumed death into a wooden cross and pounded it into

the ground behind the shed, beside the smaller cross.

Sitting on the porch in the Fall gloaming, Matthew often saw a shape sliding through the shadowy places where the fenceline ended. The shape was too indistinct to make out perfectly; it didn't move like an animal, though neither was its movement human: a low floating and cresting, a rug shook across the earth. Sometimes, as it moved, it threw up what looked to be an arm, waving, beckoning.

The prosperity continued for fifteen years. The crops grew by themselves, in perfect even rows, as though the land possessed a rudimentary sense-memory, shaping itself to the will of its inheritor. The house settled on its foundations, sinking into the earth; Caleb made no attempt at repair. As the years bled past, Caleb came to resemble the land: furrows running in straight lines down cheeks and across brow, the muscles of his back and shoulders knotted and gnarled like tamarack roots, hair tangled and brittle as knotted duckweed, eyes smooth and dull as river-polished stones.

Matthew began to walk the land. He became convinced it was a prison. Surely the most vast prison in the world, bars no more substantial than saplings or swaying bands of wheat, goaler an impassive barbed-wire fence so easily ducked under, but a prison nonetheless. Matthew had never traveled past the nearest town, never gone to school, owned a horse, kissed a woman. The imprisonment of the land was the imprisonment of focus: one grew up on the land, tended the land, knew and cared for nothing save the land. Those never allowed to look past the limits of the land adopted its boundaries as their own. The dim muttering of the brook, the sweet perfume of jimsonweed and sagebrush, the spiraling swoop of a hawk over snow-topped cedars: the most beautiful prison on earth.

By spring of the sixteenth year, the cycle repeated: the land suddenly soured, soil turning a dirty shade of tan. The animals fled. Seven head of cattle developed tumors on their udders.

Father and son sat the porch one evening in late September, staring out over the blighted fields. Caleb breathed deeply, the white shape of his breath coalescing about the twilight.

"He'll be coming tonight."

"How do you know?"

"I just know, boy." Though thirty, Caleb still referred to Matthew as a boy. "It's a hard cut. You give what you can, sometimes more than you're able. Take what the Lord gives you, shape it in your hands, try

to polish it until it glows. But there's a price... you pay what you owe. These things don't change."

He went inside and came out with the rifle, leaning the stock against Matthew's chair. They watched as darkness leeches away the daylight, wrapped in their own thoughts. A few hours later the button-glow of a lantern appeared in the east.

The man nodded at Caleb, who came down off the porch and led them to the spot behind the shed, next to the crosses. For an hour there was no sound save the man's shovel digging up the dark loam. At one point Caleb held his arms outward towards the fields, as if in supplication to their generous breadth. When the hole was dug the man lit his pipe and leaned on his shovel.

Caleb knelt down by the lip. The base was filled with black groundwater reflecting the moon.

"You give all you can, son, but it takes all you give. It's a hard cut."

Matthew slotted a cartridge into the rifle. His hands were a part of him and yet were not; his fingers felt attached to wires running down under the ground. He notched the barrel behind his father's ear; Caleb flicked his head as a cow might, trying to shoo a fly.

Muzzle flash blew a brilliant crease in the night. Caleb toppled forward into the hole, shattering the moon's calm image. The pit swelled to accommodate his father's body, or Caleb's body shrunk to fit the hole, or both, or neither; perhaps Matthew imagined it all.

He waited while the man shoveled dirt back in, crying some. When the man finished tamping the dirt flat, he offered Matthew a slight tip of his head before setting off to the west.

By next morning the brook was teeming with deer. Matthew carried a hatchet outside. The deer did not flinch as he walked amongst them, stroking fur smooth as jeweler's velvet, long belts of muscle quivering underneath. He walked on into a stand of poplar and hacked down two thick branches. Setting the branches at right angles and lashing them together, he fashioned a cross to mark his father's grave.

This time the cycle lasted thirty years. Matthew lived alone in the house his father built, sleeping on the same narrow pallet he'd spent nights on since the age of eight. The house's east-facing side fell prey to a sinkhole, the abiding slope causing chairs and tables to slide to one side of the room, books and knickknacks to fall off shelves, candles to melt down to canted points. Crabgrass grew up through the floorboards and dirt gathered everywhere—in cupboards and closets, drawers

and beds. The root cellar flooded. A hardy strain of ivy grew over the walls and roof, worming beneath the shingles. Matthew kept his bedroom as tidy as possible, ceding the rest of the house.

The land produced despite Matthew not sowing a single seed. He harvested just enough to buy supplies, content to let the rest rot on the stalk. He spited the land's abundance of game as well: the last bullet his father's rifle ever fired was the one that killed its owner.

Over time, he came to loathe the land with the particular venom a familiar and ugly piece of furniture acquires over time. He waged silent war against it. During the spring of the eighteenth year, every head of cattle was sucked into the muskeg. By the time Matthew responded to the pleading lows, the only animal left was a black-and-white Guernsey buried to its shoulders in the muck. He looped a rope around its neck and pulled until he screamed, but the cow sunk down into the blackness, an expression of pure terror stamped on its features.

That Fall, when the flax was tall and golden, Matthew doused the field with kerosene and set it alight. He stood on his porch watching lurid columns of flame race towards the house, throwing shiny sharp sparks that stung his face. He laughed at the heat and at the land, daring it to consume him. The fire petered out five feet from the door.

In the evenings he gazed out over the flat darkness. He often saw two shapes, a pair of smudges slightly darker than the twilight, moving along the fenceline. One moved on the wild side of the fence, cresting and flowing; the other on the cultivated side, lumbering between the rows. Sometimes they came together, entwining then breaking apart. One shape flowed back into the wilderness; the other sank resolutely into the land.

During the summer of the thirty-first year, when the land shrunk within itself once again, Matthew rode into town and met with a land agent. They rode back to the farm and walked the fields. The agent kicked his boot in the earth, stirring up dust.

"Can't see as how you'd get too much for it," he said. "I'm told your pa had some luck, but it looks to be used up."

"It is used up," Now sixty-one, Matthew's joints ached from the long ride. "Don't want it used as farmland, anyhow. Maybe there's some oil or gold down there. Sell it to a mining company, let them dig and drill and tear the land open."

The agent said it was a possibility. But he was thinking about the young couple who'd come into his office weeks ago, recently-married and looking for a large parcel to call their own.

A few nights later the swinging lantern glow appeared to the east. Matthew came down off the porch and met the man. In the flickering lantern light, they now seemed about the same age.

"It's about that time," Matthew said.

"It's about that time," the man agreed, and sunk his shovel into the earth.

"I don't owe this land anything," Matthew said when the man finished. "It's taken everything I cared for, given nothing back."

The man lit his pipe. A sense of unimaginable weariness hung over him, the air of a man who no longer remembered why he'd embarked on this particular journey, or for what reasons.

"Men make a mistake," he said. "They think the land will bend. They think if they work, push and prod, the land will conform. But you see, the land never bends. We bend ourselves to it... but it's so subtle, taking place over decades, we convince ourselves otherwise." He kicked a stone into the hole. "The land doesn't bend. Worst mistake a man can make."

"I'm not getting in there," Matthew said.

"I know."

The man plucked his shovel from the earth and tossed it to Matthew, who caught it unthinkingly, the way a person might catch an infant who's squirmed from her mother's grasp.

The man set his pipe beside the lantern and climbed into the pit. Laying down, he felt the earth move beneath him, the rocks and roots shifting in deference to his contours. He closed his eyes and thought back to the day he'd first glimpsed the land from the back of a horse, his hands clasped round his father's waist, his mother and sisters following behind with satchels slung over their shoulders. He remembered his first steps on the earth, how the silky reeds twined round his six-year-old legs, the swaying grain whispering, mine, mine, mine. He remembered the first bitter winter and the man who'd come to make an offer to his father, the same offer he himself had tendered time and time again. He remembered—vaguely, so long ago it seemed a sub-memory, a waking dream—the sound of a shovel breaking up the soil, and the faint crumple of his sisters' bodies falling down a hole. Most of all he remembered the man handing the shovel to him many years later, a strange feeling coursing up the shovel's shaft into his arm, his mind. He'd felt a numb sense of obligation, a fealty, a duty... to feed the land.

Matthew felt that same obligation now.

The first shovelful of dirt hit the man's legs, spreading like oil. He thought about the power of the land and the power of men's vanity, how they played on one another, how the land always won in the end. The second shovelful fell on his neck; an insect, a millipede or potato bug, slunk up his jaw and around the cup of his ear. His body slowly disappeared beneath the dank soil, torso, arms; soon only the head remained, a strange monument. Earth pattered onto his face, filling his open mouth, his staring eyes. He inhaled the dark loam, the smell of old bones and old dreams and never-ending debt. He gave one last sigh before the weight of earth crushed the final breath from his lungs.

Matthew smoothed the earth flat. He looked around, unable to recall who he was or how he'd gotten there. A dilapidated house stood a hundred yards off, gaslights burning on the porch. He felt no attachment to the place. It may as well belong to a stranger.

To the horizon, in all directions, was a vast ongoing everness, everything perfectly aligned, the soil and sky boundless in their symmetries, trees standing silent in their wrap of darkness. The earth breathed around him, the sound like the flutter of phantom wings. The wind caressed his cheek, a lover moving slowly, knowing there was all the time in the world.

Crops grow and die. Animals graze and move on.

Sometimes even people.

But the land is ongoing. The land abides.

He slung the shovel over his shoulder and picked up the lantern, setting out to the west. His light dwindled to a serene dot in the center of the night's dark canvas, then winked out. •

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Period Between Points

Kasey Kieler

Time loosely engulfed my feet
My sandals loose in a shallow stream
I thought about my hands
Alone in the sun, loose at my sides
Earlier passing through so many hands
They felt loose, kind of embarrassed
To have been intimate with so much skin
Neither of them knew about time
My right foot miscommunicated
 With the rocky floor
And my hand on the same side suffered
 A slap against a spotty rock
It went white and horrified
 At having to save me again
Once I had broken my elbow
 And my arm never forgave me
So I was thinking about all this
 Still brushing my hand on shorts
 Searching for it to have feeling
When glitters of silver popped into my view
 As I moved, they chattered noiselessly
Hundreds of tiny forks somehow discarded
Found their way to the middle of a waterfall
their tines each reflecting a spray of sun
There were hundreds of them littered there
Trying to disguise themselves as silver sticks
Minding their own business, not hurting anyone
Had they been placed there by some joker
Or had a plane dumped its cargo
After a meal of pressed meat iceburnt peas?
Or was I at home, silently dreaming
My hand not shocked or rashed by slate
I shook my head, grabbed a fork from the sand
And dined on the roar of the water •

"What is my purpose?"
wondered the dog.
"What am I to do with my days?"

Woman Born Fully Formed

Marlene Wurfel

Many men have scrupulously slogged through the paradoxes, the problematics, the pedantics—the whole tangled mess of space, time, and spacetime travel. They have devised numerous arguments against its probability—against its possibility. They have prepared documents, lectures and refutations. They have permuted and computed. They have scribbled, squabbled, and scrawled. They have scratched their furrowed brows and wrung their elegant hands.

"Look here," says one. "I have proven that time travel is impossible. I call my proof: *Thermodynamic Law and the Inviolability of Energy Time Conservation via Isotropic and Anisotropic Radiation Measurement*. It is very clever. You should read it."

"Yes, well, look here," says another, more famous man; "If it were possible for men to travel through time, then our quaint little present would be swamped with tourists and their wives from the smoggy future, wouldn't it? But men have not traveled here from the future. That is because time travel is not possible in the future. Nor has it been in the past, nor is it in the present. Men, therefore, cannot travel through time. I have prepared a lecture on the matter. It is very clever. You should attend."

Five hundred and twenty-eight years ago a woman lay on her back near a mossy stand of shivering poplar trees. She was being pleased

by an unskilled but persistent and terribly earnest young man. The sun hung low in the sky, large and yellow. The poplar leaves that shuffled and clattered in the wind were yellow too. The young man was dark brown from a long summer and slick with sweat.

After just under an hour of alternately patient and frantic coaching the woman had just reached climax when a blooming red blood vessel exploded in her brain. It was an aneurism. It killed her at the very crest of her orgasm. There was no dénouement.

The woman's afterlife was excruciating.

For five hundred and twenty-eight years she screamed, clutched and clenched, mad with the desire for release. Wherever her ghost passed, birds flew screaming from their perches, still waters would eddy and froth, skin would pucker, fur prickled, leaves curled, and ions reversed their charge.

It was five hundred and twenty-eight years until she finally found the spirit who had been with her at the moment of her unhappy demise. His elders had instructed him to expect and to fear her wrath in the spirit world and so he had been hiding his soul in the cool green boughs of a lone spruce tree. She was not wrathful when she found him, though. She was, in fact, eminently delighted.

"Get me off!" she told him in the language of spirits. "Get me off right now!"

He wasn't terribly sure how to begin. He'd lived a life of total abstinence after the woman's death. Also, he lacked bodily substance, as did she, and, he was desperately afraid of her. But, after five hundred and twenty-eight years of anticipation, the task was far less complicated than he could ever have imagined. It took so little effort on his part, really, for the whole bursting arc to unfurl and complete itself.

And then, such a tremendous release it was, such a soaring, lofty pleasure it was, such a marvelously quenching coup de grâce it was, that the woman spontaneously, in the circularity of the afterlife, conceived, gestated and bore herself.

She squeezed and thrust through the amniotic meat that separates this world from the other and fell naked and whole from the cool green boughs of the lone spruce into a place and time where the tree no longer existed. Some sixty odd miles north of the city of Calgary, the woman fell steaming onto a frozen and twisted field of wheat stubble.

She was greeted, immediately, by a white and red-freckled dog. The dog had been recently driven from his home by an unambiguous series of shot-gun blasts. The dog was fond of the thrill of fresh chicken

meat and because of this vice, could no longer peaceably co-exist with his owner. Now, homeless and jobless, the dog was in the midst of an existential crisis.

"What is my purpose?" wondered the dog. "What am I to do with my days? Who, on this machine-slashed, sun-slapped, gopher-infested prairie, will call me a good dog?"

The dog had been nervously circling the ground where the woman fell. His brilliant nose had a hunch about the genesis that shook the boughs of that long-since-obliterated-by-time spruce tree. The dog had been following his nose which had been following the hunch around the perimeter of the long-gone tree all morning.

"Ah ha!" said the dog when the woman fell from the sky. He was absolutely and immediately certain of his duty to love and protect the woman until death or worse should part them.

First things first, he licked the woman clean.

"Good dog," the woman sighed, slowly remembering the language of bodies and quickly forgetting the language of spirits.

Her lungs were seared, burnt and sore, and she cried and flailed for many hours while her vision began to function. Then she slept in the sun until her hunger and thirst coaxed her to learn how to crawl and then to stand and walk. The dog led her towards a perfect stream where they gulped sweet, cold, glacial water. The woman shook the wet strands of her own hair free from her face then looked affectionately at the dog. The dog wagged his tail and whimpered for joy.

Wherever the woman walked, the isotropic radiation released by her spontaneous generation warmed the way. As woman and dog traveled, the ground thawed around them. Where their feet fell, a trail of spring crocuses sprang into bloom behind them. The woman yanked the crunchy, crisp bulbs out of the warm earth and ate them like apples. The dog hunted gophers. They traveled for many days in this manner.

They traveled like water, along the path of least resistance. They headed South. They passed farm houses and silos, crossed gravel and asphalt roads, traveled underneath power lines and over fences. The highest point they reached was a sage and snow covered hill, just outside the great, gleaming city of Calgary. From the distance they observed it, the city looked like a geode split open to expose a sparkling bounty of crystal high-rises. Its pink, gold, green, and blue glass spires glistened in the sunshine so majestically that the woman, for a moment, lost her breath. When she caught it again, she, and the dog, ran towards the city.

At its limits they discovered a fragrant bush, heavy with Saskatoons and a startled cat with its ears and tail missing to frostbite. The woman ate greedily. When she was full, the cat looked so penetratingly at the woman, in that way only cats can, that she was filled with a sudden shame at being unclothed.

It was a simple matter, once the woman had the desire, to lie in wait for one of the joggers that loped around the asphalt city trails, and to ambush and take his reflective micro-fiber jacket, his fleece pants, and his Nike running shoes.

So clothed, the woman and the dog kept moving towards the city center, she taking whatever food tempted her, and he viciously rebuking any attempts to interfere with her urban foraging.

"You going to pay for that?" asked a Dairy Queen employee.

The woman cocked her head to one side. The dog snarled low.

"Well?" said the Dairy Queen employee.

The woman froze in place. The Dairy Queen employee stood with her arms crossed, her eyebrows raised, and one hip jutting out. She looked aggressive, the woman thought, like she might attack.

"Look here," said the Dairy Queen employee, "For starters, dogs aren't allowed in here. And you certainly can't just help yourself to an ice cream cake unless you're intending to pay for it."

The dog pulled his soft, black lips back and lowered his freckled ears. He growled low and viciously.

"All right, all right," said the Dairy Queen employee. "But I'm calling the cops."

The city lay under a thin layer of brittle white frost, but where the woman lay sleeping under a concrete overpass, a bed of dandelions and quack grass bloomed. Spiders hatched from eggs all around her.

The woman's hair was wild, her face was dirty, and the laces of her shoes were untied. Except to reprimand her for stealing, no one had attempted to speak with her since her arrival in the city. Nobody met her eyes when she stared.

The first person to gently wave "Hello" to the woman and her dog was a parched and jagged-looking man who was missing his entire top row of teeth. He sat watching the woman sleep in her bed of greenery and waited for her to wake-up. Then he waved, "Hello."

The man was filthy and dissolute. He'd long ago traded his soul to feed a deep drug habit that twisted and wrenched his bowels. His addiction had compelled him to perform many ungodly acts for many ungodly people. By now, he'd reached such a zenith of moral depravity

that he was able to see, with precise clarity, the perfect essences of things. This woman, he perceived, had a pure, pristine, and unsullied soul. After five hundred and twenty-eight years of scouring and spit-shining in the after-life, it positively gleamed.

"What difference would it make to anybody if I stole this woman's soul?" the man asked himself. "None whatsoever," he decided. "She is completely alone."

And so, there, under the concrete overpass, the man, using the last, tiny, decayed hunk of his own as bait, lured the woman's soul out of her body. It emerged from her throat in a silver, flashing arc, like a rainbow trout. The man swallowed it hungrily and was whole again.

The dog, who had been engaged by a fluster of pigeons when the deal went down, arrived only in time to snarl after the man whose being was infused with the pure joy of rebirth and renewal. The dog barked and howled as the man ran, danced, and leapt through traffic and away from the overpass, the woman, and the dog.

The woman was listless. She didn't stir from her bed of dandelions, even as it cooled then completely froze beneath her.

A bicycle courier, alarmed by the dreadful appearance of the woman under the overpass, phoned the authorities to report what he saw there. The dog and the woman, who was by now barely alive, were quickly transported to the respective institutions that house lost women and dogs.

The dog was put down after five days of mournful yowling.

But the woman, having lost her soul, rehabilitated quite marvelously. She was taught the names of common things and how to comb her hair and tie her shoes. She was taught to speak politely, to read, to write and to make jewelry out of scraps of leather and sparkle-glue.

After many years of re-education it was discovered that, like others before her who have lost their souls, the woman had a great talent for making money. She became fabulously wealthy. At first she made money in real estate, then in the acquisition of small businesses and later in junior oil stocks.

Despite her scads of money, her lovely home, her enviable job, and her soullessness, the woman still yearned for "more."

"Isn't there something *more* I should be doing with my life," she asked herself? "Perhaps," she thought, "I should fall in love."

She met a lanky and distracted astrophysicist at a fundraiser to upgrade the city's planetarium. He had spinach dip on the end of his tie.

"Ah ha!" said the woman.

His finances were a shambles, he had been divorced three times, and he had to be continually reminded to eat, drink and bathe. He was hopelessly lost within the convoluted abstractions of his own mind. He courted the woman absent-mindedly between his lectures and conferences. He proposed marriage in September, as yellow poplar leaves dropped from the trees, like silent gold coins falling to the ground.

The woman vowed to have and to hold the astrophysicist. She vowed to remind him to drink the cooling tea and to eat the drooping sandwiches that she placed on his desk vigilantly until death, or worse, should part them.

"Look here," the astrophysicist told his wife. "I have proven that time travel is impossible. I call my proof: *Thermodynamic Law and the Inviolability of Energy Time Conservation via Isotropic and Anisotropic Radiation Measurement*. It is very clever. You should read it."

"Yes, dear," she said, smoothing out his papers across their bird's-eye-maple dining room table. "It is very clever."

The woman missed the dog terribly for the rest of her life. Besides that, though, she was at peace. •

Vivisection

Anna Mioduchowska

Probing in my cranium these days,
all I find are shapeless bundles in brown wrapping paper,
parcels mailed from unknown to anonymous,
stuffed in available cavities.

Tonight, an experiment. I'll dismember myself
the way curious children take apart living
frogs, butterflies, I'll lay out the organs,
and follow with brief observations.

Beginning with the heart, to honour the Greeks.
These jagged lines running deep into muscle
denote multiple fractures. Improperly
mended over the years, pumping power
slowly reduced, chronic pain.

The lungs have always infused my flesh
with the cosmic spirit, and to boot
they're a good looking pair when inflated.
At present, running on empty. One could say
they're too tightly bound to the atmosphere.

(So's the diaphragm. Except time
has honed the diaphragm into a fine instrument
which trumpets or drums according to need.
Some nights the membrane stretches so thin
its pitch brings out the dead.)

Viewed on a screen, the slippery mass below
and to the right, seems almost bucolic.
Light finger pressure, my liver balloons
with mammoth desire, edges shredded
by fear. Careful please.

The womb, very briefly. A bundle
of scar tissue. Past lives and future lives,
rumbling echoes, unborn whimpers;
a nursery cum graveyard.

Which brings skeletons to mind.
Ah them bones them bones—
left foot alone could keep us
going all evening. •

I am a hundred and
four, with an overdrawn
Life-Account.

The Promised Land

Antonio Ruffini

Here I sit, on the floor where I have often reclined to work, to rest, where I have eaten many of my meals. I can touch all the boundaries of my home simultaneously, my own little piece of Earth, where I can do as I please—as long as I don't disturb the neighbours, separated from me in three dimensions by two millimetres of supercrete. Freedom. Soon I will illegally visit the docklands. I am Pauson the historian, by the way, but let it be.

So here I sit, my Life-Account overdrawn, balance negative, void, in default, terminal—no further life-extension treatments. I am a hundred and four years old. But I am not trying to be dramatic. Nothing cataclysmic is going to happen today, probably not this year, maybe not next year. I am not about to be ejected from my cubicle, sedated, and carried off to an incinerator, nothing like that. These are civilised times, late in the twenty-first century, 2079, but most likely by 2089 I will be absent, deceased, dead, and by 2099 that is a certainty. Unless you are one of three hundred subscribers to Pauson's musical masterpieces—the latest being 'Eternal Echoes of Abyssal Motion'—you are unlikely to notice. Tranquility.

My request for an appointment with the Society of Immortality was denied of course, but I felt obliged to try. I am balked before the foothills, not tantalisingly close in view of the Promised Land, but having

gained a sighting of it from the distant plains. I, along with everyone else, have seen that the once infinite barrier is only an Everest to be climbed without oxygen, in the dark, in spring while the ice is melting, in the middle of a storm with no climbing gear. Yet some people are going to clamber over that escarpment, not nearly as many as think they will. In a few more generations the slope will be less steep. One day it will be a gentle stroll up the rolling hills of summer, over the top onto a plateau that stretches, if not forever, then further than one can see. Let it rest.

I walk slowly down the mesh steps from my cubicle in a tenement of thousands, fifteen blocks down, forty-five across, along metal grating alleyways that are almost deserted because who has time now that everyone is clambering up the cliffs towards eternity, climbing and scrambling? Beyond this quiet zone virtual and physical malls besiege the tenements, every cranny used to vend something. Spice-synthesised smells allure, and augmented human voices babble in every pitch and tone just like in all bazaars always, dating back to Mesopotamia.

The changing of the shadows, the light, means it is sunset high overhead, where the billionaires live. I have never been there. They hang above the masses, spinning their traps to reap the maximum harvest of wealth. It isn't a game anymore. An oversupply of humanity heads for the bottleneck. The contest between us and disaster is going to be a close one. We have studied nothing as well as this and still we cannot agree on the outcome. Perhaps the billionaires, who can buy everything, including the crispest information, know, but they aren't telling. Why should they? I wouldn't. It is their edge, and with every civilisation since before the Roman Empire the privileged have worked hard to stay that way. I am a hundred and four, with an overdrawn Life-Account.

When I need to escape my thoughts I walk. I pass through the waterfront mall where restaurants sell decorated cakes that nobody eats and shops sell plastic souvenirs that nobody buys. There are ramps for the elderly but I leave those to the young. I take easy steps alongside fake waterfalls that have been dressed up with mirrors and alternate reality gigs. The vendors project a merriment that belies their terrible eyes and youngsters glance at performers' unguarded tin cups. But if you have nothing to spend, nothing to do, nowhere to go, no friends to meet, then you sit and study the banality behind it all.

I see myself in a reflecting surface and straighten my back. In this part of the waterfront mall the utilities are poorly disguised. Performing street artists, who are not above interrupting a rendition to

follow and cajole, look at my face and leave me alone. I am tempted to take up my bedroll, abandon my tiny cubicle of a home, and sneak into one of the greater park preserves. Of course they would find me and I would end my days confined, fed, watered, voided. But there is a place, where ships from parts as strange as the People's Middle Demesnes put in for dry-dock repairs, and the sailors take time off from their duties to cut each other up with knives. To protect honest people from such ruffians a perimeter fence cages in the wharves. The same fence protects the quayside cranes from being vandalised by honest citizens. A skull-and-crossbones sign warns me that entry is forbidden. Violation will render my Life-Account policy void. So be it. All is at rest.

It is night, though it seldom gets completely dark, with all the light-emitting surfaces and lamps. There is no one about, and there it is, what I am looking for, a roller gate left open to let in a flatbed truck.

I wonder if anyone could misconstrue my face for that of an old salt who has spent decades squinting into the surf. I pass crates, taking care to avoid rails where automatic haulers in passing could crush me to pulp. I stop in an unlit patch alongside some containers, each of which could hold a dozen of the cubicles in which I live. They smell of decomposing seaweed and brimstone. Bright flashes cut the corners of my eyes, acetylene welders, automated or human driven I can't tell. Nearby, metal clashes with metal. I catch sight of shadows in motion. A dry-docked ship looms overhead. Rusting Cantonese script fades into a silver hull badly dented by gigantic sea hammers. Sailors cluster on a concrete causeway, one showering naked under a suspended hosepipe. They are the ancient wreck's crew. The naked sailor looks directly at me, and makes a point of rubbing the crack between his buttocks. I can't help but stare. It isn't the sailor rubbing his crack that captures my attention, but the incredible luxury of the flowing water. It is only seawater, and can only be a few degrees off freezing, yet the delicious waste of it! I used to swim in rivers, in fresh water. Imagine that. From the bridge of the ship high above, two young sailors holding hands scowl at me.

"Hey, old man, you watch me shower!"

The naked sailor stands in front of me, sea water dripping off him. His face has a refreshing ugliness to it—no genetically modulated beauty there. I stand still like a fool. The sailor actually expects me to speak. It is so long since anyone has expected that of me.

He smiles to put me at ease. "It is ok. I don't care that you are old. We can go behind the crates. I am cheap."

I shake my head. I have never attempted sex with another male, though the genetic tweaking enabling one to fully appreciate such an endeavour is well known and simple. I have read about the tax relief benefits, and the opportunity to achieve a greater range of companionship options, for greater cohabitation benefits in a crowded environment. It sounds quite appealing, but I have had to draw upon my Life-Account funds for more pressing and life-threatening contingencies. And now my Life-Account funds are depleted.

In the People's Middle Demesnes officially there is no such thing as homosexuality, even in this day, so possibly the sailor believes he is being daring, because he says, "Perhaps you are afraid of me."

The sailor dons some clothing obviously suspecting that any negotiations might take longer than he initially bargained for. I am not one to speak, but his face is too broad. He has no chin, and a front tooth is missing.

"I have no money," I say "I couldn't pay what you are worth."

The sailor mimics disappointment, but there is friendly angry laughter behind his eyes. "Out of respect for the elderly I will still go behind the crates with you . . . You don't come to the docks for this?"

"Well no."

"So what then?"

"It is nothing. I was walking. That is all."

The sailor lays his hand on my arm. "No, not nothing. You are sad. I listen well."

"I don't have money." Seeing the expression on the sailor's face, I adjust. "And that is part of my problem. The other part is that, as you have noticed, I am old. I can't afford the life-extension treatments."

The sailor grins. He taps his chest. "I will take you to see a friend. He can help."

I could remind the sailor that in a world of twelve billion people life needs to be carefully rationed. Instead I wait to see what comes next.

The sailor takes my hand in his chilled one. "Come, we can go now. My friend is on duty."

There are dozens of reasons why it is foolish to follow a sailor from the People's Middle Demesnes deep into the docklands. But I have no appointments to cancel. There is nowhere I have to be, today, tomorrow, next week.

"I hope it is not very far," I say, "I walk slowly these days."

"Not far."

The sailor insists on holding my hand as he guides me through a

maze of black metal cogs, cranes and unidentifiable debris that could be long abandoned or off-loaded only a few hours previously. We come to an open stretch of floodlit concrete, bordered by a few shacks, but we move away from them.

"You are wasting your shore leave," I say.

As we move back into semi-shadow I see at least two of his ship-mates emerge from the night, following us. Should my corpse be found in the morning, the port authorities will dump it in the nearby recycling plant. Nobody wants to get involved with messy People's Middle Demesnes politics. My sailor notices too that we are not alone, assuming he didn't know that all along.

He yells at the people following us, the same pair I saw on the bridge of the ship. All three fall into the night, shouting in belligerent sounding Cantonese, and of course I can't understand a word they are saying. There are worse ways to go than by having a sharp serrated knife cut your throat; the brain loses consciousness, less than a minute later the body dies. Still I would prefer it if my sailor were to win.

However the shouting ceases and my sailor returns, his face squeezed into furrows. "They accuse you of corrupting my morals. Idiots." He taps his skull. "They fear you distort the People's ideology in my foolish head. It is crammed with People's ideology, and one day I will escape ship and come to where they have Society of Immortality. I have a friend here."

"You know of the Society of Immortality?"

"Of course, that is where I take you."

"I should have told you that the Society won't see me. I fall outside their actuarial figures."

"*Will see you.*"

Well, I tried.

Our destination lies beyond a dry tunnel, possibly one once used to pump sewage into the sea. I have to bend my head into the gloom, the sailor not at all. Beyond the tunnel we grope through abandoned construction rubble and ancient computer hardware toward a booth ringed by arctic radiation lamps. The booth's paint is peeling under the hard illumination and a metal doorframe rusts where its galvanising has failed. It is here to intrigue and tantalise the sea-going travellers from sealed destinations such as the Peoples' Middle Demesnes and the Kingdoms of the Holy Alliance.

Nonetheless they won't speak to me. They won't want to raise false hope, nor waste a minuscule amount of their resources. My sailor

walks up to the booth. I hang back. I am at peace, knowing the outcome. The booth's vendor emerges, leans over the sill. He is young, his hair braided long in the current fashion. I am too far away to overhear their conversation, but colour flows through the vendor's pallid face. He shakes his head.

At last the sailor returns, which is good, for I am tired of standing here. "Gildon will see you."

I raise an eyebrow. In spite of what I know I must fight off a ridiculous surge of hope. The booth operator, Gildon it must be, vendor for the Society of Immortality, sends a lover's glance at the sailor, as if looking for a reprieve, but the sailor stands with arms folded.

"This is blackmail. Please don't ask this. I could lose my job, my Life-Account, everything." Gildon's long-nailed fingers encircle my hand. "I have to get promoted if I want to make it and I never will if I get caught. As it is only one out of twenty earn the promotion I need if I am going to catch up with the curve."

I sympathise with Gildon. Each day the universe batters the human body and slowly its ability to repair itself diminishes. While there are DNA patches and artery cleansing viruses, hormones to strengthen bone and muscle, viruses tailored to help keep neurons intact and destroy cancerous growths, it is ultimately a siege and eventually the body must fall. Or must it?

"Please go away," the Society of Immortality vendor says.

I am still unused to people speaking to me, so it is the sailor who replies. "The old man will not go. I promised you would speak to him. I keep my word."

The sailor nudges me as if we two are collaborators. "Gildon is not bad, but he betrays me too often."

It turns out that the vendor has been disappearing with my sailor into the back of his booth—on company time. His job is to seduce sailors with the promise of immortality, and with nothing else. It turns out that fair young Gildon has been sharing the back of his booth with various dock workers as well. My sailor found this out in the most obvious way only a few hours previously.

"Since you will not allow me to punish Gildon by going with you," the sailor says to me, "I will find another way."

Thus do I get my interview with a Society of Immortality vendor. Of course I should quietly absent myself at this point and leave them to settle their dispute. Unfortunately I am lost, and won't be able to find my way out of the docklands without help. Certainly I don't want

to bump into the sailor's shipmates, those who are concerned I am tainting his People's Middle Demesnes ideological education.

My sailor jabs a finger towards Gildon's deeply flushed face. "You are faithless friend and if you don't help the old one you are without honour."

The Immortality vendor pales as if someone has opened a tap in his neck to drain out all the blood. "I can't. If the record shows I have been dealing with someone outside the actuarial probabilities, the Society of Immortality will expel me, for incompetence." The vendor closes his eyes.

And then I notice that his amazing eyelashes are actually real. His high cheekbones, his large eyes in a slightly too perfect face convince me there is no need for mercy. Gildon has tailored genes, though I will later find out he had no choice in the matter. He was born with them. In the end we make our decisions on such prejudices, even the best of us. We are only human.

"It is most kind of you to see me," I say. "I have been struggling to get an appointment with the Society of Immortality."

Gildon's eyes bulge in his ashen face, and he gasps as if I have hit him hard in the stomach. (Gildon is not his real name by the way, and perhaps none of this took place in the docklands, or at all. Perhaps I have some scruples.)

He looks imploringly at the sailor, then at me, then sighs as if his heart is broken. It is probably a tactic that works for him often enough. His flailing hand accidentally scratches my arm. I realise that he has been speaking to me.

"I beg your pardon."

His face has become almost translucent. "Please, I promise if you come to my place tomorrow afternoon—it is my down time—I will give you all the information you want, off the record. I know ways to do that. It is all I can do without getting into trouble." He looks as if he will break down and cry any minute.

"Good," says the sailor. "If he does not do it, old man, tell me, tell Mo-Wu-Jo at pier five, because no one betrays Mo-Wu-Jo."

Ah, but young people are silly. They can't help it.

Mo-Wu-Jo the sailor guides me back through the docks using a convoluted series of walkways in an effort to avoid his shipmates.

The next day I find Gildon's place quite easily, on the seventeenth elevation of the two hundred and forty-third horizontal, ninetyeth vertical.

The Society of Immortality employee is waiting outside his cubicle. I see why. Gildon lives in a hole that makes my own tiny recess seem like a castle. Inside there is just enough space for an average-sized person to stretch out fully. Ablution facilities are communal, shared by twenty similar apartments. The worst part is the ceiling. Gildon flutters while I struggle to find a comfortable position.

"I can afford a better place with my job. I really only use it for sleeping, and that's about it."

I shake my head. I understand. The Society of Immortality believes that in the near future it will come to an inflexion point, where it will be able to patch the damage the human body takes at a rate faster than the flesh fails. But the cost of staying alive doubles every year after a certain age, so what may be theoretically possible may not become actual. Those costs are decreasing, but not nearly as rapidly as is necessary, or perhaps just as slowly as is necessary. People like Gildon work and save, and live like the poorest of the poor, hoping if they squirrel away enough savings they will delay the inevitable long enough that it is no longer inevitable.

"Let us talk outside," I say, "On the walkway. No one will overhear."

He waves his hands in the space between my face and his. "Oh no, I dare not. I have everything in place here, the out of body hook-ups into the networks. Please, it must be here."

I wait while he sets up his security bugs. By the time you reach a hundred and four you learn patience. When it is done to his satisfaction Gildon breaks into a relieved smile, the first genuine sign of happiness, or at least something distinct from unhappiness that I have observed in the young man. I can see why so many would want to make this one happy. Gildon manages to make himself mobile even in the cramped space. He reaches around me for microfilament leads.

"Clumsy, but more secure," he says. "Ok, I'm ready." Then a fresh flow of blood heightens the flush in his cheeks.

He meets my eyes. "I sneaked a few cells of yours for analysis last night, and after work ran some Life-Account audits, and actuarial numbers."

That is terribly illegal, a first order privacy violation. I can walk out of this cubicle and have Gildon's Life-Account permanently shut, no long-life treatments, only standard medical procedures. We live in the most law-abiding society in human history.

"It's all so horrible," Gildon says. He allows a tear to slip out of the corner of an eye. "I wish I could be free of this."

I say that I understand.

He clutches onto me as if I am his grandfather, or an elderly lover. I don't know which he thinks I could be. It doesn't matter.

"I don't know what to do," he says.

I once thought I had many answers. Today I offer empty platitudes. "It's fine," I say. "Don't worry. Do what you think is best."

Gildon sees the path to the Promised Land and in his heart he knows he probably won't make it. He too has done the projections. He is twenty-two years old and he will climb higher than I will, but probably he won't even reach halfway. It should not matter.

Every generation says the time of its youth was simpler, better. Perhaps that is right. I am glad to have lived when it was impossible to buy the thing everyone wants. The rich died almost as easily as the poor. Now, in 2079 one can try for the Promised Land, and it will get worse. The stakes will climb and everyone is a contender. With Gildon's awkward beautiful head buried in my chest, I read a hardcopy notice reminding tenants to clock the volume of their urine if they want their recycling points.

"Be serene," I say to Gildon.

In his place I too would feel obliged to try, at odds of a thousand to one, at odds of a million to one. We are entering one of human history's cruel eras. No, not the cruellest, not by a long shot, but never have so many been so desperate, never has a ruling class, embedded in organisations like the Society of Immortality, been so entrenched, with so docile a peasantry. The peak of the nation-state era with its terrible excesses seems almost benign in comparison. The quests of the old theocracies to quell free thought seem riddled with shining holes.

"It is ok to cry," I say to Gildon.

He looks at me. His voice is harsh, rough. "You are going to die. You have more reason to cry, old man."

"Of course I know I am going to die."

I should have been dead before 2050, my bones riddled with cancerous cells, but thanks to a better diet, a bit of exercise, some gene therapy that eliminated the deadliest kinks in my personal DNA, a couple of regenerated organs, a couple of prosthetic joints, I am still alive. I made it by a generation or two.

"I beg your pardon?" I say. Gildon has been speaking.

His pupils dilate. "I said, what do you *want*?"

"A clearer glimpse of the Promised Land. I want to see how close it is, and how much of a mirage it is."

And then, decades after I had become used to its absence, recognition grows in young Gildon's face.

"Are you the Pauson who published '100 Key Historical Moments' in 2037?"

Felicity. So I am. Perhaps it is my vanity, but I believe young Gildon would have leaped into the air had there been the space.

And so I unashamedly use this young Society of Immortality vendor's not-quite-legitimate skills to trawl databases I cannot afford to access. And during our search perhaps young Gildon gains too. He has read my texts on history after all, so he understands how the social pressures are massed to prevent most of us crossing the River Styx to the Promised Land. We agree on what humanity's key moment will be. It is exciting to know that in a historical context we are already there.

"Mo-Wu-Jo doesn't stand a chance, does he?" Gildon says.

"No. No, he does not."

"I knew that sooner or later he would find me with one of the dockworkers."

He sees me raise my eyebrows and his eyes are suddenly as bleak as those of the vendors by the waterfront mall.

"I know. I know what I am doing. I also know why I take the chances I take. I know. I'm not an idiot."

Perhaps I should leave it, but I say, "It is too soon. I would rather bet on having a good eighty more years, possibly another twenty above that, with the asymptote pushed out a bit further."

"I know what I am doing." But his eyes are those of a trapped animal in a ravine unable to choose between the onrushing train in front of him and the stakes that line the sides.

My Life-Account is empty. I am at peace. •



Alberta
Foundation
for the Arts

You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

Yeah—from here on out,
one drink then home.
He should have stayed on
the farm in Wisconsin.

Boy's Night Out

Rob Hunter

Sally Schofield was new to Sur la Mer and with the soccer mom's requisite formula family: minivan, flaxen-haired children only moderately overweight, large hairy dog, large hairy husband with pattern baldness. The invitation was for cookies and conversation. It had been Hillary Braunstein's turn to break the news.

"Did I ever tell you about David, my first husband?" The two women were seated in a suburban kitchen, an American icon: coffee and cookies and a carafe of freshly cut daisies formed a barricade across the center of a polished granite countertop, defining their spheres. The newcomer was seated near the door—an easy exit.

"Sorry? I didn't realize you had been married before." Sally's cookie was dipped, tentatively, held under the steaming surface, then removed. *Well, we're cutting right to the chase, aren't we?* thought Sally. The cookie was not eaten, but studied.

No collagen here, thought Hillary Braunstein. Sally's cookie was held poised at lips too full, too young, too moist and sensuous to be anything but the genuine article.

"He wasn't..." began Sally. Had David died in the war? Unlikely. The cookie's fate hinged on Hillary's answer. The question and the cookie hung between them.

"A gated community like Sur la Mer should be the ideal place to

raise a family," said Hillary.

Evidently whatever had or had not happened to David was on hold for the time being. Hillary's veering off topic was considered endearing by her friends. "You never know where Hillary is headed next," they said. Sally found it irritating.

"You know—as far from New York as you can get and still be in it," said Hillary. "Ocean bathing, surrounded by water on three sides..." She made a needless adjustment to the perfectly arranged daisies. "...and that nonpareil view of the lights on the Verrazano Bridge. At night, of course."

• • •

Five blocks.

The year before their move to Sur la Mer Jim Schofield had leaned into the wind and pulled his chin lower into his coat collar, shoulders hunkered up against a March wind scudding in from the Jersey piers.

He should have stayed in Wisconsin. It was five cross-town blocks to where he parked his car—five *Manhattan* cross-town blocks, the better part of a mile—in the rain, sleet, snow and the pounding heat of high August.

An exquisite pain took that moment to drive a rusty cavalry saber into the pit of his stomach. That second martini at Lloyd's Bar. Or was it the third? He'd have to cut back. Jim gagged at the curb. He bent over with his head between his knees and vomited in cascading waves. He felt immediately better but his eyes were now blinded by tears. He felt for the curbing with his heel but it wasn't there; he tripped and stumbled. In a yellow arc, a medallioned taxi swerved past in a tight uptown turn, its driver leaning on the horn and screaming curses in a foreign language.

Yeah—from here on out, one drink then home. He should have stayed on the farm in Wisconsin.

• • •

Sally Schofield was a pretty blond woman who still looked good in a flowered spring frock. *The luxury of bare arms, not a wattle or a saddle-bag on her;* thought Hillary. Sturdy legs—well shaped, tanned, shaved and moisturized.

"You shave your legs." It was a statement.

Sally looked surprised and re-crossed her legs, a defensive posture. "You'll have to forgive me if I'm a little antsy. I don't do interviews well.

That's what this is, isn't it? An interview, the ice-breaker, the Welcome Wagon?" *This was all so very TV-Land—The Andy Griffith Show, Leave It to Beaver. Just like on cable.*

"Of course, you are in denial."

"What?"

Hillary hummed a slight tune as she dithered with the daisy-painted saucers, sugar bowl and creamer that formed the cordon sanitaire between them. She reordered a stack of paper napkins. "We try to keep all this *entrenous*, strictly between us girls. Lycanthropism has enjoyed a, an, uh... *unfavorable* public image. Too much goddamned TV. That is why newcomers get the tour and the lecture. You know the drill: peasant cunning on the rampage, ozone filled air from Tesla coils and Van deGraaff generators. Great lolloping hordes of shopkeepers and railway clerks come panting up rocky switchbacks to Doctor Frankenstein's castle with their pine pitch torches—burn and destroy, kill, ravage, extirpate, their answer to the outré—quivering with dread at anything outside their daily grind."

• • •

Five blocks.

The walk should have helped with the spare tire hung carelessly at his midriff, but the day's-end Martinis Jim Schofield allowed himself at Lloyd's negated all the walk's good work. The homicidal taxi had by now disappeared into the traffic at 42nd Street, its horn a descending Doppler ringing between the walls of buildings. He shuddered as he crossed an empty 39th Street against the light. Behind him the light turned to WALK and the smell of freshly savaged flesh, steaming and bloody, filled his nostrils. A red haze splattered across the insides of his eyes.

Cow slaughtering. Eight-year-old Jim Schofield rolled on the blood-wet ground with the yard dog: any other day a Wisconsin farm boy playing with Ol' Shep. At one particularly tempting chunk of offal, the yard dog snapped at him. Jim bit the dog's ear off. Jim spat—dog blood was different, somehow forbidden. He stood to throw up, then scrambled into an empty silo with his trophy as the yard dog whimpered under the swaying corpse of Barbie AB619.

His aunt Irene had stood saucer-eyed, in shock. "Jim... no." Deep in the hollow, ringing silo they pulled him clawing and howling off the cow's entrails. After that Jim was watched. The family did not speak of the business of the cow killing ever again.

From an alley stuffed with trash one of the city's derelicts beckoned to him. This was one of those alleyways of permanent twilight

prowled by drunks, junkies, building supers and the homeless. The man was curled up on a ventilation grate, knees under his chin. He looked pretty well beat-up, but then they all did.

Home, he had to get home.

Jim turned to go. Another moan, weaker, brought him back. The guy was hurt, maybe by those gangs of wilding teenagers he had read about. He had to help. He steeled himself to the likelihood of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as he crouched over the man.

The man was having trouble breathing. Jim tore at the man's clothing, exposing his chest. The man's throat was russet-ripe, a sun-swollen fruit full to bursting. As the taut skin popped, hot blood burst into Jim's mouth and dribbled past his lips to cover his face. Where it clotted and dried.

• • •

"Penises," said Hillary Braunstein. "Seal penis bones. David, my first husband, cut and polished them for amulets. In Alaska. The sexually challenged wear them; Sid wears one. He rode away on his motorcycle to homestead in Alaska—David, that is. He left me for subsistence farming and penis polishing. That was 1988. He said he was going for cigarettes."

"Oh." Sally's cookie hovered, unmoving. Sally was silent. The ball was still in Hillary's court.

"How did you two decide on *Sur la Mer*?" Hillary asked.

"Oh, I thought you knew. It was your husband, after all." Sally entered her comfort zone; the cookie was eaten. "Jim met Sid at one of those boys' sports nights they have after work. It was in a bar... In the city? Sid didn't tell you? After that it was every month like clockwork for about a year. All Jim could talk about was moving out here."

"Ah... yes."

• • •

Sid Braunstein aimed his remote at a wide screen plasma TV. "You into baseball? I'm a Red Sox nut. Had to sign up for satellite service to get the games."

The two husbands sat out on the deck in white painted wicker chairs with cushions whose bright oversized daisies echoed the motifs of Hillary's kitchen. Sid Braunstein was a jovial, hairy man with a tightly packed body, a college jock who hadn't let himself go in middle age. His paunch looked solid enough to have genuine muscle behind it.

Sid worked out. Jim surreptitiously touched the bulge at his own mid-section. Sid noticed.

"Don't let it get you down. Free weights."

"Huh?"

"Free weights. I have a mini gym in the garage. And the girls watch our diets. This..." Sid held the bowl of clam dip aloft like a druid holding a chalice high to catch the first rays of a dawning solstice, "...is a plenary indulgence. *In durance vile here must I wake and weep and all my frowsy couch in sorrow steep*—Robert Burns. It's about getting banished to the outer darkness, as it were... while the girls chat up the neighborhood amenities."

"Yeah, Burns." Jim had read Robert Burns in high school.

"Mmmm... don't know how she does it, Hillary," said Sid Braunstein. "Armed with but a simple blender and a whack of cream cheese, spices and clams, she can create ambrosia. Help yourself to another beer. We're not shy here."

"Uh, yeah..." Jim scoured his memory for Red Sox statistics.

• • •

"Jim met your Sid in Manhattan," said Sally Schofield.

"A sports bar, Lloyd's on Madison Avenue," said Hillary. "Sid's baseball hangout. I know. He was on the way to the train and caught your Jim in an alleyway off 39th Street making a shambles of a homeless man. It was too late for the derelict but Sid got your husband sedated and back to the clinic." The older woman crossed and then uncrossed her legs. The legs were marvelously long, tanned and slender. "Your Jim wouldn't remember. None of them do; that's why the wives have to be in charge."

Limousine legs, thought Sally, *And doesn't she love to show them off*. She blushed at getting caught staring at her hostess' marvelous legs.

Too young, too pretty, thought Hillary. *And dumb as a post. Let's toss her a bone*. "David did come back, eventually, but by then it was too late." Hillary waited while Sally reflected on this last tidbit.

"Oh..." A neat change of subject. *But she was the one who brought it up, the missing first husband*, thought Sally.

"I know this because he sent a postcard once. One postcard: "Dogs run free, why not we?"

"There are huge national parks in Alaska," said Sally.

Maybe not so dumb. "He was tired of feeling confined? He needed

room to roam. All this was before Sur la Mer, of course. The mere suggestion of a gated community would have driven him right up the wall."

She's doing the legs thing again, thought Sally. She couldn't pull her eyes away fast enough.

Gotcha, thought Hillary.

• • •

"There is a forgetfulness—a mild aphasia, you might call it. The lacunae are sometimes... ah, embarrassing. Like this?" Sid pulled what might have been a medallion from inside his aloha shirt. A polished disc reflected opalescent gemstone hues. It was fastened around his neck by a leather thong.

"Hmm... nice? What is a lacunae?"

"Sort of like an alcoholic blackout. Not the blackout itself, but the hole where your missing time went. A *lacuna*, singular—Latin, first declension, assigned gender feminine—appropriate as the girls cover up for us."

Sid held the dangle in front of Jim's nose. He gave it a gentle tap so it swung like a pendulum. *He's trying to hypnotize me*, thought Jim.

"From the penis bone of a seal." Sid dropped the amulet back inside his shirt. "David, Hillary's first husband, made it in Alaska. David made a run for it but he came back. Before he left he bit me. But like I said, he came back. Overland. He must have followed the railroad tracks. There were news reports. His trail pointed right here. Anyone with the brains God gave a tree could have figured things out." Sid upended his can of beer and reached for a replacement. "Thank God for narrow-minded chauvinism. Nobody would have believed it even if they had caught on. Which they didn't. Derek Lowe and Pedro Martinez. The Sox have a decent bullpen at last."

• • •

"David left on a motorcycle; we don't allow motorcycles here in Sur la Mer. One of the rules. Here, have another." Hillary pushed the platter of cookies across the center line back to Sally's side. "We went the Lysistrata route—Aristophanes? Withholding sex, that got their attention. First we tried threats and confrontations about those *things* they will keep on dragging home to bury in the yard—the boys can't recall anything of their midnight rambles or so they say. Dear, please

don't let your mouth hang open like that."

"But... Jim?"

The woman is a born ingénue, thought Hillary. "And the answer was right there all the time. We simply had to get some protection."

Sally thought of condoms and Allstate, the good hands people. "You already have the gates. What's left, guard dogs and sentries?"

"From the government. Our husbands were threatened, therefore Section 4—CFR 17.11 could be brought into play."

"Seventeen-eleven. That's not the convenience store..."

"No, that's the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Endangered Species Act of 1973."

"Oh. Yes...?"

"We are an aging population here in Sur la Mer. You have children," said Hillary. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"In the play, *Lysistrata*—and it's a comedy—the women go on a sex strike. They got fed up with their husbands always charging off to war. We supplement the husbands' treatments with herbs."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Sally had seen a TV report on the perils of self-diagnosis. "There was that diet drug—*ephedrine*...?"

There was a squeak from the legs of a high-backed colonial reproduction chair as Hillary stood and collected the cookies and the cups. "For thirty years the doctors slapped hormone treatments to women and called it 'enhancement.' We pointed this out—their maleness would be 'enhanced.' It's only fair," said Hillary Braunstein. "And we got the cancer and the strokes. I figure if a woman loves her husband..." She absently dumped the plate of cookies into the garbage disposal. "We don't compost," she offered by way of an explanation. "Makes the ground too easy to dig in. I have an herb garden."

Hillary walked out of the room. They would view the garden.

"Yes, I'd love to," said Sally.

• • •

"Here, help yourself..." Sid Braunstein passed the bowl of clam dip. "Ambrosial. The girls, God bless 'em," said Sid. "They have the top hand and they appreciate that. We acquiesce. Since the *Lysistrata* thing."

"*Lysistrata*," said Jim Schofield.

"*Lysistrata*. Don't ask; Hillary will tell Sally and Sally will tell you—that's how it works. *Durance vile* on the patio. Heh heh. Beer and

chips beats bread and water."

"Lysistrata. Isn't that a play by Aristo..."

"Yep. The girls needed a rest. And the hormone treatments did it. No more unchaperoned midnight impromptus; we all get hairy and horny at the same time. Impotence puts a strain on the best of marriages." Sid gave Jim a nudge with his elbow. "Come home with a wet willie and the girls like to know where it's been... Heh heh."



At the back door Hillary slipped into a pair of garden clogs. "Since you are the new girl you get to patrol the wire. Fence maintenance. It's only three nights a month and not too demanding. Here's a set of rubber Wellies. I think they'll fit you, Sally. They were David's; he had small feet."

"How did you meet your second husband?"

"We even had a skateboard park built. For the kids?" Hillary had changed the subject. Again. "Turns out we can't have kids. None of us. Something about the treatments. Oh, you mean Sid. Well, David and I were living in Jersey at the time; Sid was a veterinarian with a midtown clinic. On Madison Avenue. All very upscale and glitzy. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with David. One of them made a chance remark..."

"Is this what all the secrecy is about?"

"My, Sally, but you are fast on you feet. Excellent. See, David was a werewolf. We have made some, ahh, understandably tentative, feelers to the government as to endangered species status for the husbands. But so far..."

"Then Sid is...?"

"And so is Jim. And that is why you and I are here today going on a tour of my dumb, totally useless herb garden while our husbands swill beer and natter man-talk on the deck. Ow!" A blue spark arced from a wire fence to Hillary Braunstein's finger. "It's only 24 volts but still packs a wallop if you forget your rubber Wellies."

"You have an electrified fence!?" Sally was aghast.

"The picket wire. That's what we call it, from the days when Marshall Dillon gave the trailbosses 'til sundown to get their unruly cowhands out of Dodge. We do the same only in reverse. The husbands tend to roam."

"Dodge?"

"Ah, the generational difference. Gunsmoke—an old TV show. Marshall Dillon strung barbed wire around the perimeter of the town. To keep the cows off the streets?" Hillary held a finger poised near the wire. It was strung tight between self-anchoring metal posts and twisted onto yellow plastic insulators. "It shouldn't be much longer and we can turn the damned thing off."

"Was. You said David *was*. And Jim..."

"No, dear, there's no cure; don't get your hopes up. Sid put him down. An overdose of morphine, quite painless. David couldn't change back but David was a rare case. Sid and I had discovered feelings for one another. And David bit him before running away to Alaska, so Sid was a goner. Even with belladonna poultices."

"Hence the herb garden?"

"Sharp girl. Even with his medical knowledge, Sid was caught short. Belladonna is a specific for werewolf bite. Lacking belladonna, Sid improvised with the available members of the family Deadly Nightshade: potatoes and tomatoes. French fries and ketchup. We were the talk of the Madison Avenue Burger King that night."



"So just how *did* you come to Sur la Mer?" asked Jim Schofield.

"Well, as it happens I'm a veterinarian and Hillary came to see me about David. See, he killed the newspaper delivery boy."

Jim froze on the edge of his chair. The blue corn taco chip in his hand dripped clam and sour cream dip onto his slacks.

"Strike a nerve, did I? Hey... get a handle on that. Ruin your crease." Sid pulled a paper serviette from a stack folded into a decorative wire holder. "Any trouble back in Manhattan? Beyond chasing cars and peeing on policemen's legs?"

As Sid leaned to wipe the fallen splotch of dip from Jim's pants he spoke urgently as if they might be overheard. "You know the kind—folks usually end up here on the run from some mess they have to get away from. Not the full of the moon, that's all bullshit. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, the moon was closer, much closer to the Earth. And the months were shorter. There is a hormonal rhythm. Antibodies in the blood release a timed catalyst that triggers a hormonal shift. Really fast and nasty. But you would know all about that. That derelict I caught you with in the alley? There, that should do it." Sid wadded up the napkin and dropped it on the floor. He leaned

back and fondled his remote. "Once a month the girls fire up the electric fence and lock the gates."



A weak arc of crackling blue curved from the fence wire to Hillary's outstretched finger. "It all depends on where you stand." She played the spark like a yo-yo, pulling her finger in and out. "There's a formula—inductive capacitance, something like that. See, no shock."

"You like touching the fence, don't you?" said Sally. The electric blue followed Hillary's finger but never seemed to make contact.

"Like I said, I just moved a little. It's all in where you put your feet. And the rubber Wellies, too. Give it a try.

"No thanks."

"Whatever. Being a soccer mom... I almost envy you, Sally—the ballet lessons, soccer practice, fencing, Boy Scouts. When the men developed their—ahh, *problem*—and we applied hormone treatments, they became sterile and lost all interest in sex, and I mean *totally*. No more Mom's Taxi; our kids aged and went off to school. You will have the only children in Sur la Mer. Of course if you get caught outside the wire after curfew, you'll have to fend for yourself. But it's only two days each month. And they're horny as hell." Hillary smiled a wide, suggestive smile.



Sid reached to scoop up a mighty dollop of clam dip with a taco chip. "Like I might have said, lycanthropism is, or has been for most of us here, transmitted through the bite of an affected individual. I'd say you are a natural." Sid gave Jim a meaningful look.

"Meaning...?" Jim remembered his aunt's eyes when they caught up with him in the silo.

"Meaning some folks are born with the talent. We call it a talent. It is, you know, a talent. But there's nobody to show off for. Neat party trick except you don't get invited back." He stuffed the dip-freighted chip into his mouth. A blob clung to his nose. "Yep, you're a natural."

Jim uncomfortably shifted his weight on the patio cushion.

"Childhood memories? Got the fidgets?"

"Yes." Sid appeared happy with that and Jim decided not to belabor the point.

"I envy you. Hormonal," said Sid Braunstein as he reached for

another Coors. "You gotta hand it to them, the girls, they got it all doped out..." Sid was enjoying a mild beer buzz. "...Vatican II, the rhythm system as applied to lycanthropy. Really cool stuff and Hillary figured it all out for herself. Got the idea from the hormone replacement therapies—you know, after the birth control pills scare? I just did the grunt work, contracted with the manufacturing laboratories and all."



Hillary led Sally down a manicured path of white polished pebbles. "It's not easy being different. Ever try to slip a werewolf past a condo board? They even hire private eyes; would you believe it? OK, so the men are normal most of the time. And no amount of electrolysis would explain away the—ahh... *artifacts*. Things they bring home to bury. They're just like big kids, really. But who knew when they would get all hairy and feral?"

Sally slipped in the oversized rubber boots. "Oops. Sorry." A wounded *mandragora officinarum* hung dejectedly where it had been snapped off. White milky sap oozed.

"Careful. This little patch represents two years of work. The occasional organ—a little something for later—that we could have put up with. But the yards were a mess. Who's to know how a man's mind works? Oh, yes—the condo boards. After the twelfth try I was ready to chuck it all and buy outright. Always some old bat in a bouffant wig and her pet poodle humping Sid's pants leg. We formed a non-profit corporation. Investment capital was lean after the dot-com bust and we picked the whole place up for chump change."

"It must have cost millions."

"A million-five, actually. Sid was a celebrity veterinarian. He performed surgery on Meg Ryan's pussy. Twice. That's one of Sid's jokes. We had references. There's nothing a condo board won't ask—they leave you stripped and drained. One time I said I wanted to grow patio tomatoes on the roof, for emergencies. but I didn't tell *them* that. Remember the French fries and ketchup? Well, it was like I peed in the communion chalice."

"Oh, are you Catholics? With a name like Braunstein, I just naturally assumed..." Sally fell silent. The insides of the borrowed boots were sweaty and her face felt flushed.

"Tomato red."

"Huh?"

"Tomato red is the color I would have turned if I had made a gaffe like that one. You are forgiven; it is really quite attractive on you, Sally. Tomato red, I mean. Tomatoes are called the 'wolf apple,' by the way. At least that's their name in Latin: *lycopersicon esculentum*—the 'wolf peach,' rightly."

Sally looked at the herb garden. "I don't see any tomatoes."

"No, no tomatoes. Ketchup is more concentrated. We buy it by the case at the Pick 'N' Pay."



"Clap for the Wolfman; he's gonna rate your record high..." The TV was off and an Oldies' CD now blared from Sid Braunstein's patio boom box.

"The Guess Who. A favorite," said Sid. "Clap—clap for the Wolf-man..." Sid laughed heartily; he did not look like a man who laughed a lot. His eyes bulged and his face turned beet red. "Sorry. *Sorree*. Woo, hee. *Whoop-whoop, hack hack hack.*" Spit flew as Sid bent double over the bowl of clam dip. He recovered, still choking from the unaccustomed laughing fit. "Snorted... beer... up my nose. Ahh... hmm. Actually, sexually transmitted diseases are not a problem here in Sur la Mer as they are out in the normal world—the *civilians*, we call 'em. Leptospirosis, distemper and rabies, though..." He grew thoughtful, pulling on his beer. "Gotta lay off the rabbits and the squirrels. Cats, too. Stick to your own kind, that's my motto. Disease-wise, the baddest actors are always the species jumpers. Gotta keep it in your pants—if you're wearing any, that is. Pants cramp your style when you're chasing a cat up a tree."

Sid beamed. Jim beamed back, this was another laugh line—clap for the wolfman, yuck, yuck. Jim Schofield smiled and felt more at ease. He wondered how Sally's interview was going. Sid ignored Jim and fiddled with his TV remote. The game was back on again.



Sally and Hillary had reached the garden's far perimeter where a large cement toad crouched under a spreading ornamental yew tree. The toad was the size of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle fallen on its side.

"Don't you just love him," said Hillary. "He has a very knowing look when the light is right."

"Very... large," said Sally.

"Big is good," said Hillary. "He came with the place. And he's

sitting on some of the boys' more incriminating, ahh... trophies."

Sally had lagged behind. She was scraping at a suspicious clump adhered to her foot.

"Step in something? Let's have a look-see."

Sally held up the afflicted rubber Wellie.

"Nope. Just dog poop," said Hillary. "Wipe it on the grass. It's easy to tell the difference when you've raked up enough of the stuff—the boys get a high fiber diet. They tend to fat so we watch what we feed them."

Sally sat on the toad to clean her boots.

"I called up the agricultural extension service. Bet you didn't know New York City had county agents. Anyway, that is how I met Everett Castelnuovo. There's something about a man in uniform. He was very attentive. At first I thought he had the hots for me but he smelled a research paper. You know, publish-or-perish, something for a scientific journal. *Sur la Mer* was going to put him on the map, career-wise."

"He wore a uniform?"

"Well, a sleeve patch and a twill serge bomber jacket. He was quite handsome, a Mark Trail type filtered through Chiquita Banana what with the bolero and all."

"Was."

"He came in over the picket wire on a bad night, intruder-wise. The boys' night out."

"Oh."

"I'm expecting his replacement any day. From the Fish and Wildlife Service, an expert on 'chemical ecology,' whatever that is." Hillary toyed with a sprig of bittersweet nightshade that had been broken off by another misstep. She looked accusingly at Sally and held the wounded herb under her nose. "*Solanum dulcamara*—the potato family, would you believe?"

"You mentioned *Lysistrata*?" said Sally, trying for a diversion.

"Going without was as hard for us as it was for them. But we were willing to sacrifice for the greater good. Now that we have them back, they are totally limp, but at least we have them home nights. Most nights..."



"Ahh... *YES!*" A crowd roar issued from the TV's stereo speakers. Sid looked expectantly at his company.

Jim felt he should contribute something. "Hey... how's about that Manny Ramirez?"

"37 homers and 104 RBIs last season, but that's not why we're here. We are self-policing." Sid zapped the set with his remote and the screen went black. "This is important. I'm supposed to be vetting you on life in a gated community. You're here for a reason, you know. In Sur la Mer? Hey, that's good!"

"Huh?"

"Vetting—I made a pun. I didn't mean to—*veterinarian*—my profession and all. Have to tell Hillary about it, she'll get a chuckle. Basically I'm not a humorous guy."

"Oh, I wouldn't..."

"Yes, you would. Baseball and animal autopsies are my areas of competence, period. No standup. Anyway, I thought Hillary was having an affair. Some guy from the government. Now Hillary, I just love her to bits. I was hurt, chagrined, humiliated, all of the above. And I lurked. I caught him coming over the picket wire one night. He was packing a sensitive microphone—you know, the kind with a tripod and a parabolic reflector—a laptop, night vision goggles, the works. I buried him in the mandragora patch. When I was back to normal, I confronted my wife. Boy, did I get an earful! The girls had to dig him up and plant him under the garden toad. Seems I had made a mistake."



"But here we were talking about having the husbands declared a threatened species..." Hillary had been idly poking with her toe at a mounded planting of *atropa belladonna*. A human toe was exposed. "Oh, shit. *Simply shit!*" She knelt and brushed away shredded cedar bark. A severed foot protruded from the mulch. It had been gnawed. Hillary poked the toe and its foot back under cover and patted the shredded bark flat. "Well! I thought he was late returning my call. A steep curve in their learning processes, these government men. Your tax dollars at work. Everett's replacement, the man from the Fish and Wildlife Service. He brought it on himself—I told him to call first. He should have checked his voice mail."

Hillary directed Sally's attention to a particularly attractive grouping of daisy-like flowers. "*Arnica montana*, of the aster family, actually. The popular name is 'wolfsbane,' good for headaches. I think I feel one coming on." •

The Ghostly Nymph of Creighnish

Amy Julia McCormick

She glided over rocks, just
there,
and sat in seaweed at dusk,
when dusk was a field of
ash violets in sunset's shadows

She grew wings flecked with desire
when the sea curdled moonlight and
a zephyr braided her hair

Rising above the sand cape of Creighnish,
high into sooty veils perfumed with fish
and journeys of birds,
she rose up, just
there,
straying in her slink

Her flight would not foam with eternity's milk.

Marooned she was in medieval rays
of the labyrinth
troubling her solitude

In her clamor to meditate,
down, down she came,

prancing in her nightmare,
haunting the ivory earth •

He will return to his studio and
destroy the new paintings.
The ones already turned to the
wall. Mustn't take a chance
someone will see them,
report his heresy.

Surrealist World

Cliff Burns

"Isn't it true, after all, that man is no more than an offshoot of solar matter cast over with a gadfly shadow of free will?" - Rene Char

Antonin A explodes himself all over the foyer of the Hotel Magritte, making a pretty mess. It is a protest against the recent renovations to the beloved landmark; a witless concatenation of dull, complacent colours and an ersatz rainforest of plastic plants. The blood and offal is photographed for exhibit by one of A's accomplices, using an old style box camera. Sepia carnage.

The group had determined that a grand gesture was required, Monsieur B giving his blessing to the venture with a slight, almost imperceptible dip of his over-large, leonine head. Antonin A volunteered for the assignment, knowing it would guarantee him a spot in the pantheon beside Vache, Desnos, Rimbaud and a select few others.

The rebuff is accompanied by a hand lettered manifesto, found on what remains of A's shattered torso. The hotel management is warned that further reprisals can be expected if any attempt is made to clean up the statement. The tableau of gore is to be left as is, a potent symbol of what is in store for reactionaries and aesthetic miscreants. Word quickly spreads, the scene drawing an influx of gawkers, a clamouring of new guests.

C'est ca.

Open expressions of affection are strictly discouraged. Ardent lovers find themselves spattered with fish guts. Upon discovery, grass-stained couples are forced to run a gauntlet, screaming as they're lashed with whips and green branches stripped from nearby trees. The group is notorious for prudishness, revolted by sensuality, except in its most extreme forms.

Thus their veneration of prostitutes and porn stars, who are urged to rut in full view of on-lookers, random orgies taking place in front of schools, government buildings, police stations, homes for the aged and infirm.

Other favourite targets for "actions": libraries, churches, synagogues and mosques. A horde of *artistes* descend on such places, driven by righteous furies. Library shelves are emptied of the so-called "classics", which are then burnt to prevent further contagion. Religion is delusionary, proscribed. Walls and windows of temples are defaced with obscene graffiti, sacred texts shredded, priests and practitioners ridiculed, assaulted, their clothes cut from their bodies, driven howling into the streets.

Mr. and Mrs. Something-Something, exchanging bland pleasantries over their second cup of morning coffee.

Without warning, without the slightest inkling, the ceiling peels back, the walls expand higher and higher, stretching up to pierce the overcast. The group has dumped a huge supply of lysergic acid into the reservoir, tripping out half the city. Now see the world as it truly is, layers and camouflaging illusions stripped away, reality in its purest, most sublime state. Two million souls crying out in wonder and anguish, an eight-hour amusement ride, sans safety bars; penetrate the eyeballs, burrow into the soft matter within. Today's psychotic is tomorrow's visionary poet.

Bon voyage, madame et monsieur...

The group convenes at the Café Lautreamont to compare notes and receive a briefing regarding the latest actions. The room sulfurous with cigarette smoke, rife with rumour and innuendo.

And Monsieur B holds court, as always. Excommunication orders are drawn up for those who have strayed from the designated path. Back sliders. Art whores. *Cunts*. The list is handed to B who confirms the roster. Some will readily admit the folly of their ways and apply for

reinstatement but they will forever be regarded with suspicion. B barely bothers to pay lip-service to consensus. He is the high priest, absolute dictator, his will be done. Cold, analytical, humourless, brilliant.

C_____ minds them of his upcoming art opening and B fixes him with that hard, grey stare. Lately C_____ has been straying into unapproved styles, nonrepresentation. This will not be tolerated, he is reminded.

B is suspicious of painters, feeling in his heart that the movement is primarily a literary one. Visual artists are unstable, not to be trusted. C_____ withers under that imperious gaze, dissolving like one of those melted clocks by—well, they ridicule him with the name "Avida Dollars" now. C_____ reaffirms his allegiance to the Cause and is relieved when they finally move on to other matters.

He will return to his studio and destroy the new paintings. The ones already turned to the wall. Mustn't take a chance someone will see them, report his heresy.

The recriminations are too terrible to consider.

A visiting foreign dignitary is given the full treatment. They wait until he disembarks from the plane, accepting greetings from the usual round of functionaries. Then someone steps from their midst and with some sort of Gallic cry, empties a bucket of pig bladders over his head. The photographers shout and jostle to get a picture of the gore-drenched diplomat.

His furious security detail grapple with the assailant but they, in turn, are pelted by members of the crowd; they retreat up the red carpet, shielding their charge against the rain of projectiles.

The imperialists depart to the cheers of many present.

That was for Africa and l'Indochine, you bastards!

J'ai peur qu'il ne veuille pas revenir en France de si tot.

Bah! Good riddance! Fascists! Militarists! Capitalist douchebags! Choke on your blood money...

Their kind are not welcome here.

The launch of the new journal *Piss and Bile* is a huge success. Monsieur B's work takes up a good portion of the publication, poems and rants and a long introduction which explains, in great detail, what the magazine is not.

Apparently it is not anything. To read anything into it is to completely miss the point. The various pieces, by sycophants and

proteges, are worthless; writing for and about and by automatons. No philosophy, no didactic, no merit. "In conclusion," he writes, "this is an ichor-stained dagger, a sky threatening with clouds, a doorway leading nowhere. Fuck you and your precious belief systems and the banality they entail." Everyone congratulates him for his insightful commentary but when he is asked when the next issue is due, B merely shakes his head.

Once again, they just don't *get* it.

C___ waits impatiently for their arrival. He has purchased, out of his own pocket, the very best wine and liqueurs. He even manages to scrounge up a couple of bottles of absinthe, which is harder to find than a virgin in Montparnasse. He's excluded anything from the show that could possibly earn Monsieur B's ire. It meant stripping the walls of all but a few pictures and even those he isn't sure of. Once B renders his verdict it is set in stone. People trickle in and out, hardly glancing at the framed wonders he has spent months executing.

It grows late. Finally, he spots Louis A and Philippe S, Monsieur B's main errand boys. They eye the pictures critically and whisper amongst themselves. Sweat limns his forehead, collects in the elastic of his underwear. At last, Louis approaches. Monsieur B, it seems, will not be attending the opening. C___ ventures to ask his opinion of the show. Louis purses his lips.

"It is difficult to say," he finally offers blandly. "That piece there, for instance. The tricolor. Is that meant to be a flag? Is it... political?" He practically spits the word.

"No, no." C___ shakes his head vigorously. "That is not the intention."

But clearly the painting is suspect. It will have to go.

There are no sales, but that is inconsequential. He is not a whore. He illustrates erotic texts to make ends meet, one of the few activities that Monsieur B wholeheartedly endorses. After all, did not the great Apollinaire scribble the most heinous pornography?

Love is deception. Sex is exploitation. Revel in the carnal, the spilling of bodily fluids for sheer pleasure.

The prick is a sword. Use it.

The movement includes few women, no minorities. Pagan and African art are revered but as for admitting a black man or woman to their intimate circle... no. It wouldn't be right. Only one or two musicians make the grade (Monsieur B boasts that he is quite tone deaf).

The Italians have made contributions, the Spanish are tolerated. The English are cunts, the Germans hopeless and the Americans, the poor Americans, are louts of the worst kind. To them, art is a *commodity*. The Japanese are the worst. One collector from Japan is nearly beaten to death with a dead fish for daring to discuss the relative monetary value of modern art in the presence of Monsieur B.

Attention! The poster proclaims. *The old republics, federations, city states, university trained elites, entrenched mediocrities, critics, philologists and politicians of every stripe are to be exterminated. Mob rule is hereby enjoined. No leaders, no followers, a mindless groundswell, primitivism unleashed. Romantic notions and closely guarded paradigms no longer hold sway. The law is nothing. You are free to express yourselves. Forget the alphabet, deny coherence. Rape at will, murder creates celebrity. Are you alive? Can your eyes see what has been done to you in the name of stupid conformity? Then pluck them out and be done with it! The eyes are liars, propagandists. Empty the windows of the soul and let the void seep in/out...*

And so on and so forth.

One by one they have fallen by the wayside. For crimes against the movement, real and imagined. For daring to question Monsieur B. For refusing to toe the party line.

They are officially condemned, pronounced *persona non grata*, their readings and openings either boycotted or, even better, disrupted, their works torn from their hands, trampled underfoot.

"Who will be left?" The *enfant terrible* writes to Monsieur B from his Manhattan penthouse. "You are the unrepentant bulimic, purging yourself of all but your grossest secretions. Everything else is expelled from your faggoty lips, your puckered, cankerous asshole..."

B reads the letter to the others without comment but the next day an assassin is dispatched to deliver B's rebuttal. It is rumoured to be the same icepick that felled the mighty Trotsky. The holiest artifact in the arsenal, consecrated for a just and noble cause.

No one knows where Monsieur B found him. Allegedly it was near the amusement arcade by the river, a popular spot for homosexuals cruising for anonymous trysts. What was B doing there? No one dares ask.

The old man is filthy, his body giving off the foul odour of an unembalmed corpse. He converses in inaudible mumbles which, it seems, only Monsieur B can decipher.

"Here is the future of art!" B cries. "Observe." He instructs the man to draw, on the spot, a rendering of Baudelaire's "diseased organ". The man scratches a few lines on a pad and then B snatches it away from him, holding it aloft, brandishing it for all to see.

The others are taken aback but then when they discern the gleam in their leader's eyes they quickly burst out in a chorus of praise. Monsieur B beams at this newly discovered great master and the others press forward to embrace him, shake his stained hand, filling the air with "Bravo!" and "C'est magnifique!". Meanwhile, B looks on, his face rapturous, a gloating expression of pride or, possibly, cunning.

It is too much.

C___ flees the gathering, pushing his way outside, seeking escape, a sanctuary, some place where he can quiet the angry beehive buzzing in his head. Monsieur B has never mentioned his opening, his latest paintings, the leader's silence speaking volumes.

They will cast me out.

He does not remember how long or far he walks. The city seems foreign to him, bent Tanguy architectures, no recognizable landmarks, a stranger in this place, his wanderings without destination.

He finds himself on a dimly remembered avenue which, he finally realizes, is not far from the Proust Museum, a shrine for the group.

Now he sees him, his nemesis, his *bete noire*. Monsieur B is walking at a fast clip and gesticulating, followed by the usual entourage of hangers-on and adoring lackeys.

Where does the pistol come from? Is it his? C___ vaguely recollects buying it, or one very much like it.

He places himself in their path, causing them to draw up in an uncertain huddle. He says something, a long complaint, a diatribe against all Monsieur B represents. B's eyes take him in, his lips curling. An unforgivable affront. The letter of condemnation already being composed, a litany of C___'s many sins delineated and codified.

The gun barks once, twice. The others retreat, take to their heels, making no attempt to shield their leader. B collapses, an idol whose feet have been cut from beneath him.

Later there will be an argument over his final words. Were they "Shit, I'm killed" or, even more appropriately, "After all, art is spectacle"?

C_____ is now in complete possession of his faculties. The full ramifications of his act are apparent, the body bleeding out before him.

"There is no movement!" He shouts after them. "Death to the

demagoguery of the irrational!"

Then he places the barrel of the revolver under his chin and, *tout de suite*, bursts his brain, slipping his earthly shell and entering the all-encompassing realm of the Universal Genius. •

Contexts

Sophie Joe

Gusts of wind kindle the web, a square wheel becoming progressively circular at each

circumference,

forty circuits sustained on thirty anchoring sprays,

twelve hundred intersections haloing the fat spider at plop in the hub,

crazy, absolutely, to the movie it walked on,

blind, absolutely, to the context in which it located its effort:

between the lines of a clothesline;

and me and a jogging cowl I'd hung out the day before

to rinse in the twilight

between the last day of summer and the first day of fall.

Contexts: meanings exhaled into the mandala,

rectangularities bevelled by metaphor into progressively circular levels of equanimity

and fit:

she is a spider in the centre of a web;

she is a video of a stone dropping into a pool;

she is an insect doing crazy shit;

she is an insect bugging me with a gossamer koan in the Roberts Creek formation of

Eternity.

A raven's mock prompts me to incision.

I extend my thumb to my ear and my baby finger to the corner of my mouth.

“You are an alien transmitting intricate mathematical news of the neighbourhood to other webs in the neighbourhood,” I say to my finger: I am shown a catscan of sphere. “You are an alien transmitting intricate mathematical news of the neighbourhood to other webs on the planet,” I say into my finger again: I am shown the plane hitting the second tower. “You are an alien transmitting intricate mathematical news of the neighbourhood to other webs back at headquarters one hundred billion galaxies away,” I say: I am shown nebulae.

I twang the line like a butterfly Wall Street and tell the vibrating web I want my cowl back: in decimal places almost as many as the number pi, I am shown a stick figure on a tightrope tied between delight and a pantomime of a child at tantrum. In its efforts to stay balanced, the figure’s arms are straight arm windmilling clockwise o’s and anti-clockwise c’s and its mouth is seen as a series of square wheels becoming progressively circular.

Seven geese pass west over fir tops,
detail of feather and face:
I am shown a squeezed heart singing Praise Be to Thee Most High
Composer of the
 Universal Song
twelve hundred ways at once.

A moth, light everywhere, flaps across the cosmos:
I am shown a radio playing windy jingles through gossamer architecture
into the
 pre-occupied day,
and a stick figure
with cartoon wings
spelling buzz buzz buzz in the happy air
crashing into a huge trampoline
of syntax.

And getting stuck.
And writing this. •

He'd missed his family.
Why didn't she ever think about
her family? It was so obvious.
Why hadn't she noticed before?

Search

Ceri Young

She'd looked in the front hall closet. It wasn't in any of the boxes, nor on any of the shelves. It wasn't hidden in the sleeves of any jackets.

She'd checked the cupboards in the kitchen and climbed up on a chair so that she could see into the highest shelves that she didn't use much. It wasn't there either. *Of course*, she said to herself, *that made sense. She was in the kitchen too often. He would have put it somewhere secret, somewhere she didn't normally look.*

She walked into the dining room next and checked the cupboards where they kept the good china. There wasn't anything in the drawers except cloth napkins and one or two old aprons. It wasn't wrapped up with the silverware. She even got down on her hands and knees and peeked behind the china cabinet, but she didn't see anything.

She thought for a moment, then went into the den and checked under the sofa. There was nothing there.

On the coffee table was the book, still open to the page she'd left it at, the page she'd been reading when she'd figured it out.

There was nothing particularly special about the book, though she didn't want to look at it just now. It was a book of sea folklore that a friend had been promising to lend to her for months and had finally remembered to give her.

You'll like it, the friend had said. *It's all about where you came from.*

The book had sat on a shelf for weeks, an ordinary book, sitting with all the other ordinary books. Then today, just today, she'd had the day off and enough time to sit back, put her feet up, and read.

Until she got to that page, that is. Until everything fell apart.

Hopefully, someone would think to give back the book.

She checked the bookshelves next, and looked at the spines of all the books, looking for a fake one, but the only book with a false cover was the one that contained her jewelry and there was nothing else in it. She took out a couple of books that looked suspicious and opened them, just to make sure. But, no, they were all real.

She briefly considered taking down all of the larger books and opening them. He might have hollowed one out and hidden it in there.

She dismissed the idea. He wasn't that imaginative. Even with something this important.

She moved through the house quickly but thoroughly, searching everywhere that seemed a likely hiding spot.

In the hall closet, she found boxes of old photos from when they'd first started dating. One roll was of the coast, near where they'd met. In one picture, they stood side by side, the water behind them, squinting against the sunlight. She remembered taking that. They'd gone for a walk one day by the water, taken pictures of the view, then they'd balanced the camera on a rock, hoping it would take a good picture.

In her bedroom, under the now-stripped bed, with its mattress leaning to one side (nothing there either), she found her wedding dress, just as she remembered it, drycleaned and vacuum-sealed and boxed for posterity. It hadn't even yellowed.

Next to the dress was a wedding memory box. There were cards, and a program inside, and more pictures. Pictures of the wedding in the little church in the small village. Pictures by the ocean shore outside.

She remembered the wedding, but some moments stood out better than others. She only vaguely remembered walking down the aisle. She remembered quite clearly his face when she said "I do". She knew then that he loved her beyond anything, and it made her want to cry. She remembered biting her cheek to hold the tears back, and the sharp pain of it. She remembered the reception better than the rest of the day, remembered sneaking off at night, still in her dress, to cry by the seashore, and one of her bridesmaids following and asking her why.

"I don't know. I'm so happy," she had said as she sobbed. But it wasn't true. She wasn't happy, not really. Somehow, sitting next to the water, seeing the vastness of it, listening to its sad cry, she felt lonely.

Horribly, horribly lonely.

It wasn't long after the wedding that they'd moved inland, to a big well-paying job, with a big, well-known company. They'd been very happy for a short while in this small house. Sure, he'd missed his family and she'd missed the ocean, and they'd both missed their friends, but they'd been happy.

He'd missed his family. Why didn't she ever think about her family? It was so obvious. Why hadn't she noticed before?

She pushed the memory box away and sighed. None of this was what she was looking for and it was too painful to think about just now. She lay back on the floor, frustrated, staring at the ceiling, and trying to think.

There had to be a better way to do this. She hadn't searched the whole house yet, but he'd be home from work soon. He'd see the mess she'd left and he'd know what she was looking for. He'd move it, and then she'd never find it.

It had to be in the house. That much she was sure of. He would have kept it close.

She closed her eyes and thought for a moment.

Then, she got up. She had an idea.

She walked around the house slowly, eyes closed, hands outstretched. She was trying to sense where it might be.

It didn't work. It just made her feel stupid, and she bumped into a wall and hurt her hip. She made a noise of frustration and sat down to think some more.

It wasn't in the bedroom. Nor the living room. Nor the kitchen.

She stood straight up, trembling slightly, her eyes widening. The knowledge had come just as surely as it had when she was reading the book. *It wasn't in the house.* No, not in it. But close by. Very close by.

She went to the kitchen, took a key from a basket there, and went outside.

She walked to the backyard tool shed. It had been there when they'd bought the house. They didn't use it for much, just storage. It was a little weathered-looking and the lock was rusty. She opened it, frowning, thinking it needed another coat of paint. Then she remembered that it didn't really matter anymore and she almost laughed, except it wasn't funny.

The inside of the shed was cluttered with lawn clippers and a lawnmower, and a drill and a saw and dozens of tools that he'd bought but didn't really need or use.

She ignored all of that and took out the ladder. Now that it was so close, she found that, yes, she could feel what she was looking for. It was just like feeling her hand, or her foot. She wondered why she hadn't missed it before.

It was up in the rafters, in a corner. Some spiders had made webs around it, but she brushed them away.

She picked it up and climbed down carefully. For a few moments she stood, just holding the skin. It felt warm and rough and rubbery and smelled like seawater.

She hesitated a moment before heading back into the house. One more thing to do. And then—well, the only thing she could do, really.

When her husband came home that evening he thought at first that the house had been robbed. He looked around for his wife, calling her name in a panic. He picked up the phone, ready to call the police, when his eyes fell on the note.

It was in her handwriting. It was short.

Oh no.

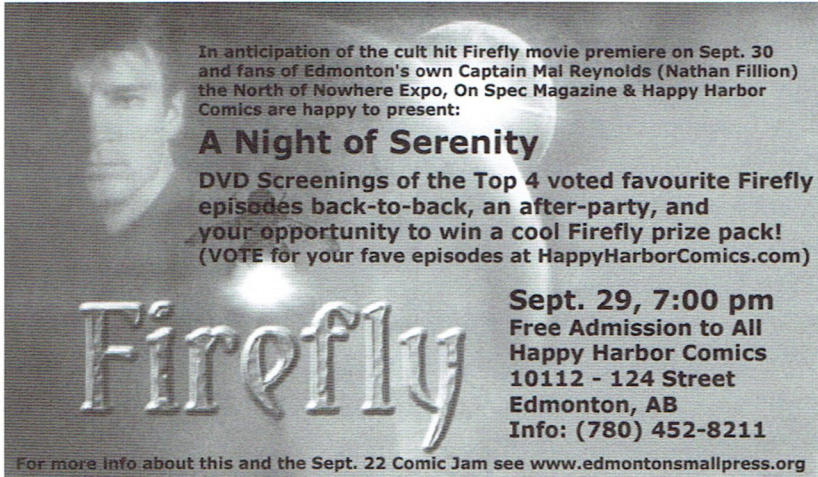
No, no.

I know where I came from. Goodbye.

He ran to the back door then, to the shed, but he knew what he would find. The door was still open and the seal skin was gone.

Gone, then.

Gone home. •



In anticipation of the cult hit *Firefly* movie premiere on Sept. 30 and fans of Edmonton's own Captain Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) the North of Nowhere Expo, On Spec Magazine & Happy Harbor Comics are happy to present:

A Night of Serenity

DVD Screenings of the Top 4 voted favourite *Firefly* episodes back-to-back, an after-party, and your opportunity to win a cool *Firefly* prize pack! (VOTE for your fave episodes at HappyHarborComics.com)

Firefly

Sept. 29, 7:00 pm
Free Admission to All Happy Harbor Comics
10112 - 124 Street
Edmonton, AB
Info: (780) 452-8211

For more info about this and the Sept. 22 Comic Jam see www.edmontonsmallpress.org

Alternate Narrative

Elizabeth Bachinsky

And everywhere is shaded. And everywhere is blinding.
How huge the cumulous; a jackal shakes his body
At my side. His coat is dust. And the land is dust.
And here everything starves. And here everything
Blossoms. There are signifiers on the horizon.
And they are crooked. And I know them well.
I have come; I am coming. There is no landowner.
There is no tower, but stone. There is one.
And I have one. The jackal dances on his hind legs
By the hearth. And I give him thanks.
What skeletal exuberance. What opulence. What gorgeous
Rings on my fingers. What turquoise secrets.
And I forget my name. And I inherit another.
And I lay down with the laughing dog. And he is my one.
And I am forgiven. And all my children have the heads of dogs.
And they are powerful. And they are forgiven.
How the landscape hollows. How it makes a space for all
My progeny. And the sky is striated. And my jackal
Becomes stricken. And I bring him river-water. And I make him drink.
How brackish the water is. And how fortunate the water on his tongue.
And the hours become singular. And I paint my mouth.
And I have forgotten. My children dance and are happy; they are
fabulous.
Their backs are straight and strong; their teeth are strong.
And I applaud their valour. And I fashion knives for them
With which they score the ground. What a gorgeous wounded.
And I am adorned with rings and flowers. And the sun falls
Silent behind the storm. •

Being naked in front of
Captain Kohl was one thing;
Lillian Grozosky was a whole
different kettle of borscht.

Like Monsters of the Deep

Hayden Trenholm

Hernandez retched, black bile spilling across his legs. He spasmed again, his body pulling into fetal position.

"That's right. Get it out." Captain Erika Kohl wiped a towel across his face and massaged his back and shoulders. She was already in uniform. Hernandez tried to roll away, embarrassed at his own nakedness.

"Take it easy, soldier. You've got nothing I haven't seen before. Relax and let me help you." She was working on his legs now, rubbing away the cramps. Hernandez shook like a dog. His stomach heaved but nothing more came out.

"Move." Kohl's voice sounded far away but urgent. "Get up!"

Hernandez felt Kohl's strong hands under his arms, lifting him. She frog-marched him up and down the narrow space until he could support his own weight.

"Ready to eat?"

His stomach lurched again. Kohl pressed a tube against his lips and squeezed nutrient jelly into his mouth. It tasted of apple and cinnamon. After the first impulse to gag, Hernandez sucked it hungrily.

An alarm pinged. A rip, a thud, then the sound of retching.

"Shit. He's early." Kohl pressed a second tube into his hand. "Get that into you. I'll take care of Nguyen. Grozosky could pop any second."

Hernandez stuck the second tube in his mouth and looked for his

uniform. Being naked in front of Captain Kohl was one thing; Lillian Grozosky was a whole different kettle of borscht.

He was still zipping up his coverall when he heard Grozosky's body hit the carpet. Man, I hate sleeper ships, he thought.

• • •

"Well, there it is," said Nguyen, "Hell's Hallway." The small black disc at the center of the forward view screen was haloed in coruscating amber light.

"We're on tape, Lieutenant." Kohl snapped.

"Right. Approaching Rickard Station. No answer to our comm. Docking procedure is nominal. Switching to computer assist. Dockside in twenty minutes."

Hernandez watched the disc resolve into detail, the compact body of the station separating from the thin silver transmission ring.

Rickard Station orbited the sun just beyond the Kuiper Belt, fifteen billion kilometers from earth. It made travel between the stars possible. Not easy but possible. Eight years in a sleeper ship, no time at all to reach the next system, then eight more years to planet fall. Then back again. Even with extended life spans, thirty-two years made quite a gap in relationships. Family men, or women, didn't sign up as crew. Cargo—the forty thousand humans still asleep in the hold—was another matter.

"Any response to our signals yet?" asked Kohl.

"Just a docking confirmation." Nguyen said.

"We've got trouble, Captain," said Grozosky, scanning the communication cache. "Earth hasn't heard from Rickard for nearly a year. They went silent right after the last ship arrived."

"Details?"

"Not many. The ship docked. There had been a sleep sack failure so they went to backup. One more message after that, then silence."

"Grozosky, Toole, in the briefing room. Nguyen, Hernandez, join us after docking is complete. And double check the security seals on the hatch."

• • •

Kohl flipped through the images again, shifting from one viewpoint to another in rapid succession. Nguyen cleared his throat.

"Nothing has changed in the last three hours. I think we should go aboard."

"I'd rather hear from Earth first," said Kohl.

"That's twenty hours away," said Toole. "We are on a schedule."

"We can change the schedule," said Kohl.

"Not without going aboard the station."

Hernandez nodded agreement. Not that he wanted to breach the doors that separated them from whatever happened on Rickard Station—something more than just a system failure. It smelled wrong. It felt wrong. Dread gnawed at him, somewhere deep in his animal brain, beneath the military training, beneath even the religious indoctrination of his youth. That was why he was in security. Enhanced senses driven by animal fear. Trust the Navy to find a use for paranoia.

"I'd like to hear that last message again," he said.

A shimmering image of the empty bridge hovered in the air. The only sound was the background hiss of interstellar space. The image broke up and reformed. The bridge door slid open and a slim figure burst through. She had a pistol in one hand and squeezed off a couple of rounds. The bark of compressed air and the whine of steel slivers ricocheting down the corridor sounded loud.

Nasty weapon, thought Hernandez. Crew's not supposed to have those.

The woman launched herself across the room, leaving a trail of red globules from a wound in her shoulder. She passed out of range of the camera for a few seconds, reappearing only after the emergency beacon had sounded. The bridge door slid shut and the security panel next to it flashed from green to red.

"Emergency level three. Code alpha red. This is Lisa Jonas of Rickards station. Repeat emergency three alpha red."

That's as high as it gets, thought Hernandez. Large-scale impact, reactor breach, Level 4 bio-contaminant, mutiny. Or first contact. Maybe we'd finally found something on the other side of the hole.

"Don't know how long I've got. The antennae went out a week ago and Grimshaw just got it working again. But now I've lost contact with him." The woman sobbed. "Captain Craig is dead and Doctor Mandeza. Carrington and Dubois are holed up on deck five, Osuna in engineering, Berger, Williams and Chaing in cargo bay two. Everyone else is missing. Simply gone." She sobbed again then shook her head. "Sorry."

Relief ships carried eight crew instead of the usual five. They

became station relief while station crew completed the ship's mission and went home. Jonas, Grimshaw, Osuna and Chaing were station crew. Berger and Williams, Carrington and Dubois had been their relief. That left two dead and six missing. Five dead if you counted the three who went when the sacks failed. That felt wrong too. The failure rate on sacks was way less than one percent. For three to fail meant a batch failure. And crew always came in two batches. One of the relief had to have been in the bad batch.

In the holo, something banged on the hatch and Jonas jumped.

"Something's gone wrong, really wrong. It must have..."

"Freeze it there," said Hernandez. "And replay mark minus five and quarter speed. Filter out the background noise and Jonas' voice." Grozosky made the adjustments and Hernandez leaned into the holo-projection, as if he could put himself right into the bridge chamber. Jonas jumped, her mouth moved and then, faintly, a hissing.

"Filter out the background, damn it."

"Done," snapped Grozosky.

Hernandez motioned for stillness. No-one moved except for the image of Jonas. Hernandez listened hard, felt his augmented hearing turn on. The hiss resolved into two separate sounds—one like the spray of an aerosol can, the other like a human sigh.

Jonas raised her pistol and fired, once, twice, jumped, no, was pulled out of camera range. The image of the bridge dimmed, turning red, and then went out.

"What was that?" asked Kohl. "Emergency lighting?"

"No," said Hernandez, "I think it was blood. A hell of a lot of blood."

• • •

Hernandez and Kohl were the first ones through the security hatch. If they didn't report in an hour, Nguyen and Toole would follow. Grozosky would wait for them to return. If they didn't, she would proceed with the primary mission. The Rickard Gate was designed for this kind of contingency—it would fire up twelve hours after ship arrival so that even if the main station had been taken out by a stray comet, the colony ship could still reach its destination. When it came on-line she simply had to push the ship through the hole. At the other end, she would wake back-up and deliver the cargo. Rickard Station would become someone else's problem.

That was the plan. Hernandez wasn't sure. Grozosky couldn't

abandon them, for pretty much the same reasons she wasn't out here with him now instead of the Captain. She was too unstable for command—had been shifted out of Captain track first to security then to meds before settling on communications. Too unstable for the tough decisions. Or maybe, whispered the voice in his head, too useful to Them.

The Captain was at least treating the situation seriously. They were in space suits—full-fledged EVA units, self-propelled in case the gravity was still off and armored against micro-meteors. Hernandez wasn't sure they would stand up to a needle gun at close range. He wasn't eager to test them. They were armed, too. Both carried airguns with their load of steel slivers—deadly on organics but unlikely to harm vital ship systems. Hernandez also carried heavier weapons—a high caliber revolver and a shotgun.

"What are we going to find on the other side of that door, Hernandez?"

"Don't really know. There have been rumors..."

"There are always rumors in the navy."

"They say that sleep sack failures aren't mechanical, they're biological. It's not the tech that goes off-line, it's the person in the tech."

"Yeah, I heard that too. Not the way it works and you know it."

"Well, I've seen the schematics, heard the theory, but..."

"Yeah, the powers that be are lying about it. I am one of the powers that be, Hernandez. Think I wouldn't know? Besides no one survives sleep sack failure."

"Some do."

"Not so as you'd know. Stick to the facts."

"You asked my opinion."

"Now I'm asking you to keep it to yourself. Toole is spooked enough as it is."

"And Grozosky?"

"She's not... thinking too clearly."

"Sure, Captain. Panel says we got atmosphere and no hazards, bio or otherwise on the other side."

"So we don't need these suits?"

"Well, that's what the panel says. Also says its fifty below in there. That's weird."

"Life support off-line, you think?"

"No life support means a lot colder than fifty below. Failure means two-fifty below. Means no atmosphere at all. Fifty below means someone wants it that cold."

"Who would want that? People can't survive at those temperatures."

"Cargo does."

"That's different," said Kohl. "And you know it. People can't live at fifty below."

"People did once. Used to get that cold on Earth, some places."

"That was a long time ago."

Yeah, thought Hernandez, back when we weren't desperate to find some other planet to screw up. The Rickards gate was going to save humanity but it was going to finish planet Earth. It took half a continent's annual output to build a sleeper ship and we'd been sending them out at one a year for more than twenty years. Like buying lottery tickets when you can't feed the kids.

Sometimes, he thought, I think you think too much. He punched in his security code. Kohl hesitated then added her own sequence. The last barrier between them and whatever disaster awaited them slid aside.

Kohl slipped through the opening and stumbled on the other side.

"Gravity's back on. Panel tell you that too."

"Does now," said Hernandez. "Maybe it was triggered when the door opened."

"Maybe. Or maybe none of these readings are reliable. Maybe all we got is vacuum and cold space. You wanna open your helmet and find out."

"Not particularly. Suit says atmosphere and minus fifty. Don't know how anyone could tamper with that. Don't want to find out either."

"You want bridge or engineering?"

What Hernandez wanted was not to split up. What he really wanted was not to be here at all. It felt wrong in ways he couldn't begin to define. If he was Captain, they'd already be sitting in front of the Rickard Gate waiting for it to power up. But he wasn't Captain, he was fifth in the chain of command. He was Lieutenant Expendable of Security—a joke that went back so far no one knew its origins.

"I'll take the bridge," he said. At least there I know what most of the buttons and levers do, he thought. Not likely to blow us all up there. Not too likely at any rate.

Kohl grunted, checked the station map and headed for engineering. Hernandez watched her out of sight.

"You still hear me, Hernandez?"

"Yeah."

"Check on the tens. It's 2004 on the mark. Mark."

The bridge was pretty much how he expected it would be. The

door was wide open. He was examining it for forced entry when Kohl checked in from engineering. He responded and stepped across the threshold.

Most of the spray of blood had condensed into red hoarfrost on the far wall near the communications array. There were no red frozen balls underfoot though.

What did that mean? That the gravity had come on before the temperature dropped? Not what tech had told them. But maybe the tech was so screwed, you couldn't rely on any of the systems or displays. Cold temperatures could do that, he supposed. Electronics fried by static, metal made brittle by cold. Hernandez felt better then—now he had an excuse for only believing the data he gathered himself. Paranoia become practical thinking.

He scraped the frost off the camera pick-ups and screen. He hit send and was gratified to see Nguyen's worried face appear.

He looked around and tried to figure out what was bothering him. Oh, yeah, a lot of blood but no body. Now that was disturbing. Even if Jonas had been blown to bits, there still would have been bits. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, only changed in form. Quite drastically given enough fire power.

Good. That pretty much ruled out bio-hazards. One of the high speed hemorrhagic plagues could have accounted for the spray of blood but viruses didn't dispose of corpses.

They had already ruled out reactor breach. That left mutiny or first contact. Or something the navy hadn't thought of yet. Hernandez shuddered and felt his senses ratchet up a notch. If those crazies hadn't thought of it, he didn't want to meet it.

On a hunch, he scraped away more frost to the side of the communications bay. Where Jonas had been dragged. There was an access grate there. The frost had formed after it had been shoved back in place. Something had sheared through the bolts. Particle beam might have done that. Would metal melting at high speed in zero gravity sound like an aerosol spray?

Hernandez glanced at the chrono display. 2021.

"Captain?"

No answer. Hernandez signaled the ship.

"Have you heard from Kohl?"

"I was just going to call and ask you the same thing," said Nguyen.

"Toole and I are on our way."

"Stay put."

"Our orders..."

"...were to come in an hour. If neither of us reported in. I'll find the Captain."



Kohl wasn't in engineering. Someone else was. The body was naked, male and probably asian. Osuna? It would take fingerprinting or DNA to confirm identity. There wasn't much left of the face. Eyes both gone, empty sockets filled with frozen pools of blood. The lower jaw was partly missing, too, on the left side. A big hunk had been torn out of his neck and left shoulder. Hernandez looked around but couldn't spot the missing parts. He took a few pictures for the record, then snipped off a bit of the ragged flesh around the wound.

Somewhere deep inside, a small voice was gibbering, while another was reciting the Lord's Prayer. Hernandez ignored them both. Time enough for fear and faith when this was over.

He knelt by the body and looked at the wound. There was almost no blood on the floor around the body and very little in the wound itself. He'd need to do an autopsy to be sure but he thought the damage to the eyes must have happened first.

On a hunch, he looked at Osuna's hands. There was blood under the nails. He clipped off one of the fingers and put it in a sample pouch. Might be useful to know whose blood it was.

Hernandez shuddered again. The colors in the room shifted as his visual perception spread beyond the visible spectrum. He wished he could smell something other than his own sour sweat. Hear something more than the hiss of the suit's systems.

He slipped off a glove and undid the helmet latches. The cold slapped at his skin and burned in his throat. The hairs inside his nose stiffened with frost.

He cautiously sniffed the air. Not much to smell, volatiles were liquid or solid at this temperature. The faint tang of ozone and something else which seemed achingly familiar but which he couldn't quite identify.

No sound but the background click and groan of cold-stressed metal and the ever present hum of machines. Nothing to tell him what had happened here—either to Osuna or to Kohl.

He prowled the room, looking for something, anything that might give him a hint to what was going on. The cold masked everything. No infrared to see, no smells, sound distorted and confusing. Taste and touch out of the question after the first brush of fingers on metal had

left skin behind.

He put the helmet back on and lowered his sensory system to alert level.

Suddenly he knew what the smell was. His grandmother.

Like most of Earth's teeming billions, he had grown up in a city. Until he was twelve he never saw the edge of it. His world was metal and plastic and glass and not much alive except people, cockroaches and pigeons.

Then a miracle happened. His father won the lottery. They could have purchased a new set of bicycles or bought another couple of square meters of living space but his father spent the whole thing on a week-long visit home. That week changed his life—gave him the courage and the reason to get out of the city and off Earth.

It was another world. Open spaces with hardly anyone else in sight. Air so clean you could see the stars at night. A room he didn't have to share. A garden where things grew. That was where he had spent every spare minute, digging in the dirt with his grandmother.

The naked living soil.

Fifteen billion miles from Earth.

His radio buzzed.

"Hernandez, are you there?" Grozosky's voice was strained.

"Here."

"Where were you?!" she shouted. "You haven't checked in for thirty minutes."

Shit, had he wasted that much time? Heightened senses could do that—twist time and space in unexpected ways.

"Put Nguyen on."

"He's not here. He and Toole went out on schedule."

"Call them back."

There was a pause on the other end of the radio.

"Nguyen's on the way back. Toole doesn't answer."

"Prep the ship for departure."

"You don't have the authority..."

"This is a class three alpha red emergency. Right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Computer, note that in the absence of the Captain, two ranking officers have declared a class three alpha red situation. Pursuant to Standing Order Eight, I, Lieutenant John Hernandez, Security Chief, am taking command."

"You tricked me." Grozosky didn't sound hurt. Sounded satisfied.

"Sorry, Lillian. It was a necessary evil. Now do what I told you."

"Yes, sir."

"If I'm not back in thirty minutes, get the hell out of here. I'll stay in touch if I can."



Hold two was empty—no sign of the three crew members hiding there. No sign of Kohl or Toole either.

Deck five was buried in the middle of Rickards Station. Crew could sleep and live safe from Rickards radiation or even major system failure.

The cabins were mostly locked. At least two had had the doors forced but they were empty.

One was closed but unlocked. The panel glowed green in welcome. Hernandez went in.

A woman lay on one of the bunks. Probably Dubois. A sheet had been pulled up to her chin so only her face was visible. It was a pretty face. Her skin was very pale and her blond hair lay across the pillow like a halo. Her blue eyes were open and staring up at... Hernandez didn't know what. He brushed his hand across them but they didn't close.

The smell of earth was strong in this room. Hernandez couldn't tell where it was coming from.

He pulled the sheet back from Dubois' body. She was naked. There were bloodless punctures in her neck, more in her breasts and in the crooks of her arms. Not enough to kill. Probably hadn't killed her, Hernandez thought. She was probably the last one left.

He pulled the sheet down further. Her left thigh had been torn away. The femoral artery instead of the jugular. There were only a few drops of blood on the bed. He wondered how long she had lain on this bed, being slowly drained of her life's blood. Then when the hunger became too great, it had done this, preserving her beauty even in death.

Why? Did beauty have to pay an extra price? He thought of Grozosky, alone on the ship.

In answer to his thought came her voice. Panicked, shouting.

"Nguyen! No!"

"Grozosky! Lillian. It's Hernandez. What's going on?" He was already running.

She sobbed. The way Jonas had. That didn't make sense. These women were trained. By the goddamn Navy. They shouldn't have any tears in them. Especially not Grozosky. Just like I shouldn't have voices

saying the Lord's Prayer while my back was turned.

"Report, Lieutenant!"

"Nguyen was at the hatch. It was opening. Then it hit him. It was so fast. Then he was gone."

"What hit him?"

"I don't know. Man-sized but different. The angles were all wrong. And it was so fast."

"Was tape rolling?"

"No." Then she screamed.

"Lillian!"

Silence.

Hernandez came around the last corner at full speed and senses on high.

The hatches were open all the way to the ship.

He knew Lillian wasn't there. There was only him now.

The smell of earth was strong here, though he doubted if anyone without enhanced senses would smell it. He twisted his neck and worked his jaw until he felt the hidden vial pop.

Everything slowed down.

He had fifteen minutes real time before he took the antidote or his system crashed. At this speed it would seem like half a day.

The smell of earth was overpowering now. Beneath it he could smell blood and sweat and the faint odor of Lillian's soap. It all had a direction too, like flashing arrows pointing the way.

Not that he needed guidance. There was only one place they hadn't looked. At the far end of the station facing the Rickards Gate. Nothing there but power plants and shielding. Humans didn't stray that close to the Gate if they could avoid it. Not if they wanted long lives and healthy children.

The hatchway was closed, its security seals in place. They barely slowed Hernandez down. As soon as the opening was wide enough, he slipped through. He was vulnerable in those few seconds but he wasn't worried about being shot full of needles or vaporized by a particle beam. It would want him alive.

It was only then he thought of the forty thousand meal packs waiting on the ship. He was surplus now. An appetizer.

It was dark in the chamber but Hernandez was no longer operating on visible light, or on sight alone. Smell, sound, taste, even the rippling of air currents on his fingers and face. It was as clear as the brightest day. It even almost made sense.

Kohl, Toole and Nguyen were all there, of course. Their bodies lay scattered like rag dolls some evil child had ripped and discarded. Against one wall were a row of sleep sacks. All of them had been ripped open. A larder. Empty now.

"Carrington." Hernandez wondered if his voice was too high for comprehension.

"Go away." Apparently not. Carrington had survived the batch failure. Had woken to a ship where crew had access to restricted weapons. Maybe they had access to secret Navy pharmaceuticals too. Hernandez knew what a single dose did to his head; he wondered what a year at light speed would do.

The voice was somewhere to the left. He willed himself not to look. Wait for a clear shot.

"What happened here, Carrington?"

"I got hungry." Carrington giggled.

"I can see that. What happened to you, Carrington?"

There probably wasn't much of Carrington left. Whatever had done all this wasn't human, at least not a sane one, thought Hernandez.

"Nothing happened. My true nature came out."

"Your true nature?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm a vampire."

"No such thing." The little kid in his head was saying the Lord's Prayer again.

"How do you explain it, then? The craving only blood will satisfy. The speed of things, the hatred of light and warmth. The ever-present stench of the grave."

"I don't know," said Hernandez. It made sense in a weird kind of way. We must retain a primal fear of predators and what had happened here was surely the work of a predator. And if Carrington could believe he was a vampire, he could believe it wasn't his fault. "I'm sure it's logical..."

"Logical?" Carrington laughed. "Then, how do you explain this?" Fear. Screaming, aching fear, welling up so fast he thought he would pass out. Something moving, coming at him.

He was going to die. The same way Jonas had died. There was nothing he could do about it. The fear held him the way a rabbit was held by the gaze of a snake. The way prey was always held.

He was going to die.

No, you're not. A voice in his head that was his and not his. Do you

really think the Navy is going to spend all that money on training and not have a back-up program?

Hernandez spun and fired. The revolver emptied a spread in the middle of Carrington's chest. The shotgun took out his head.

He barely had time to register what he was killing before it died.

It wasn't human. It didn't look like it ever had been. It was too sinewy, with too many joints and way too many teeth and claws. Except for the eyes. They were still human. All too human.

This wasn't the crippled product of sleep sack failure, sustained by illicit drugs. This was viable. This was alien.

The lights came on, shockingly bright. Hernandez bit down hard, felt the antidote release, felt everything slow down.

"Is it dead?" Grozosky stepped from behind a sleep sack. Her uniform was torn and there were punctures on her neck and chest. Hernandez wondered if he would have to kill her too. No. Carrington wasn't a vampire. There were no such things. Carrington was something worse.

"I hope so," said Hernandez. "What was he?" He had a feeling Grozosky knew. Someone on the crew had to work for Navy Intelligence.

"A vampire?"

"Don't be stupid."

"He thought he was."

"Sure. Some rational bit left over, trying to make sense of not being human anymore, not being sane."

"Oh, he was sane enough. For what he was."

"And what was he?"

Grozosky looked away. She knew but wasn't going to tell him. Need to know and all that. He was just Security.

But he was still in command.

"That's an order, Lieutenant."

"I don't have to take your orders anymore."

"You do, until we hear from Earth. I can shoot you for disobeying an order. Who would know?"

Hernandez pointed his revolver at her. The truth was worth killing for.

Grozosky's eyes flickered from side to side and her head tilted to one side.

"Don't even think it," said Hernandez. "You won't be up to speed before I blow your head off."

Grozosky shrugged and then relaxed. "It's the sleep sacks," she said.

"How?"

"Do you have any idea how they work?"

"Some drug to slow things down."

"That's what we tell you. Wouldn't work. Humans aren't built to hibernate. So—we have to become not human for a while. The injection turns us into, well, something different. Something that likes the cold. Something that can sleep for years. It dissolves us and then reforms us into something else. Like what happens to a caterpillar on the way to becoming a moth. At the other end, they turn us back again. Rebuild our bodies, restore our minds. Sometimes, it fails. So we kill them."

"Kill them?"

"Or they die. That's the way it is with failure, with mutation. But sometimes, they stay... other. Like Carrington. Sometimes we can't kill them fast enough."

"Sometimes? This has happened before."

"Yes. Not often."

"The lost colony?"

"Yes, and at least two ships."

"And they know? The powers that be. Whoever they are. They let it happen?"

"It's for the greater good."

"It's a lie. We promise people a fresh start. A clean start somewhere new, where we won't make the same mistakes that destroyed Earth. And you start it with a lie."

"It's a necessary evil," said Grozosky.

"There is nothing necessary about evil. It's a choice."

"And what choice are you going to make? Blow up the ship, kill the cargo on the risk we might be sending monsters to the stars. They went into those sacks knowing some of them wouldn't make it."

"You don't get it. Your kind never does. The ends always justify the means. Don't you see? You have to start as you mean to go on. Initial conditions determine final results. And lies always come in bunches."

"So what are you going to do? Destroy the station. That would end it. We can't afford to build another."

All the voices were quiet now. He was alone in his head. That's the way it usually is when the hard choices have to be made.

"Humanity must survive," said Grozosky.

"Yeah," he said, lowering the pistol. "Humanity must survive." Not for the first time, nor the last, Hernandez wondered why. •

Happy There In My Agony

Jude Dillon

Tired of the words that glimpse me
unraveling from the pen
existence proves I was nowhere
but happy there in my agony

Funny how even the bad parts
fit into scenery falling away
the seam of asphalt working
into the mosaic of hills

Centuries as tiny as seconds
linger us between the moments
into dark quick the candle
before the shadow moves

Following in behind my steps
my body wary in its skeleton
the rain deciding wet
determining the resonance of words •

It isn't enough to simply know the interval is there. Hearing it out of context is only the beginning, like planting the seed in your mind.

A Moment Before C

Tanya Allan-Johnson

A rolling symphony of thunder. A crescendo of rain.

It had been falling steadily since breakfast, unlikely to ease until late in the evening, according to the weather reports. Lorne sighed. He checked to make sure Betty wasn't watching before he slipped out onto the back porch. The bowl of kibble he'd left out was starting to get soggy on the edge. He pulled it in a bit further under the awning, made sure it would still be visible from the hole in the fence at the back of the yard. Pushed it forward again, just a half inch, for good measure. It was Cleo's favourite; if she came anywhere near, she'd smell it for sure.

(Ping)

A short pause.

(Ping)

Beyond the closed screen door, Lorne could hear the piano tuner tapping out and meticulously adjusting the sound of each key. He'd been at it for three hours now. Through most of it, Betty had sat at the edge of the sofa, her hands clasped, nearly bursting with anticipation. Damn fool, that woman. To spend that kind of money on something so crazy. She'd never so much as touched the thing in over twenty-five years except to keep the dust off it. The whole thing was pure hogwash.

"Lorne, honey, come in out of the rain."

He turned, pretended not to be startled. "Not gettin' wet under the awning."

"Don't be silly," Betty scolded him. "The damp, you'll catch your death."

(Ping)

"I'll be fine."

(Ping)

(Ping)

(Ping)

"Honey, she's not coming back. You know she's not."

(Ping)

"She might still. Only been a couple of weeks."

(Ping)

"It's been six, Lorne. It's been so cold, and Cleo was old. Maybe it was just her time. Maybe she knew it, even. Didn't want us fussing over her."

(Ping)

(Ping)

"Never know. Might still come home." He waited until he was sure Betty had gone before he turned back into the house.

The overcast sky grumbled again, low, as if it were in a mood. Lorne opened the fridge. He rested his hand on a Molson Ex. Checked his watch. Opted instead for a gingerale.

(Ping)

And then, tentatively...

(Ping)

"Oh my," exclaimed a breathless voice. "I believe we've found it, Mrs. Brewer."

"Really? Oh, how exciting!"

Lorne rolled his eyes. He cracked open his drink, took a sip. Decided he'd better feign interest or he'd never hear the finish of it from Betty. He strolled into the living room. Betty now hovered over the little man, whose ear was bent low to the yellowing old keys. She looked up at Lorne, beaming with triumph. "Did you hear, Lorne? Mr. Tibble found the hidden interval!"

"Hmmm," replied Lorne from behind a long swig of gingerale.

"Astonishing!" Mr. Tibble whispered. "This is... simply astonishing!"

Lorne leaned over the keyboard, motioning to the two keys the piano tuner continued to play in succession.

"That the integer?" he asked.

"Interval, not integer, Lorne," Betty corrected him. "An interval is the distance between two keys on a keyboard. It's good news, is it, Mr. Tibble?"

Mr. Tibble looked up, his face the flushed colour of one too many sips of sherry. He looked from one to the other of the Brewers. "You understand," he began, "that the discovery of a piano's hidden interval is not, in and of itself, remarkable. It would only be a matter of time. Every piano has one, typically within one and four semitones. Although there was a rumour circulating recently that Mozart's pianoforte in Salzburg actually had two hidden intervals, but I don't believe that's ever been proven. No, each will have one, and only one." He paused, brushed the keyboard with a delicate hand. "Most pianos, however, hide their intervals either very low, or very high on the keyboard."

"Yes! Like Ida and Joe's, Lorne, you remember Ida showing us theirs at their barbeque last June..."

"How the hell could I forget?" Lorne mumbled. "If I never hear *Moonlight Sonata* again it won't be too soon..."

"She's already had two people hear it, too," Betty went on, ignoring her husband. "One was her grandson visiting from Victoria. Kept describing horses and cowboys. They thought maybe Texas, based on the information they could get out of him. The other was her neighbour, who was hanging out her sheets when she heard Ida playing. She swears the interval took her to Japan. Japan! Can you imagine? She said she could tell from the crowds and the funny signs..."

"It becomes a question of commonality," Mr. Tibble continued. "An interval tucked away amongst little-used keys bears little value. But," he smiled, "not so with your piano."

"Our piano is... special, somehow?" Betty asked.

"Oh my, yes," Mr. Tibble confirmed. "Special, and very rare. Your piano's interval is not hidden behind obscure tones. It is here, in the very centre of the keyboard. Between B and middle C, if you can believe it!"

"That mean you're gonna charge us more for finding it?"

"Lorne! Really..."

"Not at all, Mrs. Brewer. I understand this is all a bit fantastic to some, and it's a fair question, Mr. Brewer. No, my fee is the same regardless of the piano's value, although I regret I can't say the same for a few of my colleagues. I rather consider it a privilege to be asked to find them in the first place. It's exciting every time, making that first

discovery. I consider myself a sort of Louis Pasteur, as musical sensitives go." He chuckled. "Anyway, I trust you can easily find a tune containing such a common interval, Mrs. Brewer. Do you play?"

"Oh, yes. Well, I try," Betty humbly replied, lifting her one and only dog-eared music book from the table next to the piano. "I must admit, it's been a while. I'll be rusty, I'm sure."

"Rusty?" Lorne scoffed. "For Pete's sake, Betty, even when you did play, you only knew four songs, if you count *Chopsticks*."

"I'm well aware of that, Lorne," she replied, thumbing through the book. "But one of them repeats this interval often, I'm sure of it. I'll just have to practice, that's all."

"Oh yes, practice you must, Mrs. Brewer. It isn't enough to simply know the interval is there. Hearing it out of context is only the beginning, like planting the seed in your mind. To actually experience the moment of your hidden interval, it must be played in context, woven within the harmonies of a complete piece of music. And even then, there are no guarantees. Only a minute percentage of the population can experience a hidden interval moment."

"*Für Elise!*" Betty exclaimed.

"Fury what?"

"*Für Elise*, Lorne. It's a very famous piece by Beethoven. The interval from B to C is repeated several times." She slid onto the bench in front of the piano, found the page she needed in the old music book and set it before her. She rubbed her hands together and squinted at the notes, regarding the page as a nervous chef might an unfamiliar recipe. "I'm sure if I just polish my skills up a bit..."

Betty placed her hands on the keyboard, and began, much to the late Beethoven's chagrin, Lorne was sure, to slog out the first few bars of *Für Elise*. He exchanged a strained glance with Mr. Tibble, who appeared to share Lorne's appraisal of Betty's skills. "You'd, ah, be surprised at what a little practice can accomplish, Mr. Brewer," the piano tuner offered.

"Hmph. I sure would."

"Well... that will just about do it, then. You may find the piano's tuning may falter a bit after three or four months, as it's been so long since it was last tuned. Just give me a call if it needs a touching-up."

"I'm sure it'll be just fine," Betty said over her shoulder, her fingers pausing in the midst of an awkward phrase. "Lorne, the chequebook is in the drawer in the hall. Why don't you settle up with Mr. Tibble?"

The fee seemed preposterous, but Lorne decided against making

a fuss over it. He signed the receipt for services rendered before fetching the little man's umbrella and overcoat from the closet.

"Tell me, Mr. Tibble," Lorne just had to ask. "I appreciate that piano tuning is no simple task, takes some talent, an ear for music, and all that."

"Yes..."

"Well, but really. This whole 'hidden interval' nonsense. I mean, seein' cowboys, Japan, that sort of thing. Just sounds like a bunch of New Age hogwash to me."

Mr. Tibble smiled. "Believe me, Mr. Brewer, you wouldn't be the first to be skeptical. Since most will never experience it, it can be difficult to justify its value. Perhaps, over time, it will become more widely accepted, and in so being, more commonly experienced."

Lorne thought a moment. "Where does it take you?"

"Take me?"

"You know, the interval, a piano's hidden interval. When you hear it, where do you, uh, go?"

"Oh, each experience is as different as each piano. Certainly no where as exotic as Japan, to be sure." He patted Lorne's elbow. "Suffice it to say, Mr. Brewer, we all have our own special places. And for me, each one is more of a surprise than the last." He turned to leave.

"Good day, and," he motioned to the tedious melody from the living room, "good luck."

Lorne made his way back to the living room, shaking his head. Special places my ass. He had to give the guy credit, he was certainly doing a good job cashing in on such an elaborate hoax. There was a reprieve as Betty finally dragged herself to the end of *Für Elise*, but it was short-lived. She turned back to the first page, flexed her fingers, and began the woeful exercise again. Lorne gritted his teeth. Between this and *Moonlight Sonata*, he was beginning to wish this Beethoven guy was still alive so he could kill him himself.

He thumbed through the paper on the coffee table, extracting the sports section before tipping back into his worn La-Z-Boy. Might as well just try and tune her out, no pun intended. He scanned the highlights. Jays off to another rough start. What else is new. Leafs still have a chance at the cup, if they can make it past Ottawa. He squinted through his bifocals, tilting the page away from the window. The glare of the sun was making it difficult to read the scores, they printed them so damn small...

Puzzled, he looked up from the paper toward the window. There

it was, all right. He stood, and looked outside. It had been raining not five minutes ago, and yet there was the sun, full-strength bright in a clear blue sky. "Well, I'll be... Betty, the rain's quit—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, having noticed how quiet the room was. He turned. The piano stood silent, sans pianist, the protective wooden lid closed over its keyboard. "Betty?" he called out. Silence answered back.

Then, from the corner of his eye, movement. From outside, toward the back of the yard. A quick glimpse of brown and black. Lorne moved closer to the window, the faint flame of hope he'd secretly extinguished weeks ago now coming back to life. There she was, making her way back through the broken fence.

Lorne tore through the kitchen and out the back door, his heart full. The little beagle stood by the fence, her head tilted to the right. As soon as she spied her master, her tail broke into a vigorous wag, and she bounded toward him, the sheen of her healthy coat glistening in the sunlight. Lorne bent to meet her, hardly able to say her name through his emotion. "Oh, Cleo," he finally managed as she leapt into his lap, her friendly tongue lapping at the salty tears on his face.

Lorne held his dog close, stroking her soft fur, scratching beneath her oversized ears the way he knew she liked. He marveled at her health. When she had gone all those weeks ago, her greying fur had appeared dull, her face heavy with age and wear. And yet now... it was as though her little adventure had taken years off her life, rejuvenating her back to her prime. She was as happy and hardy as Lorne had ever remembered her to be.

"Oh, my Cleo. That's my old girl. Betty!" he called over his shoulder. "She's back, Betty! Cleo's back! Daggonnit, I knew she'd come, I told you she would. Didn't I tell you?" He stood and made his way back to the house, Cleo nipping happily at his heels. She stopped abruptly at the bowl of kibble, never having been one to pass up a meal. "That's right, you eat, old girl. I'll get you more. You must be plenty starved. Betty! Damn it, Betty, where are you?"

He flung open the screen door, called her again. "Betty! Betty, you in here?"

He went to the living room. She was there this time, at the piano, her back still to Lorne. Her fingers rested just above the keys, as if waiting for her cue.

"Betty?" Lorne didn't hide his annoyance. "Damn it, woman, didn't you hear me hollerin' back there, it's Cleo, she's come—"

It was the quiet that seemed so out of place. She wasn't moving, not even a muscle. Just waiting. Lorne moved closer to her. "Betty? What's wrong? What's..."

He looked down at the frozen form of his wife, her face fixed in concentration. He reached out a tentative hand, touched her shoulder.

Another crescendo of rain from outside, a distant rumble of thunder.

"Oh! Oh, heaven's, Lorne you startled me. You know, I think I've really got it this time. It's just the arpeggios for the left hand, they're a bit tricky, but it's like riding a bike, you just need to get back on and... Lorne? Honey, are you okay, you look so pale."

Lorne was looking out the window now, at the overcast sky's heavy grey underbellies, at the empty yard, the broken fence. The full bowl of soggy kibble.

Betty stood, joined her husband at the window. "Lorne? What is it?"

He looked down at her, the familiar heaviness returning to his heart. "Again, Betty. Do you... could you play it for me again?" •

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The fault lay not with the stone
or with Edon's method of
sweeping off the table. The
fault of his wound was the
master's and none other's.

Testing Edon

Robert J. Santa

"Edon!"

The apprentice came into the room quickly, drying his soapy hands on a dishcloth.

"Yes, master?" Edon said in the way he'd learned long ago gave his voice just the right tone of eager servitude.

"Help me move this." The master had been studying for weeks a stone of odd composition. Despite the many samples chipped away from it, and the hole bored through its center, the stone was still as large as a man's torso. Edon dried his hands and approached the stone, the master on the other side. They stooped and lifted it off the low worktable. It was massive, and Edon could tell he was doing the lion's share of the carrying.

As they lowered the stone into the cart, Edon felt a sudden increase of weight, as if the master was intentionally giving him more to lift, and Edon realized he would be unable to maintain his grip much longer. The stone was higher than he wanted it to be when his fingers slipped. The cart's frame did not shatter as he backed his toes away from the dancing wheels.

"Clean the table," said the master, who simply turned his back and walked toward his writing desk. Edon could remember the days not too long in the past when the master had said "please" and "thank

you". Their relationship has progressed well beyond the student and master. The master, of course, was still the master. Edon, though, had somehow gone from pupil to servant.

The stone chips littering the table's surface were sharp. One of them pierced the soft flesh of Edon's palm as he scooped them up. He limited his outburst to a sharp intake of breath through his teeth. The cut was not deep, and the stone flake still stuck out of him. Sometime during the first year of Edon's apprenticeship, one of the master's many cats had scratched him. It was hardly life threatening, but it was enough of a scratch to make a boy cry. The master had held him and let Edon's tears wash away his pain and anger, his embarrassment and loneliness. Today, as Edon plucked out the fragment he saw that the master had not moved from his writing desk.

There was always respect for the master, even in those lonely hours at the end of the day when the master had gone to bed and Edon was still scrubbing the floor or sorting leaves or translating textbooks. The hatred hadn't begun until only the last few years and infrequently at that. More and more of the everyday inconveniences of his apprenticeship Edon had begun to blame on the master, as if somehow the master had caused the stone chip to cut Edon's flesh. The fault lay not with the stone or with Edon's method of sweeping off the table. The fault of his wound was the master's and none other's.

"How many apricot trees are in the orchard?" the master asked without pausing in his writing.

"Sixteen," Edon said without hesitation. He had long ago become accustomed to the master's frequent and esoteric quizzes.

"What are the methods of manipulating energy?" the master said.

"The spoken word," Edon said, "psychic control, and muscle manipulation."

"What are the different manipulative techniques?"

"Eye movement, finger movement, and facial movement."

"Demonstrate facial movement," the master said.

Edon knew the master was choosing a particularly difficult skill. Edon focused his thoughts and closed his eyes. Then he twitched the layer of muscles on his brow, running from his hairline down to the nose. He alternated each side of the nose and the nostrils, quivered his upper lips, and flexed the muscles around his chin. It was something he had done thousands of times while lying in bed. He had also demonstrated the manipulations for the master on several occasions, but Edon had never answered one the master's requests with a successful

display. As he wiggled first one ear then the next, which concluded the cycle, he smiled and opened his eyes.

The master was still hunched over the desk, scribbling in his journal. He hadn't so much as craned his neck to look.

The manipulation was on Edon's fingers before he realized he was in mid-casting. His right hand froze; the second and third fingers curled only a fraction of an inch from the completion of the spell. All Edon had to do was blink and flick his fingertips as if he were plucking a harp, and the casting that would fell a full-grown buck at three hundred paces would strike the master in the back.

Very carefully, Edon opened his hand and disrupted the manipulation.

"What is the best day to summon a water faerie?" the master asked, oblivious of his near death.

Edon found his voice in only a moment. "Three days before the first full moon of summer." The word crackled. Then the master turned in his chair.

"Are you well?" he asked, a scowl painted on his face.

"I am."

"Then continue cleaning." The master turned back to his journal and blew on the ink. Edon retrieved the dishcloth and wiped the table, scooping the stone chips into one hand.

"How long have you apprenticed with me?"

"In what unit of measure would you like the answer?"

"Lunar months."

"Two hundred and thirty-five," Edon said without pause. He was doing some quick calculations, making certain he knew how many hours it had been when the master continued.

"Almost," he said as he turned around. "It will be two hundred thirty-five tomorrow."

"Yes, master. I rounded off the last few hours."

"The Metetonic cycle is very important. Before the cycle is complete you must pass the test."

"Which test is that, master?"

The master did not answer. He rose from the chair and went to The Door, for that is how Edon had always thought of it: The Door. He had learned during the first week of his apprenticeship that it was the only locked door in the entire manor, a building that contained eighty-eight doors. The door to the master's private bedroom was always unlocked; many times it was open, even when the master was asleep

within. The door to the treasury was also unlocked, closed by nothing more complicated than a simple latch.

But The Door defied all means of entry that Edon had tried. He had pulled on it and taken a prybar to it in his youth. As he learned more from the master, he had tried manipulations that would have blasted sections of forest, yet The Door remained unscathed. The master could open and close it with ease, a simple twisting of the knob. It irritated Edon like a rash every time the master opened The Door.

The master walked into the room beyond The Door and returned in only a moment with a wooden block perhaps a foot across, maybe less. In his other hand was a wire hoop slightly larger than the mirror that hung in Edon's room. The master set the block on the recently cleaned worktable and pulled a stool close to it.

"Sit," he said, and Edon sat down.

The master reached out and set the hoop in a groove in the block. The air, circumscribed by the wire, darkened immediately, followed by a nauseating stench so foul it forced tears from his eyes. This was not the first time he had seen the master open a portal. Edon had done it himself hundreds of times. But it was certainly the strangest, for inside the hoop there was a void, an emptiness that lacked even the color black, though Edon could think of no other word to describe the color in the hoop.

"This is a test of willpower," the master said. "Put in your hand."

Edon did not hesitate. He reached out his right hand and put it into the emptiness. He had expected to find no resistance, but his fingertips felt pressure as they crossed the plane of not-black. He pushed harder and felt his hand entering the bowels of a freshly butchered hog. It was a little cool, with a wet sensation over his skin. His hand was entirely inside the void up to the wrist. Edon did not have to look around the hoop to see that his hand did not penetrate the other side.

"More," said the master, and Edon obeyed. As the emptiness swallowed more and more of his arm, as the line of the blackness crept along his forearm up to the elbow, the first inklings of fear gripped his loins. He looked at the master who was intently watching Edon's face, though his own gave no sign of his emotion.

It is a test of willpower, Edon thought, and he held his arm inside the hoop even though it felt like the disgusting remnants of a meal sluicing over his flesh and smelled like the regurgitations of the same. He held his arm inside the hoop for more than a thousand heartbeats, wondering when the master was going to acknowledge his will to succeed.

Something brushed over the back of his hand, something with a hard body and many tiny legs like needles. Edon flinched and almost withdrew his hand, but stopped after only an inch or so and pushed his arm back into the inky void. His peripheral vision saw the master move, as if he wanted to get a better view of Edon's face.

The creature touched his arm again, less casually, as if testing the strange object that had invaded its world. Edon had encountered the denizens of those universes, had summoned them, and had controlled them. He had never before permitted one to do as it pleased with his helplessly exposed arm.

In deliberate exploration of his hand, the centipedal thing touched his palm and gripped it hard with painfully sharp legs. Something lightly inspected the wound on his hand—antenna? Then something pierced the opening, a rasp-like tongue, that sent lightning pain up his elbow, where it was magnified by a big nerve cluster. Edon drew in breath again and waited for the centipede to bite. He saw the master watching Edon's face, and the pupil took courage.

And then it was there, the ball of energy. Edon sensed it with the part of him the master had recognized those many years ago when he selected Edon from two score applicants.

The energy ball floated inside the void of the hoop, drifting like a stick caught in a tidal pool. Despite its size, Edon felt its power. It was more energy than he had ever seen in one place at one time. The edges of its presence brushed the hairs on his skin. It was so strong, so close!

What could I do with all that energy? Edon wondered: He could summon a spirit and bind it to himself, to draw on its abilities at whim. He dismissed the idea as too short-sighted. With that much energy he could summon a demon, even one of the lordlings. The binding manipulation would be the same, and there was more than enough energy to defeat the creature. It would be like having another sorcerer with him to be at his beck and call. He could regenerate his youth; put the bounce back into his step, and remain that way for decades. He could do anything.

He could even let the master know how poorly he had treated his apprentice the last few years. Edon smiled inwardly at the thought of the master sitting in a chair, unable to rise, bound by some of that limitless energy.

Edon shook loose the ideas in his brain. The master had taught him in his youth the application of power, a lesson that was literally

beaten into him when he manipulated the death of a bird too small to eat. Edon had killed the bird for no reason other than because he wanted to, and the master had struck him to the flagstones with a close-fisted blow that would have felled a large man. The memory of the beating angered Edon, yet the humiliation of it was equally strong.

But with all that energy, the master would never be able to strike him down. He could protest as much as he wanted to, and that would be his only recourse.

Edon wondered what the master might say if he tried to use that energy. He would say it was too much. He would lecture his apprentice on restraint and self-control. He would caution Edon not to attempt so much, that there were risks.

The centipede bit again, harder, as if it had acquired a taste for blood and needed more. Edon tried to grab it and crush it, but it eluded him. At the very least, all he need to do was draw away some of the energy and blast that thing apart.

He pushed his arm further into the hoop when the ball of energy was near, but a shifting in the strange currents caused it to dance away. Edon's fingertips brushed the surface of the ball.

It all happened so quickly: flashes of imagery burned themselves onto his eyes as if he had looked directly at the sun...

Edon saw himself standing over the Goblin King, his evil horde burned to ashes...

Edon saw himself leading a great army, invincible before the sheer power of his manipulations...

Edon saw himself as a desiccated corpse, his hair still brown with strands of gray just formed.

He felt the truth of all the images as if he had summoned them in the scrying pool. The death did not frighten him, for he had known since his teenage years that it would be a manipulation that eventually killed him. His choice was to be a very old man when it happened, when the energy of the manipulation overwhelmed him and turned on his tissue for strength. No, what terrified him was that he would become the sorcerer in the white gown, the staff raised over his head as he looked out on a sea of soldiers as unstoppable as time.

Edon knew he was stronger than that. There had been instances in the past when he hadn't been able to handle a manipulation, but that was years ago. Since then he had done everything the way he should. He had even begun to wonder what the master had left to teach him.

Edon knew he was strong enough. He knew it with a conviction that was complete. As the ball of energy floated closer, he lunged for it, closing his fingers around it.

The energy burned into the wound on his palm like a flame, searing the flesh. More energy flowed into it, forced its way into his being against his will. Edon threw up walls to block the onslaught, turning the energy itself into his defence. It sapped the strength of the flood, but before he could do more, the energy burst over and around his blocks. There was too much energy. In the simple space of a heartbeat his sense of self was suffocated.

He drifted into slumber, letting the peace of it cover him...

In the instant before he accepted his doom he fought back, attacking the wave of energy that was all around. Edon began the manipulation that would make the energy his to use however he saw fit, repeating the motions again and again. With each sequence the energy retreated a bit. He focused on the one manipulation, the fractional reduction of the energy's strength, until he was manipulating more than the ball contained.

There was too much power. It was enough to make Edon the most powerful person in the world, and it was too much! He considered it, holding the onslaught of energy to a standstill. He should release the energy back into the void, but instead Edon made the manipulation that would draw the rest to him.

Then it was gone. The energy that had been flowing into him was no more, as if it had never been. The feeling of the universe inside the hoop was also gone. Though his arm was still up to the elbow in the black nothingness, there was no longer any sensation of being surrounded by mass. The centipede thing no longer attacked his hand. There was simply nothing.

Edon closed his eyes and withdrew his arm. The master silently lifted it up and picked up the block with his other hand.

Edon sat in silence as the master returned the hoop and the block to the room behind the Door. When the master came back he stood beside Edon and said nothing. They remained so for a long time before Edon spoke:

"I'm sorry, master."

"For what?" the master asked in the softest voice Edon has heard in a decade.

"I failed."

"What makes you think so?"

Edon opened his eyes and looked up at the master, whose face showed long-lost emotions. The master was happy, fulfilled, but most of all, the master was proud to the point of tears.

"Edon," he said, "there comes a point when I can no longer teach you, that you must learn things on your own, with your own experimentation. I have tried to teach you not only the skills of manipulation but a way of thinking, a way of believing in yourself. If you hadn't tried for that energy than you would have failed."

"I don't understand," said Edon.

"I know. And it will be some time before you do. When you realize the significance of this day you will be ready to train your own pupil. I was not ready when I chose my first student."

Edon gasped.

"There was another before me?" he asked.

"Quinlin," said the master. "He reached out for the energy and balked. It destroyed him. It was a failure I have thought about every day for twenty years."

"I almost didn't take it."

"I know."

"And I almost stopped after I had begun."

"I know," said the master, nodding.

"I still don't understand," Edon said, and the master smiled.

"What do I do now, master?" asked Edon.

"I am no longer your master. First, you may call me Garrett." He waited and smiled wider. Edon stood.

"Yes, Garrett."

"I have a house for your studies. It is some distance, but not so far that you can't come back every now and again. It has been boarded up a very long time. It was to have been Quinlin's." The master paused. All Edon could do was wait in silence.

"There are some things in this room for you," the master said when he found his voice. He led Edon to The Door. "The hoop will be yours, and I don't believe I have another cycle in me to teach a third student. There are some trinkets of value I'm sure you would appreciate. The textbooks you've copied are yours to keep, of course. And I've put together a small chest of coins that should come in handy."

The master turned and put out his hand. Edon shook it, and after only a moment the master leaned forward and pulled Edon into his embrace.

"Thank you, Garrett," Edon said.

"It was my pleasure," the master said, his eyes glazed. Edon began to pull away, but Garrett held him. "I never got to tell Quinlin I was sorry for the way I treated him. It's part of the teaching."

"It's all right," Edon said. They separated. "I understand." And he did, if only a little.

Garrett smiled. "Let's collect your things." He turned and gestured with an open palm.

Edon looked at him for a moment before he reached out, turned the knob, and simply opened The Door. •

High Priestess

Alyxandra Harvey-Fitzhenry

high priestess:
do not fear the
caves
or the bones of
your mothers.
the red ochre
is there to welcome you,
to remind you
of the moon
and your blood
and, above all,
instinct.

walk as if you know
where you are going
and you might forget
that you think
you are lost.

this is the trick:
trust the moth at your screen door;
she teaches you passion
and dedication.
trust the deer on the hills

(con't)

and the crows
when they gather
in the trees.
they speak with the voice
of the mother—
trust your shadow
and your reflection
and the little wishes
which find you
in the night—
these are her voice as well.

listen to everything:
the river, the birch,
your own tears.
there will be pain
and doubt,
oh yes,
doubt.
this is not an easy path
and yet it is as simple
as this:
walk and the path will be there
under your feet,
unfolding
like a lotus blossom. •

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about our contributors

TANYA ALLAN-JOHNSON lives in Barrie, Ontario with her husband and two young boys. She is currently in the process of submitting her first supernatural suspense novel *Quiet the Weeping* for publication, and is hard at work writing a second novel.

ELIZABETH BACHINSKY was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 1976. Her poems have appeared most recently in subTerrain and The Malahat Review. You can read her work in upcoming issues of: *Event*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *Geist*, *Arc*, *Room of One's Own* and *In Fine Form: The Anthology of Canadian Form Poetry* (Poestar, 2005). Her newest chapbook *Sometimes Boys go Missing* was out with Mosquito Press in fall, 2004. She lives in Vancouver, BC.

CLIFF BURNS is a Canadian writer with well over 100 published short stories to his credit. His tales have been selected for fourteen major anthologies in the U.K., USA, Germany and Canada. He is presently working on a new novel, some personal essays, a short story or two... and a variety of other stuff. Burns lives in western Canada with his wife, Sherron, and two sons, Liam & Samuel.

KEVIN COCKLE lives and writes in Alberta, Canada. He has sold screenplays, interviewed boxers, and most recently turned to trying his hand at short fiction. *Rat Patrol* marks his fourth professional short story sale.

JUDE DILLON: Born in Kingston, Ontario. Graduated English from Queen's. News-photographer for the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, and the *Calgary Albertan*. Studied painting at Alberta College of Art and Design. Plays guitar and harmonica. Favourite painter Cézanne. Favourite poet Theodore Roetke. Writes full time.

ALYXANDRA HARVEY-FITZHENRY lives in a old stone house with her husband and 2 dogs (soon to be 3). She is addicted to books and mocaccinos and has a well-developed sense of mischief and a collection of tattoos. She has been published in such literary magazines as *The Antigonish Review*, *Room of One's Own* and *Fireweed*.

ROB HUNTER: With the onset of late middle age Rob Hunter is the sole support of a 1993 Geo Metro and the despair of his young wife. He does dishes, stacks firewood and keeps their Maine cottage spotless by moving as little as possible. In a former life he was a newspaper copy boy, railroad telegraph operator, recording engineer, radio announcer and film editor.

SOPHIE JOE: "I have ridden in busses. I have ridden in a Mark VII Jaguar. I have ridden in countless rusty Volvos and only two summers ago I walked past the Cirque de Soleil tents in Vancouver."

KASEY KIELER was born and raised in Mission, B.C. His poem *Revered* won an honourable mention in Ripple Effect Press' *All Wound Up* collection. He is an avid coffee drinker and loves the water.

PATRICK LESTEWKA has been published in various publications including *Chiaroscuro*, *NeverWorlds*, *Infernal* and *MOT 2001: The Anthology*. He is the author of *The Preserve* and *Bitchfight*.

AMY JULIA McCORMICK was born in Sudbury, Ontario in 1956. The strongest influence in her creative life was her Scottish grandfather, a Chief Mining Engineer, who was also an author of fiction. Her Irish grandmother brought much laughter into her life. Amy continues to write fiction and poetry with great sensitivity and perception, often drawing on her experiences of world travel. She currently lives and writes in Winnipeg with her husband.

ANNA MIODUCHOWSKA is a poet, author of essays, short stories, and book reviews. Her work has appeared in anthologies, literary journals, on buses, and has aired on the CBC Radio. *In-Between Season*, a poetry collection, was published in 1998 by Rowan Books. Forty poems translated from Polish were included in *When You Speak*, a bilingual collection of poetry by Jan Twardowski, published in 2000 in Cracow.

DAN J. O'DRISCOLL started his art career "with dinosaurs", drawing them on the margins of school books as a kid. He tells us "My drawing style has its roots in architectural rendering, and has further evolved through the application of sharp focus drawing techniques. Visual (and literary) influences and sources of inspiration include Michael Whelan, James Gurney, Arthur C. Clarke, and Frank Herbert, among others." See his website at <http://www.djostudio.com>

ANTONIO RUFFINI lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he was born and grew up. Trained as an electrical engineer he currently edits a mining magazine for a living. *The Promised Land* is his first professional SF sale.

ROBERT J. SANTA has been writing speculative fiction for twenty years. He

has been most recently published in *Artemis*, *Paradox*, *Horror Garage* and Ralan Conely's *Spectravaganza* and has material forthcoming in *Amazing Journeys*, *Here & Now*, *Hadrosaur Tales*, and *Nova SF*. He is married to the beautiful Rachel, and is the father of two equally beautiful daughters, Elizabeth and Lily.

HAYDEN TRENHOLM has written over 15 plays with productions across Alberta in Ottawa and on CBC radio. His short fiction has appeared in *On Spec*, *TransVersion*, *Tesseract6*, *Neo-Opis*, *Challenging Destiny* and on CBC radio. In 1992, his novel, *A Circle of Birds*, was published by Anvil Press. He lives in Ottawa with his wife, Elizabeth, where he does research for the Senator for the Northwest Territories.


MARLENE WURFEL is busy building a fetus out of fresh air and carrot cake and a novel out of nerve and hindsight. She doesn't know any better. The fetus has more momentum but she hopes the novel will prove less demanding in the long run.

CERI YOUNG is a writer and editor living in Montréal. She is originally from Nova Scotia, and uses maritime themes and folklore to inspire her work. This is her first fiction publication.

in upcoming issues...

Great new fiction and poetry by JW Anderson, Nancy Bennett, Kevin Cockle, Rocco de Giacomo, Robert Lake, Mary Soon Lee, Tony Pi, Laura Price, KV Skene, Jack Skillingstead, Kin Man Young Tai, Suzan Tessier, Melissa Thomas, Diane Tucker, Mildred Tremblay, and many, many more!

As always, thanks for reading!



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