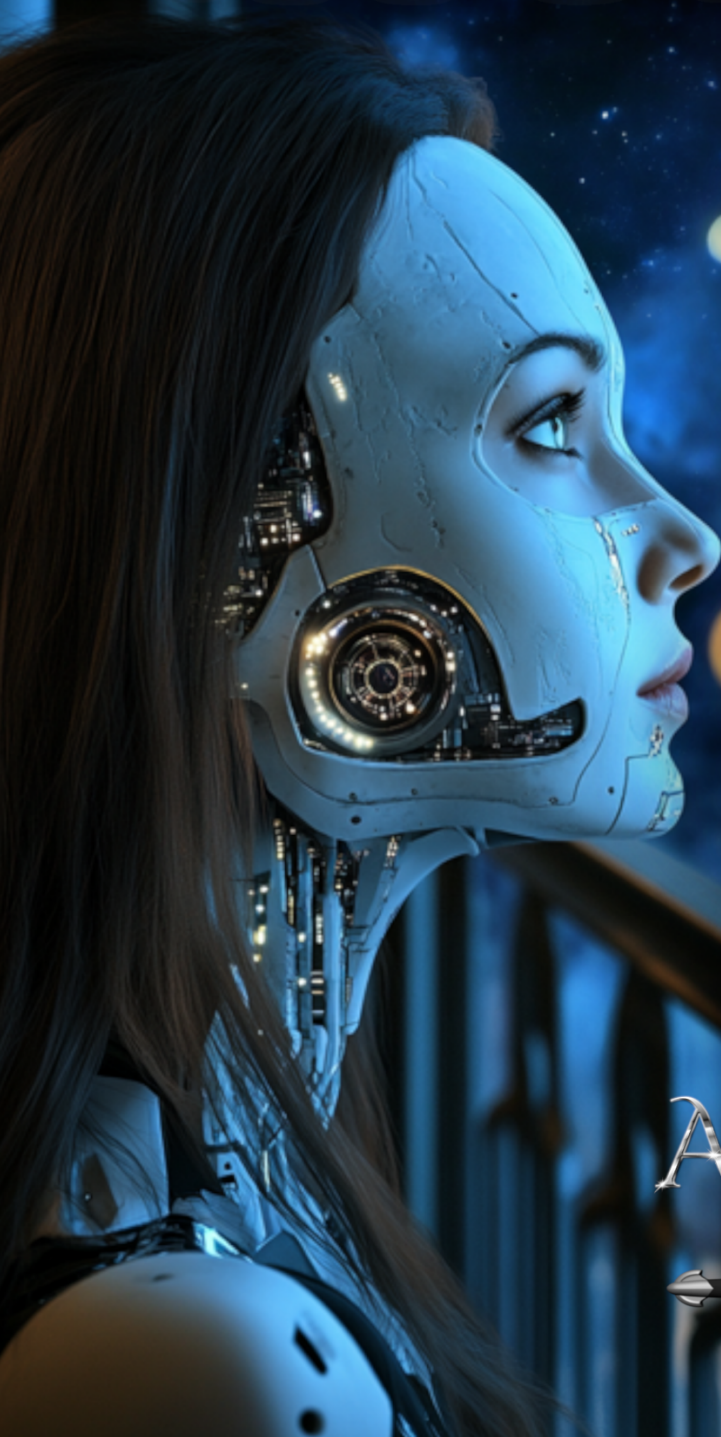


FALL 24 ISSUE

WITH STORIES
AND POEMS BY
THOMAS VAN
BOENING, JOHN
GRAY, PHERN M.
AND JOEL
GLOVER

FEATURING THE ARTIST
ELIZABETH BRANDIE

ALTERED
REALITY



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Trigger and Content Warning

The staff of Altered Reality Magazine would like to give warning to those who might be upset by violence, gore, terrifying situations and imagery, or other dark themes. This collection has been rated M for mature by the staff.

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TO ADAM DOE FROM THE GUYS IN ROOM 104

BY JOHN GREY

Yes we invented you.
Your perfection is ours.
Likewise, your immortality.

We manipulated the gene pool
to your ends,
ours too as it so happened.

You are as handsome in looks
as we are in deeds,
as capable in so many fields,
as we only needed to be in one.

Everywhere you go,
we travel with you.
What you do,
you do on our behalf.

We're a bunch of
nerdy-looking, balding,
bespectacled scientists
in a combination
think/tank laboratory
off route 128.

You're the cynosure of all eyes,
amazing the world
with all you are capable of.

But remember where you came from.
Otherwise, only we will.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Tenth Muse. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Amazon= Stories and River and South. You can find him on facebook.

THUMP BY WILLIAM KITCHER

There was a massive thump. It wasn't very loud, only like a bottle falling onto a thick carpet, but Walter felt it slam into him like an omnidirectional shockwave that then rattled around inside him, causing his internal organs to vibrate.

He looked to his right along the coffee shop wall. Two tables down, a woman cuddling a Yorkie and feeding him a muffin, had obviously noticed it too as she looked bewilderedly about her.

She turned to Walter, and said, "What the hell was that?"

He was about to answer when he noticed, not only the woman looking at him, but in her same space, the woman looking forward at the TV behind the counter. Two images, as if part of her had frozen while the rest of her continued about her daily business.

He turned to the TV. The picture of the basketball game had frozen at the moment Curry had launched a three-pointer, but the game continued and he could see that as well, the beautiful arc of the shot, in half-second intervals that also froze. Satellite problems, no doubt, he thought, pixel glitches.

But that didn't explain the same image he was getting from the woman – a woman sitting at a table feeding her dog, followed by successive images of everywhere she had moved since the thump. They were like hallucinogenic trails that didn't dissipate.

The Yorkie, too, could now be seen in various poses, looking about him, obviously wondering what had just happened to him. But he soon went back to his muffin.

Walter thought of his two cats at home, and hoped they'd been asleep when the thump hit. This would confuse them to no end if they were awake.

The woman with the Yorkie got up, swiveled around with a blank face, and staggered to the back of the shop, carrying the Yorkie. Each of her steps left part of her there. She disappeared out the back door.

Where she'd been sitting were twenty or thirty of her, overlapping, with slightly different facial expressions and body movements. Stop-motion actions piled one on top of the other.

Walter stood up, leaned over the table next to him, and reached out to the apparent phantoms. He touched her shoulder, then another shoulder, then another...

When he turned back, he saw himself on his chair, where he'd been when the thump happened and everything he'd done since then. It was unsettling for him to see so many versions of himself. In general, he didn't like his own face, and to see so many faces made him very uneasy.

Hesitantly, he put his hand out, and made contact with himself. He flinched.

Tiny flies rose from the muffins and bagels on the counter, creating patterns in the air like twisted electrons.

Mickey, the owner of the coffee shop, came out of the office, wobbling in half-second blocks, with succeeding looks on her faces ranging from muddle-headedness to horror.

Walter couldn't stand it any longer and had to leave. He threw a fifty on the counter, and flung his ever-growing body toward the entrance, bumping into himself several times. On his way out, the two elderly gentlemen who had been sitting quietly by the window turned to him. That turn appeared to have been the only time they'd moved since the thump. How nice to be calm, thought Walter. One of them said to him, "Be careful."

Mickey's coffee shop (known as "Mickey's Coffee Shop") is on a mostly industrial side street about fifty meters down the road from the main drag, so there's not a lot of foot traffic on weekends. Consequently, Walter didn't see a lot of action as he left the shop.

One man had passed by, and Walter saw his disordered body in segments, lurching irregularly down the street, briefly sitting on a park bench outside Mickey's, and then continuing until he disappeared into the entrance of the engineering research facility next door.

Across the street was a boy walking a German Shepherd, and they'd turned back before they'd reached the corner. Further down the street were the trails of the woman with the Yorkie staggering from side to side on the sidewalk, occasionally veering off onto the road.

Walter had to go to the main street to get home and he could already see the humanity piling up, faces twisted in non-understanding, bodies in perpetual motion and stillness. The sidewalk was packed, human sardines forming a wall uglier than bricks. He weaved, bumped, staggered, pushed, recoiled. There was no conversation. The only thing anyone managed to utter was, "Huh?"

Walter fought his way for two more blocks until he reached his street, and turned onto it, breathing a sigh of relief. There weren't as many pedestrians there so he made his way down the street more easily, although he tripped over a squirrel once.

He made it home, and walked up the stairs of his apartment building, bumping into neighbors he almost knew and their remnants. "Good afternoon, Mrs. O'Brien," he said, but Mrs. O'Brien hadn't been there for a long time.

He reached his floor and sidled down the wall where there were fewer people. Closer and closer to his apartment he struggled, to safety, to room, to space.

He unlocked his apartment door. He was almost home.

He pushed the door but it didn't open very far. His cats had been bouncing off the walls, furniture, and doors so much in confusion there was no way he'd be able to get inside.

Walter lay down in front of the door, curled into a fetal position, and closed his eyes. His cats came out of the apartment, snuggled up against him, and the three of them went to sleep. The cats dreamed of open spaces. So did Walter but he also dreamed about how he was going to get to his storage locker in the basement to retrieve the cats' carrier cages.



Bill's stories, plays, and comedy sketches have been published, produced, and/or broadcast in Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Czechia, England, Germany, Guernsey, Holland, India, Ireland, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, the U.S., and Wales. His comic noir novel, "Farewell And Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep", the second funniest novel ever written, was published in October 2023 by Close To The Bone Publishing, and is available on Amazon.

THE STORIES OF DAVID GIANATASIO

SPLAHSDOWN

Daybreak on ... Mars?

The sun's small and angry in the cloudless sky as you slide silently behind the wheel of the Lexus, leaving me marooned.

Your charcoal sedan's an odd space vehicle, shiny and wet. Mist clings in mildewed sheets across the lawn. You're revving the engine. Thrusters growl with the fury of an oncoming storm.

What if I cry? I'll hide inside my pressure suit, dusty craters and jumbled terrain reflected in my visor.

No ...

Wet grass waves in the muggy morning, drab and desolate. Stucco canyons, cracked brick facades, ancient arroyos of some dead world. Strange, yet familiar.

Feels like I'm 150 million miles from home.

Your car rises, its vapor trail paints the sky, and I'm stranded in a labyrinth of parched mesas, endless sand ravines, crystal miles sloping toward eternity.

The fourth planet. Third. I'm there. I'm HERE.

It's too much to fathom, such vastness. It's inside me now, a black hole, devouring the light and hungry for more.

I'll hike to the reservoir and crack the helmet's seal, drift like dust in a Martian canal.

(END)

SOFT-SERVE

"That ice-cream truck. It's an instrument of our oppression."

Dusky clouds hung low as bands of light fled the suburban sky.

As usual, Hank's porch reeked of dung.

"Your septic tank's leaking again."

He stared straight ahead, lids flapping like flags.

Across the street, kids crowded around the gleaming white van. Tinny strains of "Pop Goes the Weasel" filled the air.

"What oppression, Hank? That truck's just selling ice cream."

He sniffed. "That's what they want you to think. No. Check that. They..."

We spoke in unison: "...don't want you to think at all."^[L]_[SEP]

A husky boy in jean-shorts bought a cone; a girl grabbed for it. She chased him across Hank's lawn. Their sneakers sloshed in sewage.

Their pals gulped down frozen treats and screamed their pre-pubescent heads off.

"You always say THEY don't want us to think. Who are THEY, exactly?"

Hank swatted away a wasp and spat into a rosebush.

"THEY are the ones who drive the trucks."

"O-kay. What's their motive? Their endgame? Who do they represent? The government? Some shadowy private firm? Foreign invaders? Space aliens? HOW do they control us, exactly? When we're under their control, well, what then? They make us do stuff?"

Hank slurped the last of his lemonade and crushed the red plastic cup in one hand.

"They DRIVE. That's all."

"But you're immune? You've figured out what's going on? Why you?"

He spread his hands. “Somebody had to.”

I’d heard it all before. Hank’s paranoid theories revolved around telecom trucks, delivery vans, cop cars, long-haul rigs, ambulances, hearses, Ubers and so forth.

He was a mechanic. Damn good one, too. Alas, he rocked a distinctly vehicular pathology.

If Hank wasn’t my next-door neighbor, who fixed my ailing Audi for cheap, I’d ghost him for sure.

The ice-cream truck played “London Bridge Is Falling Down.” Its speakers popped with static. I always loathed that tune but began humming along anyway.

The kids had vanished. Strange, I hadn’t seen them leave.

Hank said: “So, you’re not being controlled at this very moment?”

“That’s right.”

“Or programmed?”

“Nope.”

“Or guided, even just a little bit?”

I shook my head.

“You’re sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“Well then, pal, where are you going?”

“Huh?”

“You’re half-way down the path.”

Hank was right. I hadn’t even realized. I was fumbling in my pocket for change. The streetlights flashed but failed to ignite.

“Pop Goes the Weasel” returned. Or maybe it was some other stupid song.

Hank stood up and called, “Stop walking! Freeze!”

As I reached the server’s window, the yard’s shit-smell faded, replaced by an aroma of almonds, coconut and caramel.

I ordered a chocolate ice-cream sandwich with mocha chips and tipped the driver \$2. She flashed the whitest smile.

By the time I got back to the poach, I’d nearly finished the snack. The truck began rolling away.

“You want the last bite?”

Hank just shrugged. The streetlamps snapped on with a low-pitched buzz.

I buried my face in the sticky wrapper. My tongue poked through to the other side as I licked that sucker clean.

(END)

ON DISPLAY

Watery light shrouds the rotunda's cracked staircase. Neanderthals pout beneath a fallen pillar. Moon rocks swim in a swirling sea of dust. Strange engines sag, shattered and silent. Stegosaurus skulls and gift-shop trinkets litter the floor.

I climb into my exhibit, straighten the sign around my neck.

I should be in a zoo. But I guess none of those survived. And this place is far more ironic: I'm surrounded by broken remnants from all the ages and stages of my world.

Yep. You guessed it. I'm the last human being on Earth. They make me live in a museum. The sign says: "Indigenous species in its natural habitat." Such a damn cliché.

Slithering, sucking sounds fill the hall. They love to hiss and gawk.

When my "shift" ends, I'll sleep on the planetarium floor.

The roof's gone. So, at night, real stars pierce the sky.

(END)

David Gianatasio's recent SF and fantasy stories have also appeared in The Sirens Call, Daily SF, New Myths, Another Dimension and elsewhere. Find David on X here: <https://x.com/davegian>

THE POEMS OF FHEN M.

1943: THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

Midway Island's surrounded by the sea
a tempest about to take place:
on the one hand were welcoming ships:
Enterprise, Yorktown, Hornet in wee hours,
& an island is a ship, too.
on the other hand were adversary's carriers:
Akagi, Kaga, Soryu, & Hiryu
invade an island between East & West;
the water was always overflowing
in blue, in sea spray & raging,
it can't be still & it stammered.

in the 90s, my brown brother & I
made merry with *The Battle of Midway*
piloted the Lockheed P-38
we slipped the surly bonds of Earth
up above the blue vast ocean
& up above the clouds of cream
shot the enemy planes & ships
we were kids, the thrill of our lives.

fuel meter fixedly depleting
the will to defend our happiness nev'r cease.

EIGHTH CIRCLE OF DANTE'S INFERNO

tail of a snake, wings of a bat
flamed demons grappled a pitchfork;
sticky fingers, dark secrets of business
J.C., J.A., corrupt politicians
bathed in the boiling tar of river;
gray smoke & burned bitumen
Malebranche congregated on a cliff
bard M.A. hid behind the Roman Virgil.

ditch appears as an arena
carving of demons at the corners
in their wings tack thieves & grafters
flash the faces of J.C. & J.A.;
I, the player, protect the taxpayers

from hordes of mugging minions.

tarries in the midst of two innocents
my scythe aims where politicians suspended
starts spraying with the cross
the gnashing of the teeth.



Fhen M. was a fellow in a creative writing workshop. His verse “Uyasan” was published in *Pinili: 15 Years of Lamiraw*. His poems “A Name Whispered in the Wind,” “Yakal House beside the Sabang River,” “You’ll Never Know,” among others appeared in *Poetica* anthology series. Red Penguin Books’ *About Time: A Coming-of-Age Poetry Anthology* published his piece “Outside the Block Universe”. His poem “Sea Snail” is featured in *Flora/Fauna Anthology* by Open Shutter Press. His verses “Pagkita ha Kalibutan,” “Mga Pinanmayaan ha Cancabatoc,” and other siday won in the 1st Chito Roño Literary Awards. Find Fhen online at <https://otherpeople1990.wordpress.com>

YOU ARE NOT ALONE BY PAUL MCAVOY

As the doors of the elevator juddered shut, Ryan knew he should have taken the stairs. There was a clanking sound from somewhere in the belly of the lift, the kind of noise that did not sound good. He half expected the cables that held it in place to snap and for the elevator and him to fall quickly down the four floors to his and the lift's demise.

There was a pause and Ryan waited, then the lift started to descend. It didn't get far, though, as there was another clank which was followed by a clonk, then a long and drawn-out clunk. The elevator shuddered as though having been given bad news. A screech, and it stopped dead. After a brief, hopeful pause, he went over to the control panel which had ten white circular buttons with numbers for each floor and there was a red alarm button, which he pressed.

There was sound of a dialling tone, then: 'Spres Elevators,' came a bored voice. 'How can we help you?'

'Hi,' he said, leaning forward. 'I'm in the elevator and it has broken down...'

'You will have to speak up, darling, as I can't hear you.'

The voice sounded female, maybe in her late forties. Who said 'Darling,' these days?

He leaned further to the alarm button. 'The lift I am in has broken down.'

'Spres Elevators apologise for your inconvenience,' came the voice. 'What's its EMT number?'

'Err, I don't know.'

'Should be on the panel, begins with EMT...'

Ryan looked at the bottom of the panel. There was a fading list of things not to do whilst in the lift (jump up and down, procreate, fight etc) and at the bottom the EMT number. He read it, 'EMT 11/3004/AZ.'

A pause, 'Cavel Building?'

'Yes.'

'You a resident?'

'I am.'

'Name?'

'Ryan Bednarek,' he told the alarm button, picturing her in his mind, sat at a desk, headphones on, bottle of coke and half pack of family sized potato chips before her.

'Okay, did it make any noises before it broke down?'

'There was a clank and a clonk... then a clunk.'

'Okay, someone will get onto it straight away.'

'Do you have a timeframe? I start a shift at eleven at the hospital, I'm a nurse.'

'It's hard to judge these things Mr Bednarek, but be assured we are right on it. Can we help you with anything else?'

'No.'

'Have good night.'

Good night? Yes, sure... stuck in the elevator when I am due to start my night shift with unforgiving bosses. Another late arrival at work and this time he would get a written warning. He sighed and looked around him. The walls were a dark material which he could not decide if was plastic or wood. The flooring was a beige carpet that may have been plush once. The ceiling

contained four spotlights that seemed out of place in the lift that looked as ancient as the building, and that was eighty years old.

As he looked at the lights, they flickered for a moment.

He checked his watch. 10.05 am and the subway was a five-minute walk. There was then a thirty-minute ride to the hospital. The latest he could board to arrive on time was 10.25pm. Ryan had never been stuck in the lift before, but he suspected he would miss that one. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and saw there was no signal, and that didn't surprise him. He scrawled up and looked at the last text he'd received.

Annie had texted: *I just need some time to myself, decide how I feel and what I want from a relationship. I don't want to hurt you, but that's how it is.*

The epitaph of their fourteen-month relationship.

He had been composing a reply in his head but had yet to type it. Maybe that was just as well... how did he feel about their relationship ending? He supposed he needed time as well. The notion hit him suddenly: he had always thought things were hunky dory between the two of them, but deep down? Maybe they weren't as...

A voice said, *You are not alone.*

Ryan started and looked around the empty lift, frowning.

'Hello?'

He paused, heart beating heavy in his chest. He went over to the alarm and pressed it.

'Spress Elevators, can we help?'

He had expected the same person, but this sounded male. 'Hi, I called earlier. My Name is Ryan Bednarek.'

A pause. 'Yes, you just called; Rafael, the engineer, is on his way...'

'Okay, but I heard a voice, and thought it was someone on your side, maybe with an update...' That didn't make much sense.

'A voice? What did it say?'

Ryan hesitated. 'Hard to say.'

'No calls have been made to you, Mr Bednarek. Perhaps it was someone walking by the lift or something?'

'Maybe...'

'Also, it's quite usual to hear things when you are in a stressful situation as yourself. We can supply a link to you for elevator trauma?'

'I think I'll be okay.'

'Okay, if you change your mind, let us know. I can, though, assure you we are working on the problem to get you moving asap.'

'Don't I know it,' he said. He looked at the ceiling as the lights flickered again. 'Thanks.'

'Take care and have nice evening.'

He leant against the wall, grimacing.

That was when the lights went out and he was in darkness. Ryan looked around; eyes wide. 'Fuck's sake,' he muttered, stepping forward as he stared into the thick blackness. He didn't like being in small, enclosed places in the darkness (who the fuck did?) and felt his heartbeat quickening and a growing dizziness and disorientation. He stood rigid for what was probably only a few seconds, but seemed to last longer. He looked up, almost willing the lights to come back on. He closed his eyes. 'Fuck, fuck...fuck...' He felt as though he could not breathe so forcibly inhaled and exhaled.

Panic attack, incoming... just what I need...

Finally, there was a flicker and brightness filled the small area. However, he was no longer alone (just as the voice had proclaimed). He took several steps backwards and his back touched the wall. He stared, not believing his eyes. He had been joined by four other people, each standing against the walls of the lift.

Mouth dropping, he looked at each individual.

There was a man in his seventies, wearing a tweed jacket with patches under the elbows; a girl of twelve wearing a gingham dress and sandals; a punk lady with an orange Mohican, probably early twenties and finally a tough looking guy in a black leather jacket, maybe mid-thirties.

‘No,’ Ryan said, deflating. ‘What the fuck are you doing here?’

Tweed man said, ‘Well, that’s hardly a nice way to greet us! Not seen you in years and that’s the welcome we get?’

Gingham girl said, ‘He was always so frightfully rude.’

Punk lady blew bubble gum and it popped.

Leather guy just shook his head, eyeing him coldly.

‘This is not fucking happening!’ said Ryan.

Tweed man said, ‘Now, now, no need for that kind of language, there is a young girl present after all!’

Ryan looked at the child. ‘She’s no girl. Christ, I thought I had seen the last of you four in Boston.’

‘Guessed wrong then, mofo,’ said Leather Guy.

Ryan shook his head and closed his eyes. ‘Not happening, this is fucking well not happening.’ He took in a few deep breaths. To himself: ‘Focus, Ryan... they are not real.’ He breathed in and out. ‘Not real.’ In and out.

He opened his eyes and they were still before him.

‘What the fuck do you want?’

Leather Guy laughed. ‘What do we want, he asks!’ He looked at the others, grinning. Punk Lady blew a bubble gum, it popped.

Tweed Man said, ‘It’s as it must be, you know that. Did you think you could hide forever, playing nurse, dating that woman, having your own place here in New York? You can never escape us, can you.’

Gingham Girl said, ‘You have to give back what you stole.’

‘I didn’t steal anything, you four are the thieves, always were. Ever since junior high.’

‘I should just break your neck and take it now,’ said Leather Guy.

‘Now, now,’ said Tweed Man. ‘We decided no violence, didn’t we. We thought we would give him the chance.’

‘No violence... for now,’ Leather Guy said.

Ryan said, ‘This is not happening. You are not here. They said I may have such... visions or flashbacks later...’

‘We are real,’ said Punk Lady, speaking at last. ‘You know that, deep down, no matter what they kept telling you, or what pills they made you swallow. Remember when they strapped you down and you screamed and convulsed? We were there. I held your hand...’

‘I stroked your brow,’ said Gingham Girl. ‘We made the deal.’

Ryan saw the memory in his mind’s eye, but quickly forced it away. ‘I would have said anything for you spooks to leave me the fuck alone.’

‘We were always there,’ said Tweed Man. ‘From the beginning when Ryan One was in charge... Then you snuffed us out, like...’

‘Birthday candles,’ said Gingham Girl.

Ryan put his head in his hands, but was laughing. ‘All that fucking work in Boston; all it takes is a broken relationship and a stuck lift for everything to fall apart. Ryan One! That was my anger, my rage after the abuse...’

‘We helped you banish Ryan One... he is no more,’ said Gingham Girl. ‘But we did have a deal. You made a promise.’

‘Please, just leave me alone,’ said Ryan. ‘I am thirty-one now and have well outgrown you four. I don’t need you.’

The four just stared at him silently.

‘I created you after what my stepfather did, you were a way to deal with the shit. I am thankful to you all, even though you are all just figments of my imagination; spooks who should be long gone by now. I am over what happened to me as a kid. I don’t need this crap in my life anymore. He was put in prison and he died there. I know, I don’t see Mom much, but that’s just how it is. Sure, she blames me a little bit, God only knows why, but I kind of understand. My relationship with my sister is strained as well. But I am stable, have been stable since Boston. So please... just fuck off, okay?’

He looked around, ignoring the eyes of the four that stared at him nonchalantly.

‘I don’t need you.’

Punk Lady said, ‘You are us and we are you. We are like parts of the same body.’

Tweed Man said, ‘That’s right. You can’t just discard us, like an old...’

‘Birthday card,’ Gingham Girl finished.

Leather Guy did not speak, instead moved swiftly forward and punched him in the face. Ryan felt sudden pain around his jaw area and spat blood.

There was a hubbub of chatter. Tweed Man: ‘No need for that!’

Leather Guy said to Ryan, ‘Did that feel real enough, you son of a bitch?’

Ryan rubbed his aching face. ‘I’m going fucking crazy,’ he muttered. He went over to the control panel and pressed the alarm button.

‘Spress elevators, how can we help you?’ came a familiar woman’s voice.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘Just checking the status of the lift repair that I am stuck in.’

Leather Guy mimicked, ‘Cos I am scared of the ghosties.’

Ryan rubbed his jaw, biting off a reply. ‘My name is Ryan Bednarek.’

‘Hello, darling,’ came the voice. ‘I will just check... the engineer will be over soon. It’s usually a fuse, so it won’t take long.’

‘Okay, thanks,’ he replied.

‘And don’t you be scared of any ghosties, they can’t harm you...’

‘Wanna bet?’ said Leather Man.

‘We can supply a website address for elevator trauma if you like.’

‘I’m good.’

‘Sorry for the inconvenience this is causing you, sir. Is there anything else I can help with tonight?’

Ryan could sense that Leather Guy was coming up with another remark, so leaned closer to the alarm and said, ‘No, thanks – bye.’ He turned around, sad to see his four companions were still there in the elevator.

How had he got rid of them last time? He wondered. But no answers would come; those times were hazy. He supposed it would have been medication and psychotherapy. He didn't like to look back on those days, as they were bad times. They were in the past and they could stay there. The horror and the anger were under control.

'The day has come,' said Tweed Man and Ryan looked at the older man. 'Time to open up and let the next one take your place. As it should be.'

'As we agreed,' said Gingham Girl.

'It's null and void when I agree shit with something that is not real,' said Ryan.

Tweed Man smiled sadly. 'Then you die tonight.'

Ryan shot a glance at Leather Guy, expecting him to attack, but he saw a blur of movement to his side and next minute he felt a stinging sensation across his throat. He turned and saw Tweed Man stood there with a switchblade held before him. It was a mixture of silver and red. Ryan put a hand to his throat and felt something warm and sticky. He looked at his hand; it was covered in blood. He fell backwards, his shoulder touching the wall of the elevator. He slid slightly and saw Tweed Man looming above him. He tried to say something, but all he could manage was a gurgling sound. He felt unable to breath, still not able to believe.

'It's okay,' said Punk Girl. 'We are here.'

Not real, he wanted to say, as he felt blood seep down his chest, as his limbs turned to jelly, as a coldness took over. *Not...*

Real...

Rafael selected a fuse from the tool box and inspected it before slotting it home and then closing the fuse chamber door and screwing it tight.

He then stood back and pressed the descend button and waited for the lift to reach the ground floor. He thought of catching a cool beer before he went home and maybe a few nachos: it had been a long day. He picked up his tablet that was next to the toolbox and brought up the job, the last one of the evening.

The lift appeared to be descending without a problem, so job done. These old elevators had problems with overheating fuses and he was thankful it was no more of an issue. The cool beer was calling to him.

He looked up from his tablet as the doors hissed open. The occupant got out and Rafael smiled a hello.

'Thank you,' they said.

He nodded, slightly puzzled as he was sure the fault had been reported by a male. He checked the tablet. Sure enough, it was a Ryan Bednarek alleged to have made the call to Express Elevators. The engineer shrugged to himself, wondering if the female was going to a fancy-dress party or something as she was wearing one of those old-style European dresses. He could not recall the name of the style.

She gave him a quick look and the expression alarmed him somewhat, for the glance was alien, the look of someone beyond her years. She seemed to collect herself and waved briefly before continuing on.

He watched her enter the lobby area, deciding he was just tired and briefly wondered where her parents were, but decided it was none of his business, and he was eager to clear up his things. He finished with the tablet and picked up his toolbox.

Gingham, that was it. An old-style gingham dress.

They always freaked him out, if he was honest. Especially if worn by a twelve-year-old girl.



Writer of Horror, YA Paranormal and Dystopian

FEAR MAKES ANIMALS OF US ALL BY JOEL GLOVER

The Child of Sorrow was waiting for us when the Master split dreams from the waking to send us across the stars.

My brother was the first of us to die, struck from behind with a knife made of sharpened bone. He bled his life out into the leaves as his murderer fled, cloaked by wicked magics. I watched my brother reaching for me, gasping. But there was no time to mourn. My idiot cousin Obedience chased it, alone, and immediately suffered for his foolishness.

A scream cracked the sky, clouds parting as it tore the air. A tree tumbled past, shattered to kindling by the agony of the world. Ears bleeding, we stumbled through the furrows made by the sorcerous wail. My cousin's flensed corpse was curled in a pit, smeared in shit and gravel. The beast was gone.

We drew together, seeing its vile form in every shadow, bodies trembling as we braced for further occult assault. Fortitude began to weep, belying her name. I dared turn my head a little to look at her, to try and chasten her to quiet, and saw that she had tangled her foot in a loop of Obedience's gut. He trailed behind her, in death as he had been in life.

Patience found a footprint, small, almost infantile, clawed imprints puncturing the dirt at the tip of each toe. She sniffed at the mark, spat.

"Filth."

Her spittle was stained red.

We let her track it, her nose twitching now she had the scent of it. Our Master had chosen well when he took her to his sanctum and heightened her. I pushed my spear out beyond me, swinging it slowly back and forth, hoping that it might catch my foe before my foe caught me. It

was a Reaper of Men, and as I swung I hoped to winnow it. My teeth chattered in my jaw, so I clenched them together, trying my best to form a snarl.

Fear made animals of us all.

Plenitude was the next to die. It burst from beneath a pile of pine needles which looked like it had been laying there for unending turnings of the sun and moon, gradually returning to the soil. A new knife appeared, though the hand that wielded it defied the eye, an antler carved into a splinter which slashed through an outstretched thigh before plunging into a screaming mouth. Bits of bone and skull fell down the back of Plenitude's neck.

Our Master sent us here to hunt the beast.

Now it hunted us.

Branches bent as it ran from us, ready to make a new trap, and now it was our turn to scream. Our anger filled the spaces between the trees, howls for blood and vengeance, affirmations of life, promises of death. Our feet struck the ground like temple drums, fists shook in fear and fury as we ran.

This was its home though. It knew the ways here in a way we never could. We ran, and unseen it slipped away.

Terror warred obedience within me. The Masters' voice was to be heeded, never ignored. The Master had sent us here to succeed. To fail was unthinkable.

We had been a holy thirteen. Three of our pack were dead. How many more would fall before we would succeed?

Its next trap began to answer my unspoken question. We found it sitting on a boulder in a clearing, waiting. It was panting, we were fresh. One socket in its skull was a hollow wound, the eye plucked out.

We spread out, the fingers on two strong hands, grasping, seeking to put an end to this.
To do our Master's bidding. To be free.

Beatitude cast a spear at it with a long, loping hop. It was an easy throw to avoid, but the beast barely managed it. We had brought it to heel. Now it was time to end it.

If it had been human, I would have thought it sorrowful as it slid from its perch, readying itself to die. Willingness gave an exultant war cry, hooting his joy for all to hear.

In response it opened its bleeding mouth and spoke.

“Goodbye.”

Before we could think on that word the bone mace it held struck the ground beneath its feet. A crack opened, the world shuddering as the line which raced towards us split into a hungry mouth which sought to swallow us. I saw Willingness and Patience slip into it, scrabbling for purchase, unable to save themselves. I dove to one side, boulders rushing past me into the new formed chasm. I stabbed with my spear, the point not sinking into flesh but wood, a tree which was forming a bridge across the ravine, held fast by its roots. My spear became a hook from which to hang. Above me I heard a shriek as Chosen toppled, sliding towards her doom. She had been the last of the pack in the fighting line, protected, sheltered by her gifts and status. If she was tumbling in, the rest were fallen too. I lunged, desperate, my fingers sinking into the meat of her thigh, swinging her around into me.

I had dreamed for years of touching her.

Never like this.

She clung to me, weeping, as the land's tremors slowed and quieted.

“You have to climb out.”

It was not for one like me to instruct her, but my fingers were telling me that I could not hold both our weight for long. Her booted foot hit my hip, my jaw, as she pulled herself up me and back into the uncertain safety of the land above.

“Come.” She reached down to me with filthy hands. I took one, pulled cautiously, and scaled the exposed roots.

We had no choice but to go on. Our Master expected it.

The sun fled the crimson sky, clouds of choking dust and smoke blotting out the stars from whence we came. Without Patience’s arcane gifts, tracking the monster to its lair was almost beyond us. I found blood though, two drops, cast in haste across an overturned stone. Then one more, further on. My mind cleared even as my lungs burned. It was seeking shelter, assuming its witchcraft had sent us to our deaths. Beyond the trees was a hill, a perfect place to make a home.

I whispered to Chosen, hoping she would disagree. I did not want to die here. She disappointed me.

If I had been told my last moments would be with her, I would have been glad. As I took what felt like they would be my final steps, leaving behind me the bodies of friends and family, battered and bruised, I found it hard to feel any happiness.

“Our Master will be pleased, Tracker” she reassured me in her sweet voice. My heart beat faster in my chest, and I did not know whether it was discovering she knew my name, or the thought of pleasing Them that made it do so. Then she rested her hand on my shoulder.

The thrill of it helped me discover my courage again.

“Wait here.” More a request than an instruction.

I stalked the edge of the hillock, peering into the spaces beyond.

“I found it.” There was a deeper pool of shadow. I knew it held our end.

“We shall call the Master.”

It was her choice to make.

She laid out the runes, silver and bone, making a ring which could trap all the colour in the world, a pool through which the Master’s thoughts could swim. Placing the last shape in place, she sang her prayer, voice raised in exultation. This was the purpose for which she was Chosen, to make her voice heard in the realms made by gods long gone.

The night sky became darker still as sorceries as old as the stars brought him to us.

“You have done well, my children.”

I wept to hear him speak, to feel the praise.

The Master drew the Blade of Love from its secret sheath.

“I will finish it now.”

The Master strode into the darkness.



Former waiter in a Love Boat themed restaurant, reformed mandarin, and extroverted accountant, Joel lives in the woods of Hertfordshire with two boys, one wife, and not nearly enough coffee. He has published everything from silly poetry to grimdark novels, and would encourage you to try them! Find Joel online here: <https://linktr.ee/joelgloverauthor>

ARTIST INTERVIEW: ELIZABETH BRANDLE

- **What got you interested in art?**

I started to do art at a very young age, and at first it was just scribbles, then I watched Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron. A movie about a horse and eventually an Indian working on gaining their freedom from slavery and supremacy. In the Extra Features of that movie, I found a short video on how to draw the main character Spirit. I was gravitated by the style and calm teaching nature, and wanted so badly to make my own Spirit.



- **Do you prefer digital art or traditional mediums? Or do you use a combination of both?**

I've worked most of my life in traditional mediums. I first learned to draw, shade, color, paint, composition, and eventually realistic art with most mediums and colors. As time went on I saw the benefits of digital when I had the means to use them, and regrettably I haven't learned how to use programs like Krita and Blender efficiently yet. It's very new to me, and requires a different approach to learning. I've been trying to use them for about 2-3 years now, it's not easy at first.

- **Banking off that, how do you compose? First, what's your process? Second, do you go back and forth between programs?**

I compose my ideas on paper first. It's easier for me to get an idea out and to just mess around with said idea. For drawings I can make a digital version or just make a traditional painting like I've done before. So far I haven't actually produced an image for sale using digital yet as I'm still experimenting.

1. I think about what I want to draw/paint, and find references for the object. Many of my references I just keep on the computer at all times instead of printing, so I'm always using my phone or computer to help with the process.

2. Make loose sketches of composition and poses. (my minis and models don't need this step since they already have a pose and composition)

3. Choose what the final image will be and redraw what I sketched (I often don't use tracing paper since the sketch isn't usually a fully realized piece) For models I have a list of references for specific details and color palettes to use for the whole process.

4. Prime and block out all the base colors and I like to recoat many spots in case the color is transparent like oranges, yellows, reds, and whites. I like having a solid base to work on. On models this step can take a really long time especially with a dark primer into a light color on top.

5. Add Shadows and highlights (I often do this either in a loose realistic style or Cel shading aka Anime Style)

6. At this point I can add lineart if I believe it would look good to the final product. This is often used in Cel shaded styles.



7. Sealing the project with a clear coat to protect your work. Admittedly I don't always do this like I should.

In the sense of traditional style, instead of programs I often go back and forth between them as they share many aspects, just one is flat while the other is a 3D object. There are many challenges to overcome when going from a traditional painting on a 2D surface to an object that you can hold and need to perceive light in the 3D aspect.

- **What's your favorite genre to create art in?**

Typically Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Anime, Fiction, or just anything that goes with my interests. Most of the time I like to paint/draw characters from franchises I really like, and sometimes popular too.



- **Side question for our readers: do you like Star Trek or Star Wars better? Or neither?**

I like both, but I do have a preference for Star Trek because Star Wars I was force fed into, and Star Trek I found on my own and left alone to watch on my own time. Still can't beat Jurassic Park for me though.

- **Who is your favorite villain in movies, TV shows, or books?**

My favorite ones are the ones that make sense and have a reason and motivation to do what they did, even if it wasn't obvious at first. It gives something for the hero to be challenged within their beliefs, and knowing many times a villain's story is written on grief and how that can impact a person's personality and choices.

If I had to choose one, probably Tigerstar from the Warriors series. He was ruthless and exact with what he did in the name of power and revenge because he was denied the very thing he dedicated his entire life towards was power, even if misguided with greed and jealousy. His dedication to being the most powerful leader is also what led to his ultimate downfall, and helped the hero become the best leader his clan needed at the time, and the hero was an outsider. Tigerstar was a creature of hatred as

well and depicts how greed, hatred, jealousy, and revenge often overcame the mortal realm of his body, but that left him alone in the end even well after death. No allies, or friends. A cautionary tale for those who feel power by itself grants them everything in life, when it really leaves nothing once it's achieved.

- **Do you read? What genre? And do you have a certain author you like?**

I don't read as often anymore, but when I did my favorite series was Warriors by Erin Hunter. I also really enjoyed reading books about dragons, and often other mythical creatures and abilities. I've always loved fantasy/fiction even if it was rooted in the real world sometimes. It allowed me to imagine a world outside of my current reality and feel a connection in understanding the current world just a little better. I know many books I've read are considered for teens, and not adults, but I enjoyed the colorful nature those books brought that weren't Twilight. (I've never read Twilight just not my kind of books, and of course was super popular when I was in school at the time. So many people tried to force me to read it by their glowing reviews, nope I like things people don't always know is there or currently popular)

- **Do things like books and movies influence what you decide to create?**

Definitely so because I like to create basically fanart, it lets me give my appreciation to the existence of the character and how they helped me in my life with their stories.

- **I see you have some video game-inspired art, what's your favorite genre of video game?**

I love theme park building games. My favorite is Jurassic World and before that was Jurassic Park Operation Genesis. I've played many platformers, and my most recent favorite, as cringe as it sounds,

is Elden Ring because for me it's a good challenge on patience. I know it's easier than the other Dark Souls games, but I appreciate the ability to explore places when I become stuck and frustrated at bosses. Allows me to remember that the main path isn't the only one I can travel when life gets hard or I'm stuck at an important part of my life. Travel around and explore the world to gain experience for the main task ahead.



- **Do you do commissions?**

Absolutely yes. I'm available for pretty much almost anything within my current abilities. I can print almost anything someone has sculpted, and I have merchant licenses for Bulkamancer and Printed Obsession models available for commission too.

- **When creating for yourself, does it relax you?**

Yes and no. When I can pull it off it gives me great satisfaction/relaxation, but when I keep hitting roadblocks to achieve the desired result it just furthers my frustration.

- **Is art your full-time job?**

Currently yes, admittedly sometimes a little slow, but I like to have a certain amount of perfectionism that needs itching for me to be happy with most projects' outcomes.

- **Lastly, is there anything you'd like us to know about you? And please offer a piece of advice for artists in your field.**



I'm mostly self-taught so everything I've ever learned is in books, and online. Watching a large variety of artists on youtube and watching their process and stories on the hobby. It's ok to copy other people's work to practice, just be mindful when sharing your copied work to make sure to credit the original's work as best you can. There is usually someone out there who will know the artist when you can't find them. In between copying others definitely pursue more original ideas and always use references; it helps keep the artwork more cohesive in the end.

As my main advice, take a break sometimes when things become overwhelming or too frustrating to look at. Burnout exists in many

ways, shapes, and forms. It's ok to step away and rest, and reevaluate the situation with a rested mind and better light.

- **Where can our readers find you online?**

Instagram/Threads - jaybirddragonheart

Facebook - jaybirddragonheart

Tiktok - JaybirdDragon aka @jaybirddragonheart

Website - jaybirddragon.square.site

THE POEMS OF SIMON MACCULLOCH

KELPIE

Orangedale Brook twists through cranny and nook
Where the water communes with the weeds
In a stillness too dense to permit any sense
Of a course to the sea that it feeds.

In the rubbish and junk and malodorous gunk
That infests these pestiferous puddles
There's a hump or a mound, partly dry, partly drowned,
And the flies are a-buzz where it huddles.

This kelpie's a clog in the stench and the fog
But it doesn't lead travellers astray;
It lodges instead like a doubt in your head
And begins to persuade you to stay.

It has stories to tell of a cold sticky hell
Other demons have long since forsaken;
Its pale fungal gleams are the spores of slow dreams
Dreamed by dreamers who never awaken.

Now the love that you feel as your memories congeal
Is a nauseous slippage inside you
As your consciousness bleeds to the sea that it feeds
Where a moon waxes fat to betide you.

And you follow its stare to the star-middens where,
In the nebulae's vast oily sweeps,
There's a hump or a mound, and the comets swarm round,
All a-buzz for the secrets it keeps.

Now wherever you go in your gut you will know
That the kelpie is waiting to meet you,
And the cranny's next crook brings you back to the nook
Where its ugly black truth will complete you.

THE APOTHECARY

...And here I have a virus that can kill the stars.
Or this, a potion fatal to the sense of wrong;
The ones who take it say it makes them clean and strong -

It's proving very popular in local bars.

But you, I see, require the best I keep in store,
A drug that makes the others seem like childhood sweets,
The ultimate in arcane art's forbidden treats:
The chemical that makes you think there's something more.

So every certain knowledge has its tinge of doubt,
And every satisfaction hints of fresh desire;
Your flesh may take the sustenance its cells require
And tingle yet for all that it has gone without.

No consummation great enough to end the plight
Of one who's been metabolised to take in stride
The door of death, and open it, and peer inside,
To say *That's it*; but no, of course it isn't quite.

You'll dream a god, disdain it, dream a trinity,
A pantheon, an all that might as well be none,
For every time you try to make the count of one
The number redivides into infinity.

The value, as I trust that you will come to feel,
Of looking thus askance at life's totality
Is simply to assert an unreality;
And that alone, the thing that makes you truly real.

Oh, one more thing I think perhaps you ought to know
Before you make a purchase that you can't take back:
This all-creating, all-destroying sense of lack -
I gave it to the race called human long ago.

THE UNMASKING

Her hands are creeping towards his mask again;
Her fingers quiver, brush the silken ties.
That secret smile, that swivel of the eyes -
Which one of them is sound and which insane?
His fingers flex and dance upon the keys,
Like tumbling clowns condemned to entertain
With twist of torso, painted grin of pain.
You want to know the worst; we aim to please.

And then it's off, the skull a naked scream;
The audience cowers, huddled on the floor,
As beauty takes the measure of the beast,

And contemplates the mirror of her dream,
Then drops her gaze and whispers *Show me more*.
Enough is never quite as good as feast.

Simon MacCulloch lives in London and has published poetry in a variety of online and print venues.

THE SILVER TIPPED DEMON BY MATTHEW BATTISTONE

Arthur placed a ladder next to the tree trunk and opened it up. Beside him, his wife Alice gently set down their one year old daughter Anna. She readjusted the toddlers knitted cap as the little girl giggled.

“Alright Tex,” Alice said, turning to their large kangal. “Keep Anna company.”

The dog moved closer to the toddler, appearing like a giant towering over her. Anna leaned out and began petting him, which made her happy. Arthur and Alice watched for a few seconds, smiles on their faces before Arthur climbed the ladder.

“Ready hon? These things ain’t gonna pick themselves.”

He reached up and plucked the first golden apple from its branch, examined it for a moment then handed it down to Alice who placed it in a bucket. They were ecstatic that their small Washington apple farm was once again yielding its crops. The previous three years had yielded little in profit due to bitter frosts. But this year, finally, the weather was just warm enough for things to grow again.

They’d spent the day picking what they could from the trees until sunset, which came relatively quickly, taking breaks after every basket full to warm up Anna by the fireplace inside their small log cabin. By the end of the day, Alice took Anna inside to prepare dinner while Arthur, with Tex by his side, grabbed a pail and carrot, then headed towards the barn.

Opening the doors, to his left was their horse, Hermes, and to his right, was their cow, Bess. The two animals each had their own half of the barn, and got along surprisingly well. Arthur fed Hermes his carrot as he stroked his mane before going to Bess to milk her. Once finished, he told the two goodnight and locked the barn.

Setting the heavy pail down on the front porch, he let out a long breath as he wiped his brow. At that moment, Tex’s ears perked up and he began to growl. Following where the dog was looking, Arthur heard a rustling sound coming from somewhere close to the woods near their apple trees.

He walked through the sets of trees until he came to one about twenty feet from the woods. By now, it was nearly dark, and all he saw was a massive shape that bolted off into the woods when Tex let out a bark. After a moment, Arthur went to where the shape was and found half eaten apples at the base of the tree and a small trail of messy tracks that led off into the woods. As he examined the scene, he was broken from his trance when Alice called for him from the porch for dinner.

“Come on buddy.” He told Tex as he started back to the house.

“Is everything ok hon?” She asked when he got back.

He turned back towards the trees and began to explain before he decided against it and turned back to his wife with a smile.

“It’s nothing. I just thought I saw something, but it’s nothing to worry about.” He answered with a wave of his hand as he picked up the milk pail. “Let’s just have dinner.”

The following morning at sunrise, the family repeated yesterday’s routine of apple picking until sunset. Arthur was collecting eggs from the chicken coup when, like the day before, Tex turned back towards the trees and growled. He stood up, wondering if it was the same thing that had run off the day before. Then, down by the trail they traveled to get into town, he finally saw it, and it was a sight that made his jaw drop.

On his property was a massive grizzly bear. It stood on its hind legs, ramming its body into one of his trees, shaking the leaves and making apples fall to the ground. When it came back down to eat the fallen apples, the few remaining rays of sunset revealed that the fur along its back transitioned from a dark brown, to a misty silver.

Tex took a territorial step forward but Arthur stuck his hand out to stop him. Tex was a big dog. He'd managed to kill a coyote once that was trying to get their chickens, and even had the faded scars to prove it, but this was different. While he knew bears were big, he'd never seen one in person. From the ground to their lowest branch, his trees were around ten feet off the ground. On its legs, the bear was just able to swat at those lowest hanging branches.

He couldn't let this beast of an animal keep coming back to his land for a free meal, not with his wife, kid and all their animals around. It needed to be scared away. He took Tex inside and made his way upstairs to their bedroom.

"Everything ok Arthur?" Alice asked as she sat with a sleeping Anna in a rocking chair. "Your face is so pale."

"Yeah, uh, just give me a minute." He said as he reached under their bed and pulled out his rifle case.

"Arthur? What's going on?" Alice said, clutching Anna tighter, her eyes going wide.

"Just give me a minute." He answered as he hurried out the room and down the stairs.

Getting back to his position at the coup, he was relieved that the bear was still gouging itself on apples and hadn't left. He lined up a shot, aiming for the trunk of the tree it was next to. When he thought he had the shot, he fired. He lowered the gun and watched the bullet miss its mark. Instead of hitting the tree, it nicked the bear's upper back.

It roared in shock when the bullet hit. Arthur cringed when he saw a small trail of blood begin to trickle down its fur. Then, the bear spotted him. It glared at him for a long moment, let out a small growl, then calmly stalked back into the woods, seemingly unaffected from the bullet.

A shiver ran down his spine. That thing was looking right at him before it left. It knew he was the one who hurt it. Arthur shook it off, started back inside, and prayed that it didn't come back.

It had taken a lot of convincing and reassuring for Alice to believe that all was well, but eventually, she relented and after a long discussion, they went to bed. That was until they were woken up in the dead of night by a cacophony of noises. Anna was crying in her crib, Tex was barking and growling, and Hermes could be heard kicking against the barn wall and neighing in distress. But the worst was a deep, guttural, gurgling scream bellowing from the barn as well.

Arthur leapt to his feet, grabbed his rifle and a lantern, then sprinted through the house with Tex hot on his heels. When he got outside, in the dim light he spotted a pool of blood flowing out of the now open barn doors. The scream had since died out, only to be replaced with a slurping crunch. He only got a few steps in the barn before he stopped dead in his tracks.

Holding his lantern out, it illuminated a hulking brown and silver shape, drenched in blood. It was the bear. In front of it layed the hollowed, still twitching corpse of Bess. Behind them, Hermes continued to stomp and kick the wall in distress. Sensing the new presence, the bear's head perked up and turned to face them.

Between its bloodied fangs was Bess' leg. It chomped down hard, shattering the bone in a series of sickening rapid fire pops. Its eyes glowed bright in the light like malevolent orbs. When it was done chewing, its snout contorted in a growl and the mass took a slow step forward.

Stunned, Arthur quickly dropped the lantern and raised his rifle to fire but before he could, Tex bolted forward and pounced on the beast's back. He clamped his jaws down hard on the scruff of its neck and began tugging. The bear reared up on its legs with a roar and shook its body, desperate to throw the dog off. Arthur stood in awe of its size as he raised his gun again but the creature came back down and started swatting at its back. He wasn't going to fire in the commotion and take the risk of hitting Tex by mistake.

Then, with one final violent shake, Tex was thrown from its back and hit the back wall, falling behind a gate where Arthur couldn't see him. Seeing his chance, he fired a shot that made its mark on the animal's back near where the first shot was fired. The creature faced him again and began barreling towards him. Moving fast, Arthur made a running leap out of the way and fell behind Bess' corpse.

Instead of going after him, the beast ran from the barn and out into the night. After a few moments, Arthur got up and started for where Tex was flung.

"Tex!" He yelled as he flung the gate door open, only to be met with the sight of his unmoving dog.

He quickly dropped down and picked up the kangals head and shook it.

"Tex! Buddy! Wake up!"

Next to the dog, Arthur spotted a patch of silver fur. Lifting it up revealed bloody skin beneath it. Tex had been able to hurt the brute after all.

"Oh, good boy." He said as he bent down over his friend, tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

He stayed like that for what felt like an eternity before, beneath him, Tex suddenly sprang back to life, ready to jump back into the fight. Laughing happily as he wiped the tears away, Arthur managed to calm the dog down just as Alice ran in.

"Oh my God!" She screamed at the sight of Bess. "What the hell happened!?"

"Where's Anna?" Arthur demanded, ignoring her question.

"She's in her crib, she's fine. Now tell me what happened!" She ordered again.

After explaining, Alice had had enough.

"We're leaving! Right now!" She ordered. "That demon eating our apples is one thing, but going after Bess?! What if it went for Hermes or Tex, or, what about Anna! Saddle up Hermes, we're leaving!"

She made a move for the saddle, but Arthur placed his hands on her shoulders.

"You're not wrong, but we can't leave until that bear is dead."

"Are you insane!?" She demanded. "It's been shot twice and it did nothing!"

"Again, you're right, but that thing has been watching us for days and there is only one road out of here. If we leave now, we'd only be giving it a free meal. The town is miles away. No one's around to help us if it were to attack. Tomorrow, I promise you, that thing dies."

She wanted to protest, but knew he was right. She nodded slowly and turned to comfort the animals. Arthur went to Bess and saw her now lifeless eyes were still wide with shock and pain. He knelt down and gently lowered her eyelids.

The following day, no work was done as Arthur and Alice dug Bess' grave while Tex watched Anna and licked his wounds. After taking some time to grieve, Arthur saddled Hermes and kept his gun by his side all day, ready for a quick exit. When night fell, they were sitting around the fireplace when, like clockwork, the demon sauntered out from the woods.

"Alice, it's back..." He hissed as he watched from the window.

"What do we do?" She asked, ready to do whatever was needed.

“Right now, stay close to Anna.” He answered as he crept slowly out the side door.

The bear was by the chicken coup, ready for another feast. Arthur saw its fur was still stained with Bess’ blood and the scalped flesh on its neck was still raw. When it pawed at the coup’s door, Arthur raised his rifle and took aim.

“Eat this you son of a bitch.”

He pulled the trigger and the shot hit its back left thigh. It jumped, roared in frustration and turned to him. Instantly, it began charging straight at him. He fired again, clipping its left ear, but it continued to charge. Realizing it wasn’t stopping, he ran back inside and slammed the door.

“Get to the barn! Now!” He ordered just as the beast collided with the wall of the house, shaking it violently.

Alice scrambled to her feet and Anna began to cry as they raced out the front. They threw the barn doors open and she quickly unfastened Hermes.

“Let’s go!” She said, waiting for him to get on.

Arthur looked back at the house and saw smoke begin to pour out of the open front door.

“It must’ve knocked a log out of the fireplace when it hit the house...” He uttered, realizing everything was literally going up in flames.

“All the more reason we need to leave!”

He turned to face her and smiled softly, knowing what he had to do.

“No. You’re leaving. I’m staying.” He stated, fastening the rifle to Hermes’ side.

“Have you lost your damned mind!” She yelled.

“Look, that thing will easily chase us down. I need to stay so I can stall it and buy you all some time to run.”

She went to protest but he stopped her, enveloping her and Anna in a tight hug.

“It’s the only way. You need to protect Anna.” He said as he pulled back.

Tears streamed down her face she leaned back in and kissed him one last time before climbing up the saddle. Arthur rubbed the side of Hermes’ face then knelt down to Tex.

“I guess this is goodbye boy. You’re the best dog there is. You need to keep them safe.” He said as he kissed his head.

“I love you.” Alice told him, her voice shaky as she snapped the reins.

“I love you too.” He said as Hermes raced forward, Tex next to them.

As soon as they passed the house, the bear reappeared, racing after its new target. Arthur grabbed a hatchet and lantern, then ran out and heaved the lantern right in front of the bear’s path. The lantern hit the ground, shattered and burst into a small fire right on the bear’s face. It roared in pain as it dragged its face in the dirt, desperate to put the fire out.

“Keep going!” Arthur screamed as his family started down the dirt trail into the woods. “And don’t stop until you get into town!”

Behind him, his home was now engulfed in flames. But he didn’t have time to mourn as the beast suddenly bellowed above the crackling flames that now lit up the night sky. It put out the fire on its face, leaving the right side of its head burned, and right eye blinded. In addition to its original injuries, now it truly looked like a demon.

“Come on, bastard!” He screamed, hatchet at the ready. “Come and get me!”

Accepting his challenge, the bear charged. Arthur wanted to wait until the last second before attempting to dive out of the way. Only, he waited a second too long. The bear lowered its head and as Arthur went to jump, it rammed into him, sending him flying back.

He hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him, the hatchet lost from his grip. Knowing he didn't have time to rest, he rolled and quickly reached for his weapon. No sooner than his fingers wrapped around the hatchet's handle, an unbearable pain clamped down on his left leg. He screamed in agony as the bear's fangs pierced through his flesh down to the bone.

Once its grip was secure, the creature flung him across the yard. This time, he managed to hold onto the hatchet when he hit the ground. He tried to get to his feet and run, but collapsed when he put weight down on his left side. Sitting up, he saw that where his left foot once was, only a bleeding stump remained.

Knowing its prey was too crippled to run, the bear took its time to methodically walk over to him. Arthur gripped the hatchet tighter. It was as if this bear was getting enjoyment out of tormenting him and dragging his death on as long as possible. When the demon was finally face to face with him, it licked its dripping fangs as it opened its mouth, reaching out for the killing blow. Then, as quick as he could, with everything he had left in him, Arthur swung the hatchet up, and brought it down right between the monster's eyes.

There was no grand primal roar of defeat. When the hatchet pierced through its skull, the demon collapsed on top of him, dead. Arthur again yelled out as the full weight of the animal came crashing down on him, pinning him in place. He tried to free himself, but quickly realized it was no use. He didn't bother to call for help either, he knew he was alone.

Through the pain, he chuckled softly to himself. Maybe this was the bear's last spiteful way of tormenting him, literally dying on top of him and making sure that if it was going to die, it was going to take Arthur with it. Normally, he'd think that would be absurd for a wild animal to think like that, but in this case, he was willing to make an exception.

He turned and watched the fire rage. In the end, it didn't matter what happened to him or his home, because he had won. The monster was dead, and his family was safe. To him, that was all that mattered. All he had to do now was close his eyes and rest.

Matthew Battistone has always had a love for tales of horror. When he found his passion for writing, what spoke to him most was scary stories. He lives in Pittsburgh, PA with his family.

You can find my book for purchase at:

<https://bookstore.dorrancepublishing.com/products/horrors-of-the-night>

IF I HAD STAYED BY MICHAEL KLONARAKIS

He knelt at the bedside of his ailing wife, grasping her hand with the intention and vigor required to keep her on this earth. Her eyes were sunken, lips parched and she breathed paradoxically. His career as a physician was intimately intertwined with life and death, but never had he felt so helpless. A crushing chest pain insidiously developed as he began to imagine a life without the one person he could never live without. He cried often for her, but this was different. This felt final.

"I think about us at the Magnolia," she whispered faintly. "And only wish we had more time together. Our spot next to the window. I want that moment forever."

That stung. The Magnolia was a small café where they had met on their first date. With their busy lives, they had promised one another to set aside each lunch hour within that haven of reprieve to cut out the rest of the world and focus on one another. Often, he had fallen short on that promise. It turns out that 24-hour call with sick patients did not respect personal boundaries or relationships.

"I'm sorry. I left those dates early more times than not. If I had stayed, I would have discovered more about you that I'll never know."

"It's okay," she gripped his hand tightly. "We both know you should have stuck with Genetics."

"It was my passion," he wiped the tears from his face. "But nothing that could have kept a roof over our heads."

She attempted to scoff, but instead broke into a dry cough and became short of breath.

"I need you to promise me to finish your genetics PhD. I want you to be happy. I love you so much." She trailed off as her breathing became shallower, and abruptly, she drew her last breath. Her sunken eyes stared lifelessly at the wall behind. He wanted to call for a nurse, but only a croak developed in the back of his throat, building to an insufferable level before it burst. He cried like he had never before.

"I love you, too."

#

Conversation, laughter, and the sound of an industrial milk frother met the ears of those in the Magnolia. The smell of espresso engulfed the enclosed space and brought peace to the soul. In a clean, well-lit place next to the window, he stared at the world beyond this haven.

His thoughts were interrupted by a young waiter placing two macchiatos on the table.

"This one's on the house, Doc."

"Thanks, Jonathan. I appreciate it."

He sipped his coffee and deeply exhaled before he uncapped his pen and began to write:

September 16, 2093

My Love,

It's been five years since you left, and I miss you every moment of the day. I'm at the Magnolia again, marking the fifth occasion that I enjoy two macchiatos in honour of you.

My life has been busy, as always. As you already know, I completed my Genetics PhD last fall and my lab is all I've ever dreamed. I re-negotiated a cutback in clinical hours with the hospital board to dedicate most of my week to research. I know what you're thinking: less

call and more free time! That hasn't been the case. You know how obsessive I can get, and my attention has turned to bench science with long nights of frontier discovery. To be honest, I need to be fully occupied, otherwise I ruminate on how lonely life has been without you here.

I wanted to use this entry to discuss tremendous news with my lab. I'm shaking as I write this, but I think we have broken real ground in the realm of oncology. Like we talked about last time, I've been focusing on telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) gene mutations in cancer cell growth. My compound, Tertizumab, has selectively halted malignant cell growth in our mouse models. I truly believe this is a cure. I realize this won't bring us back together, but it may prevent other people from experiencing this unbearable pain.

Unfortunately, the red tape to advance our therapy to human trials is astronomical. The longer we wait, the more people die from this horrible disease. I just don't have that time.

Victor Everett seems to think he can help me. Yes, that Victor Everett of Everett Robotics. The man who created neural-linked cyber limbs for amputated war veterans. The pioneer of advanced artificial intelligence and android beings. One of the few multi-billionaires still left. He was my patient last spring after he developed a horrible infection and septic shock. He was forever grateful for my care, and we have kept in touch since that time.

I'm not sure how he can help move this process forward, but I plan to meet him tonight to find out. I should get going now, our coffees are getting cold.

I love you and miss you dearly. Until next time

#

"Come in, Doctor." Victor Everett was a middle-aged man, dressed in grey slim-fit wool trousers pulled up by suspenders with a striped collared long sleeve rolled to the mid forearm. He wore rounded spectacles and sported a burly mustache.

"Thank you, Mr. Everett."

"I've told you before, Victor is more than fine. Leave your coat with Elijah." He gestured towards the young boy, who grabbed his overcoat and scurried away quickly into the depths of the mansion. The child was like any other besides his subtly stiff gross motor movements as he ran away. Everett sensed his unease.

"They're all my children, and none will harm you."

He nodded. His attention was quickly diverted to a monitor that hung above the fireplace. On it was a continuous ECG monitor and a large biologic dataset.

"I knew you would be interested in that," Everett smiled brightly and directed his gaze towards his wrist. "Microfluidic device. Uses acoustic sensors to collect serum data off my radial artery every six hours. After last year, I thought a more strict policing of homeostasis was important. Too much at stake to end up on a ventilator again."

"Amazing," he approached Everett's device with awe. "This could revolutionize outpatient medicine. Have you considered—"

"I've considered everything," he interjected, now in a rush. "But more pressing projects are in the forefront. That's why I've asked you here. Follow me."

He led them to a staircase that illuminated as they walked down. At the bottom, they were met with rows of blacktop tables and figures working feverishly behind them. Most bore faces of their human counterparts, while others functioned fleshless, their skeletal wiring exposed unabashedly.

"We're dangerously close to losing the war overseas," Everett stated.

Over the last several months it had become widely publicized that the opponent had gained access to several of Everett Robotics' patented artificial intelligence programs. Early android models were discretely planting improvised explosive devices that have decimated the allied forces. It had become impossible to predict where they were located. Beyond the concern for mass casualties, it was unclear who provided the leak in the first place.

"They're blaming me," Everett slumped over a blacktop table. "And I carry that guilt daily. It's partly the motivation behind my involvement in cyber limbs. That's not enough for them. They wanted my children, and when I refused to use them for warfare, they threatened to nationalize my company. Do you know how hard I worked to build this?"

He stood silently. The androids behind them sensed Everett's distress and immediately stopped their tasks to focus on their creator.

"I offered them another solution. Something I have been working on for decades for another purpose." He gestured towards his android, who brought forth a small cubic structure neatly mounted on a circular electrode. "It's called a loop recorder. My life's work isn't in robotics, Doctor. It's in quantum."

"I'm not following you."

"I've spent decades studying Gödel's metric on closed timelike curves: The principle that any material in spacetime can loop to the past and return to its starting point. I would never have discovered an applied application had it not been for them. Their intelligence now far exceeds my own."

"You mean—" he froze.

"Yes," Everett's eyes brightened. "You pick the time coordinate and the loop recorder does the rest. That's why I need you."

"My wife, Tertizumab..."

"Exactly! You do not need the FDA to prove your drug works. Use it to save your wife. If we can do this, I have concrete data to bring to the military board. They will be able to loop their Explosive Ordinance Disposal Unit to specific time coordinates and deactivate bomb threats before they happen."

He clutched at his breast pocket, feeling the bottle of immunotherapy that he carried around daily as an obsessive reminder of his wife's passing.

"I'm glad you have it," Everett turned away from him. "Delphi, please hook him up."

"Now?!"

The android peeled the electrode sticker from the base and nimbly placed the loop recorder on his chest, just under the left clavicle.

"For your own safety, there are a few things you must know," Everett began. "You must never break the loop. Keep it on your person, never remove it. Once you've chosen a time coordinate, you have 30 minutes before it loops you to the present. Do not waste a moment."

"And what if I accidentally break the loop?"

"Do not break the loop," Everett emphasized. "We can only theorize the repercussions. Delphi?"

"Well, Father," it postulated momentarily. "I predict the Doctor may be trapped in a strange loop: An eternally repeating 30-minute circuit without possibility of escape."

"A terrible existence. Now where are we sending you?"

"Um," he thought for a moment. "November 3rd, 2085. A day before her diagnosis."

Both Everett and Delphi nodded.

"See you in a moment, doc."

#

Jonathan placed two macchiatos in front of him. The steam fogged his glasses, providing a moment of sensory reprieve to collect himself. As he rapidly cleaned his lenses, foot traffic began to grow rapidly around the coffee bar.

The bell perched above the doorframe jingled as she entered through it, walking with purpose. She smiled brightly, sat across from him, and reached for her cup with a smooth and well-practiced fluidity.

“Guess what—”

“My god.” His throat tightened.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Her bright and carefree aura had changed to one of cautious concern.

“You have no idea.” He wanted so bad to hold and embrace her in that moment for eternity, but Everett’s warnings rang clear: Waste no time. Instead, he tremulously reached for his breast pocket and palmed a pill, extending his arm towards her.

“What in the world is this? Have you been sneaking your patient’s prescriptions?”

“Of course not. Please, just take it. You must trust me.” It was a quiet plead, but the connotations of desperation seeped through every word like a faulty faucet. She knew him well enough to know this was not a joke.

“You’re insane. I’m not taking that.”

“Do it, please! I don’t have any more time!” he never raised his voice at her. The frantic desperation was now palpably apparent, hitting her like an Enhanced Fujita 5.

“Please just explain to me what’s going on?”

“I can’t,” he placed the pill in her palm and tightly closed her hand around it. “Take it. I’ll explain when I see you next.”

The last thing he remembered was her contorted, distressed facial expression as she reluctantly washed the pill down with her steaming hot drink.

#

Delphi caught him as he quickly flashed back to the present. He stumbled momentarily as he frantically shoved the android away and reached for his phone. He dialed his wife and waited. The time between each ring felt enormous. No answer. He attempted twice more, reaching voicemail each time as he had over the course of five years. Reaching that voicemail had once been a short moment of joy in a day filled with darkness. Now, it caused severe nausea and panic.

Everett grabbed the phone, gently placed it on the table and shook his head. The doctor’s body became flaccid as he collapsed to his knees in disarray.

“How? I know it works. I’ve seen it work. All the models are cured.”

“Novikov’s self-consistency principle does hold true after all. I knew it.”

“Huh?”

“How can you go back in time to save your wife with a medication that would not have existed in the first place if she didn’t die of cancer? Your whole motivation to pursue this stemmed from her passing.”

He sat, stunned. “You knew this was possible?”

“I knew it was highly probable, just needed confirmation. You’ve really provided valuable data here! Wouldn’t you say, Delph?”

“Certainly, Father. Now that we know Novikov was on to something, we can start creating an algorithm incorporating the Echeverria Resolution. It won’t be long now before we can actually change the past to influence our present.”

“You used me...”

“Brighten up,” Everett clutched at the doctor’s breast pocket. “It’s cute but won’t change the world. Don’t worry, that’s what I’m here for.”

I didn’t spend a moment listening to her. The thought weighed heavily on his chest. Since she died, all I wanted was to speak with her again. I didn’t ask her one question. Always prioritizing other things.

He laughed maniacally. Before anyone could react quick enough, he reached for the loop recorder on his chest and dissipated into thin air.

#

That same aroma filled his nostrils. Conversation and laughter rode the acoustic waves to his tympanum. Jonathan again passed by, dropping two hot macchiatos beside him. They nodded silently to one another as steam fogged his spectacles. This time, he sat silently and took a calming breath in, waiting for the condensation to disappear spontaneously. As his vision cleared, he noticed the crowd growing at the coffee bar. He heard the bell ring above the doorframe and before turning toward the door, grasped at his chest just under the left clavicle. He pulled the electrode and stared amusedly at it for a long moment. He chuckled, tossed it into his steaming beverage, and saw the light flicker weakly before drawing its last breath.

Then he turned to meet the most beautiful woman he had ever known. She smiled at him, sat down and reached for her macchiato with the carefree elegance she always embodied.

“Guess what happened today at work?”

“Tell me.”

END



Michael Klonarakis was born and raised in Northern British Columbia, Canada. He is currently completing a Fellowship in General Internal Medicine in Calgary, Alberta. He spends his free time with his partner, Emily, and enjoys playing tennis and loyally supporting Manchester United. *If I Had Stayed* is his first published work of fiction. Michael can be found on X.

THE POEMS OF PETER FRIEDRICHSEN

CORN COB CARNIVAL

White spiked the rough red
bricks that once held sweat
and sodium and laughter. Dread had since
bled their pores, fiends flickering into
damp light and grime.

In search of joy, I filled their lungs
with shallow divinity. Clouded eyes
could not dim the shining
sins pressing me from all
sides. My side
was pure: a spotted dog, a captain,
a plastic-clad knight
bearing an axe he could not name.

Consolation was pity in a hand-sewn
costume. Piece by piece, it filled
my grinning head with flavors
favored by the demons
swirling smoke-like
beneath crude masks.

They laughed with the voices
of childhood friends as my loves
dripped from my nose,
slipped from my skin
to incubate on vile floors, blind
idiot offspring mewling
for warmth.

I left them
to the trampling of
little feet.

Filling my arms with rimed strangers,
I sucked sweetness from their lips
to swell my cesspit self. Flesh floated
down tar-black rivers in clumps,
curds that I gathered and slathered where
I was not lacking.

Before the liar's painted grins sank
into gaping gutters, I rolled
myself in nicotine light and nursed my own
growing litter of fiends.

ARS PHLEGMA

The floor is not lava.
It is bile and blood but
still blisters the eyes.

I hear it
lap and suck at the feet
of the couch keeping me afloat.

The VCR clock counts
pneumonic moments,
stones in my corpse-light crown.

Beneath blankets, I shiver
to see fevered truths
drip from the drooling dark.

Their trails dry cracked and cold,
webbing my waxen face with
the rotten resin of stars.

Practiced lovers, they tease
and tickle until my lips
part for breath. They taste

of broth and bitter herbs
as they worm down my
throat, drawn by the pale

Friedrichsen - "Ars Phlegma"
green pyre twisting lean
fingers around my stomach.
Each feeds itself

to the conflagration.
Each another note in
a hymn of stacked sixes

the tumid tongues cannot

sing. Molten scales sear
my sticky lungs with fractal

brands as the venomous
things grow along my spine.
At its end, a bulbous bronze

fruit flushes white within
their embrace. Seeds twitch
and swell and burst into

awakening. Embryo screams
wander lost through twisted
organ pipes, congealing into

thick chords before flying
from my tongue. I usher
them toward the pale

plastic lifeboat bobbing
beside me, taking special

Friedrichsen - "Ars Phlegma"
note of each one's luster.

Those lacking I hold
beneath the frothy humors
until they stop singing.

Ocher hues work the oars
for the happy few
true to their mossy dreams.

No rheumy eyes return
my gaze as they shove off
into the simmering storm.

The rhythm of their retreat
drowns in the delirious
humming of my eardrums.

A swallow of lukewarm
soda scrapes my throat
clean of any remains.

Still I drift, longing to

sink before they return or
I find the shore they seek.

Peter Friedrichsen lives and works, enjoying neither.



THE STORY AND POEM OF JASIAH WITKOFSKY

BIRTH PANG

San Marino, perched upon Monte Titano near the Adriatic Sea, is the world's most ancient constitutional republic about the globe. Landlocked atop the Apennine Mountains which afforded some protection – an island without an ocean so to speak. The security and secrecy of the region was double whilst one is sequestered inside a nunnery oathbound to keep silent regarding the interior workings of the stone-lined holy grounds.

Within the hallowed halls of the monastery, a swollen woman lies atop a quilted bed moaning a dull yet prolonged agony preparing for the precious child to be shed unto the world. Yet the immediacy of the current predicament drove all such prognostications, hopes, and regrets from cognition. The terrible discomforts of the birthing are intense and chronic for the overripe female striving to free herself from the being seeking to release itself of the confines of the restraining womb.

The sweat beading upon the woman's brow grows to rivulets of saline funnels streaming across her exposed flesh – the skin covered by a simple skirt clings tenaciously sheathing her sleek figure like slick wax. A growing discomfort from the inside-out creates a weariness beyond any pull she had previously been able to drag herself from under. The implosive pressure from within the core of her being reaches a breaking point with an expulsion from both poles of her petite body, roaring out tremoring pain as her water bursts loose from her lower extremities.

A handful of holy workers act as wetnurses for the troubling birthing process racking the tortured woman squirming like a bed of enraged serpents upon the crumpled and dampening sheets. Many of the young nuns in the role of midwives stand stricken, paralyzed with indecision over the options of restraining the mother-to-be or taking the risk of sedating the thrashing female with the numerous concoctions housed within the walls of the sanctimonious. Too timid to apply force upon the writhing foreigner, far stronger than her diminutive size portrays, the order of the cloth attempts to soothe the struggling maiden with strips of soaked linen and prayers to the good Mother Virgin and the Lord Above.

The head matron – a veteran of many such battles – kneels between the trembling legs kicking wildly at unseen combatants looming about her cot. Clamping down firmly upon the furiously twitching thighs, the abbess breaks from her calm demeanor to bark harsh orders of command at her underlings, demanding for the sake of the child and the mother that she be held securely in place. The grappling of the pregnant fighter comes just in time, for the slick skull of the babe begins to crown.

A piercing scream tears through the halls of the nunnery before fading to a pathetic moan tapering off into a low, straining groan. Minutes become hours with everyone present drenched in the rank perspiration of fear and tense uncertainty. With one shrill and final exhalation, a single entity becomes two as a piercing scream of new life conquers all sounds within the chamber. The severing of the bond cord from the placenta reveals a further expulsion of vital fluids pouring from the birth canal beyond the outpouring of what is considered normal or healthy.

The patient – bleeding out – lies beyond delirium from the physical exertions and ravaging toll taken upon her wee being. The women of the order rush forth to staunch the blood

flow of the stricken mother to the best of their abilities while the senior nun swaddles the newborn, caring for the youth in place of the matriarch who was in no condition to deal with anything in her current state. Nuzzling the darkling child close to her bosom, the elderly matron utters a fervent prayer to God for a swift and full recovery of the comatose lass under her care.

#

The worst of dreams... or is it something worse?

Cradling my babe, freshly born, I awake suddenly to a portal spiraling open in the dimness of the moonlit room – my own recuperation broken from the haze of my previous ordeal while my offspring slumbers on in the deep dreamscape the young typically dwell within. From the void, a childlike Imp, smaller than myself, unfurls its batlike wings greater than its own length spanning the entirety of the wall. Its skin is black as if pulled from the shadows, darker than the night. The onyx flesh makes its burning red eyes all the more horrifying as they sear unblinking into my being. From its insectile mouth the hellish figure states its terrifying demand.

“The newborn is ours, sinner! The father you know not, whore! Therefore, we demand you hand the soul to us.”

I am weak from the birthing. I am small and the breaching of my womb caused me to lose much blood leaving me drained and completely exhausted. So depleted I cannot even reach for my firearm. With a dry tongue, I barely deliver my protest.

“Never... I shall not relinquish my child to you. Never will I abandon my kin or Christ to the likes of you!”

The Demon’s wings collapse unseen behind its back as it strides to my bedside. “Do not force me to pry the whelp from your weakened arms. I am not here to hurt the babe but rear it as one of our own.”

I can do nothing more than clutch the child to my breast, tears leaking blurring my sight. Reaching its claws out to me, the Imp halts its advance as a pale green glow swells from the opposite side of the chamber.

Twisting my throbbing head, another opening rends into reality, or the dream realm for this cannot be truly happening. Tearing upon the plastered stones, the vibrant aura spreads wider revealing an idyllic woodland scene of alien and beautiful flora. Through the center of the mystical gateway, a slim figure gowned in full indigo robes enters with a sable cat trailing close behind. Maybe it’s a trick of the light, but his long pale hair is streaked with mauve stands parting to expose a pair of sharp ears similar to my newborns, but long enough to crest his skull like his feline pet.

Suddenly, the cat launches itself upon the bed beside me, hackles raised and hissing furiously at the Imp looms over me. Striding to my side, the ethereal newcomer raises his staff on high threatening the Demon, his hair billowing from a breeze I do not feel.

“Leave this poor woman and her innocent child be! Return from whence you came, foul wretch, and never come back to torment these souls ever again!”

The demonic creature screeches at his antagonists, but takes a furtive step back unfurling his devilish wings once again in an ominous manner. The Elven presence begins chanting in an esoteric tongue I have never heard igniting a sphere of many hues from the polished burl of his walking stick. Beneath it all, I lie helpless and frozen while this strange battle of wills wages above me and my son – I the battlefield and my child the prize.

The piercing shrieks continue with my protector’s intonation growing ever louder and more commanding to combat the Imp’s ear-splitting wails, flapping its wings frantically as if it

could douse the staff's radiance. Throughout it all, I wonder how no one else within the nunnery has come to investigate the deafening commotion... this must be a dream.

I catch the repetition in the character's eldritch words and at the finality of one of his verses, he raps the knob end of his elongated wand upon the distorted head of the Hellborn fiend. In a surreal expulsion of force, the Imp sucks back into the tear in reality from which it entered through. Whipping around the bed with uncanny speed, the spritely man dressed in the robes of a fairytale wizard taps the wall with his staff sealing the jagged arch from which the Demon originated.

The holy site must sit upon an ancient node or sacred grounds, for that is where the veil between worlds is said to be the thinnest. Possibly a gravesite for the barrier that separates the spirits from the living is weakest at the place of a burial for obvious reasons.

Turning his attention back upon me, the sorcerer's tapered eyes are large and intense. "Forgive the intrusion, Madame. I am Ffleusteriol Ffurthark and I am here to warn that you are beset by powers beyond the scope of this realm."

"This can't be real." I sputter out in denial.

"All too real, Lady of the Purple." The graceful presence proclaims. "That is why it is imperative you heed my words well."

"What choice do I have?" I relent, sinking full into my cushions. "I have no recourse but lie here and let all unfold before me."

"Then, there is one thing you must do." The lurching man implores. "I ask of you what the infernal one desired... hand over your son and we shall look after him. You are currently in no condition to wean a hapless cub. And there is still many activities you must perform without being anchored down by a dependent."

Cradling my son protectively, I glare defiantly at this stranger who seeks to abduct my progeny. "How are you any different than the Demon you banished? Why should I do as you say when your request goes against all my instincts and moral rationale?"

The gaunt man leans in very close to my face revealing all the sharp angles of his visage. "I understand you have absolutely no reason to trust me. But upon my honor, I shall return the boy-child when the proper time comes. For now, you must heal and take care of matters... then you shall have a secure environment to raise the little one."

Too weak and addled to resist further, I kiss my babe one final time before the mystic wraps my son carefully within his robes and returns with his black cat to the enchanted forest shining through the preternatural window into the separate reality lying yonder. With the closure of the portal behind his passage, my fevered mind fades black.

Many hours later, waking sick and vacant with the nightmare dispersing gently from memory as dreams often do, I retain the gist of last night's diablerie. Parched and withered, my first notion is to feed my newborn, but he is no longer by my side. I spend the last of my strength wailing my soul out throughout the hallowed walls of the holy order – a structure I am further unworthy to dwell within. Now that daylight has returned, a small number of the Sisterhood rush into my domicile then disperse throughout the nunnery to discover the whereabouts of my abducted child. Left alone with my tortured thoughts, I have no option but wonder if the one who holds my child in his long arms is any more worthy than the Hellborn to craft the precious soul of my son.

JEROME'S SESTINA

Flick of the wrist ever so quick
Smile on lips, starts of a laugh
Beneath her cloak, power... fire...
Singular choice, death or bold life
Despite your size, ye hold the might
Such was her path, such be her way

Shipped from the west to dock the quays
Light on her heels, step oh so quick
Left or right, anyway she might
Eyes glowing bright above a laugh
Genoa beams with teeming life
Oil wicks spark thousands of fires

Spirit flame and firepower
Sees the young woman on her way
Boots kicking high ever lively
Pace measured with grace, tiger quick
Joining the jester's full laughter
A belly roar of mirth and might

Yet fearful of the Lord's great might
Averse to enter Hellfire
Still, wee fae girl keeps on laughing
Traversing the narrow byways
Find the essence, capture the quick
Of the township's hale robust life

Oh, what a sight this little life
Wily of wit, resolute might
Load thy musket, quickly... quickly...
Ignite the fuse for firing
And my sharp steel by you always
Rogues in the dark stifling laughs

Drink your wine ringing with laughter
Fortunate to still be alive
Free will kept her safe on the way
Or the hand of the Almighty
No matter the blazing fire
You shall always be the quicker

Laughing high with all of her might

Lifestyle fuels passion's fire
Wayward bound for the quickening



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ONE LAST GHOST BEFORE RETIREMENT BY THOMAS VAN BOENING

Mr. E.'s eyes had a beautiful hue of blue, and I couldn't help but get lost in them before he clenched them shut and groaned.

Pleasuring men isn't hard, but he moved just right. It's rare for me to get off while working. His dirty, curly blonde hair looked great. His gym-sculpted physique was especially attractive, and I loved the hair curled along his manhood and six-pack.

Weirdness aside, he was my favorite client.

Spent, I caught my breath for a minute. "Any better, I'd have to pay *you*."

He wasn't even winded, and he gave a just-you-wait smirk that made me feel my pulse within my loins all over again.

"No other girl compares to you, Sapphire."

I matched his flirting with a smirk of my own. Either he was teasing, or he truly was the traveling type with a favorite girl in every town. He probably said the same thing to every girl paid to love him.

Still naked and coated in a mix of our sweat and his seed, he walked to his hotel bathroom and stepped in the shower.

He gave me a come-hither gesture. "I have a wild idea we've never done."

I stepped inside with him, and it was hardly a wild idea to fuck while showering.

"Thrill me," I said.

He held me from behind and kissed my neck. With my ass teasing him, he playfully bit my ear as his arms wrapped around my chest.

"Want to join me on my last job?"

"You're *real* job?" I said between gasps.

"It's better seen than explained. And I've always wanted to show someone before retiring."

I believed Mr. E. was a bounty hunter. I just didn't believe the bullshit about ghosts. That didn't stop my curiosity about the strange black suitcase with the odd silver markings.

Whenever he supposedly finished a job, he never brought anyone back alive. If he killed people, he easily could have brought back smaller body parts. I've seen *Winter's Bone* and dozens of other thrillers.

"Why would I put myself in danger?" I asked while he dug his chin into my neck as my loins relented to him. It took everything to not whimper.

"Because I want to ask you something afterward. I'll triple tonight's pay, and I'm good for the entire weekend. I promise you'll be safe. I've done this fifteen times, and I'm as experienced a ghost hunter as one can be."

It's never the normal men who hire me.

As he entered me again and again, I didn't care what he did.

I think I love him. Shit. Don't fall in love with a client.

"You... collect bounties," I said. "On ghosts."

Mr. E. drew back and turned me to face him.

"I want you to believe me," he said. "It's important, and I'll make it worth your while."

He teased me as he gave my nipples a gradual pinch. That time I did audibly gasp.

I pinched him back, and before he could wince, he pinned my back against the shower wall.

"I do this every time," he said. "It's like a ritual. If I die tomorrow, I'll die after truly living the best life possible. Other guys only wish they could live like me."

"If you die?" I asked. "You said--"

"Every bounty comes with risk. As a ghost hunter--"

"Quit calling yourself a ghost hunter," I said. "That shit is for fake reality TV, hokey horror novels, and trashy movies hosted by Joe Bob Briggs."

He only smiled. "If I don't convince you, you'll never have to deal with this crazy sombitch ever again. I can't prove it otherwise, but I swear it's absolutely true."

His cock hitting all my right spots put an end to my arguing. I let out throaty moans as the water was going cold.

Mr. E. was the closest thing I had to a lover, and his mastery of our flesh made the oncoming orgasm build below my abdomen.

"Come on," He whispered into my ear between thrusts. "Come with me?"

"Yes."

His libido carried us both to the stratosphere and we came crashing down in ecstatic release.

Using his lean muscles, he made sure I didn't slip and fall as he finished.

Reaching outside the shower, he enveloped us both in a single white towel, drawing us close yet again as he tenderly held me in one arm, and dried off my back as I held onto his round shoulders.

So warm.

I couldn't help but run my hands over his firm chest and abdomen with the sagittal trail of hair that would have repulsed me before meeting him.

"We have a long drive tomorrow. I know I'll sleep well tonight."

I did the same.

...

The drive from Las Vegas to the Sierra Nevada was a few hours. Then Mr. E. stopped using GPS when we got somewhere in Sequoia National Park and opened an old road atlas before taking what looked like a backroad that only park rangers would use.

"You still haven't told me your real name," I said. "Mr. E. is cute, but it's an awful pun."

"You're a little late if you think I'm abducting you. Come on, how many times have we met? And I don't know your name either. That is... I'm sure your real name isn't Sapphire."

I smirked.

"Tell you what? You can even take a pic of me and put it on your social media of choice. Then if I end up dicing you into little pieces, they'll have a cute suspect to arrest."

He had that smile and demeanor that made me snicker. "You're making fun of what most women fear."

"And I'm relishing how much you're trying not to laugh at my dark sense of humor."

I called his bluff and got my phone.

"Wait," he said pointing ahead. "when we get up this road, you and I can get a selfie. Even better to have you in the pic with me, right?"

He's really trying to make me feel at ease.

The road was rough but he stopped at a bend that had a clearer view of the mountain range.

With enthusiasm, he got out and encouraged me to do the same before I did what he asked. I got the right angle with both of us in frame, and let the sensor get the mountains so they weren't washed out before taking our first pic.

"I'll upload it to--"

"Don't tell me," I said. "That just means you're truly safe with me. Although... you could let me see what your name is too."

I smiled. "You first, Mr. E."

He laughed. "Come on. We're almost to the ghost town."

After a few near misses of his truck slipping on the winding mountain pass, he parked the pickup in a clearing several miles from the highway.

Among the sequoia trees, the only sign of a ghost town was the skeletons of wood buildings. The only building that looked close to intact was an old steepled church, next to a small graveyard.

"This is it," he said. "We talked all day about what I do, but before dawn tomorrow, you'll see how."

...

We spent the night in the back of his pickup, with a large sleeping bag coated in a deet smell that reminded me of my Girl Scout days. I thought he'd want to make love, but he got more and more antsy. My arms around him put a stop to that, and he dozed for a few hours.

I awoke when I felt the pickup shift and heard Mr. E. landing in the long grass before he pissed in the dark.

I looked at my phone, and it was almost five.

I yawned. "You're getting your money's worth, I hope."

"It's a hunter's moon tonight," he said. "It's perfect."

He got into the pickup's backseat and pulled out the black suitcase. He opened it after pressing his thumb to the silver markings in a quick sequence, and a hissing pop echoed before opening.

From there, he held what looked like a medical vial. It was too dark to tell what it was.

"It's bait," he said, reading my mind. "Something I'm sure Mr. Gaius wants."

"And who's that?" I asked. "The ghost you're going to catch?"

He didn't hesitate. "You catch on quick."

He's either a psycho, or he's just playing the long game on a prank.

I humored him. "Go on. Tell me more."

He went on a long tale of some rich town planner in the late 1800s, name-dropping historical people like I was supposed to know who he was talking about. I simply nodded as he told me the sorted history of Gunther Gaius and the town he failed to establish on these grounds.

"And this is where I come in," he said. "Gunther refused to accept that a mountain town was beyond his capacity. So when he couldn't hire railroad workers that had experience during the frontier days, he cut corners by hiring Chinese immigrants."

I didn't think it was possible, but my eyesight got used to seeing Mr. E.'s blonde hair in the moonlight, and I could listen to him for hours.

“So then an accident happened on the mountainside, and it killed the three men. He also cut corners with shoddy building materials, and wouldn't listen to the idea of landslides being a possibility. His biggest mistake was when he refused to pay for unfinished train tracks. This led to a revolt, and unfortunately, that led to the massacre.”

“What massacre?” I asked.

“It wasn't given a fancy name,” Mr. E. said. “But according to my client, many were killed, seventeen of them belonging to the Lin family. My client's grandmother was the only survivor.”

“Wait, you said this was in the 1800s?”

“1888,” he said.

“And your client is her grandson? He has to be a hundred years old.”

“Mr. Lin will be 91 next month,” he said. “And I have a vial of his blood to lure the ghost of Gunther Gaius. If he has any unfinished business, the blood will bring him out of his resting place.”

“And how do you know he's here?”

He pointed to the church. “There's only one gravestone made of marble. No inscription, but someone had the wealth for it. I hope I'm right.”

“But... *how* will you catch him?”

He smiled. “When dawn's first light comes, it will combine with the full moon. The hour of the veil is rare, and only gives me a short time to lure him out. After that, it's a cakewalk. Done it many times.”

He reached into the black suitcase, and he held what looked like a black dustbuster with the same silver markings. He pressed a single button, and a violet light at the front lit and dimmed in a beautiful repeating pulse.

...

Mr. E. changed clothes, and he looked like he had thick black tactical gear with a Batman-style utility belt. He looked like a wannabe SWAT team cop.

Dawn approached around 6:30, and Mr. E. opened the vial of blood.

“Gaius!” he screamed, letting his voice echo. “The Lin family has unfinished business with you.”

For a few seconds, nothing happened, and I was sure this was all bullshit.

Then I saw the moonlight reflect off something in the graveyard.

Then that reflection of moonlight changed shape, like a fading scene in a movie, and then a person emerged from the light.

No, he was the light, and I couldn't believe it until I looked at Mr. E.'s ‘told ya’ smirk.

“Lin?” A dry voice said. “The same Lin that cost me everything? The same... who the hell are you?”

Mr. E.'s smile vanished. “Just a guy doing his job, Mr. Gaius.”

“Oh, ho,” Gunther said. “And just what job is that?”

Before Mr. E. could use his ghost-catching device, a loud shot rang out, and I was covering my ears as I screamed and squatted on my knees.

I looked at the ghost, and sure enough, it had a revolver straight out of one of my grandpa's Jimmy Stewart westerns.

“I've met a few since my time was up,” Gunther said. “But I have to admit, nobody ever came looking for-“

A blast of bright purple light pierced Gunther Gaius, and I saw Mr. E. lying on his back with his black glowing dustbuster.

"Bulletproof vest," Mr. E. said. "I'm not an idiot. I know even a ghost's bullets can be lethal when the veil between worlds is so thin."

Then the shape of Gunther's ghost was gone, and the bright purple light ceased.

"You didn't tell me he was going to be armed."

Mr. E. got to his feet and helped me up. "I didn't know. I was prepared though. Gunther was clearly buried with his prized possessions. But..."

He pointed to a glowing violet dome on top of the dustbuster gizmo.

"What is it?"

"What remains of a ghost," Mr. E. said. "Call it the soul, call it his essence, call it ectoplasm. It's all the same. I'd say ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent of people go to heaven or hell, but the ones that refuse to leave stay behind in this form. And this keeps it from escaping in its physical form."

I looked closer. "It looks like... spun sugar."

"And just as consumable," Mr. E. said. "Oh, I better make a call. Mr. Lin's expecting me."

He pulled out his smartphone and called.

It rang only once.

"Mr. McDowell?" An elderly, and yet firm voice said.

I know half his name.

"It's finished, Mr. Lin," Mr. E. said. "I'll send your package certified. Packed in liquid nitrogen still your preferred method?"

"I shall take no chances," Mr. Lin said. "Please, send a photo of Mr. Gaius's soul to confirm."

He did so. "Coming through now, sir."

"Remarkable things we can do in this day and age," Mr. Lin said. "Excellent. Payment shall be in your account momentarily."

A notification chimed, and my jaw dropped when he showed me seventeen million dollars.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Mr. Lin's voice said before a coughing fit. "One million for each murdered ancestor."

Mr. E., real name Mr. McDowell, smirked. "The pleasure was mine. For some, Hell isn't a good enough punishment. Before we part ways, what will you do with Gunther Gaius's ectoplasm?"

"Chop it up," Mr. Lin said. "I intend for my family to devour him."

I almost blurted 'ew,' but covered my mouth only.

"The living will haunt the dead," he continued. "His soul will be divided into so many pieces and it'll be boiled down in a soup. After eating his soul, he'll only be able to become part of our souls. I never understood the meaning of 'the best revenge is living well' until I had this idea. Mr. Gaius will be absorbed, and only know the existence of witnessing our bloodline living on, knowing he murdered the wrong people. I have twenty grandchildren, and thirty-three grandchildren, with another on the way. Our happiness will become his hell. What better revenge is there? Mr. McDowell... You have our gratitude."

The call ended.

"Fuck yeah!" Mr. McDowell said. "Seven fucking figures, baby!"

"That's amazing," I said.

"Alright, alright," he said. "I need to actually deliver it. I've not lost a package yet. But... before anything happens."

He got on one knee.

Oh no.

From his back pocket, he produced a silver velvet box and opened and displayed a diamond the size of a thumbnail.

"Sapphire, will you marry me?"

"Mr. E.?" I said. "No. That's just crazy. I don't even know you."

"Don't say 'no' yet," he said. "I know this is crazy, but before I did this job, I told myself if I settled down, it was going to be with the prettiest girl I know."

"Besides my job, you don't know a thing about me," I said.

"That's fair," he said. "Besides *my* job, you don't know a thing about me either. We're on even footing, except you know that I never lied to you, and you know I've got enough money to live comfortably for our remaining years. We can spend the next few decades getting to know each other."

"What even is your name, Mr. McDowell?"

"I didn't quite lie about that either," he said. "It does start with an 'E.' Promise. Go on and guess."

"I don't know. Ernest?"

"No," he laughed.

"Earl?"

"Not that either."

"Edward? Maybe Eddie?"

"Close, but no."

"It better not be Egon. Quit teasing, I've wanted to know all along, Mr. E."

He grinned. "It's Edwin. Edwin McDowell, ghost hunter. Er... former ghost hunter. And just who might you be, pretty lady?"

"Sapphire Joyner," I said as I reached for the velvet box. "Or... shall I say Sapphire McDowell?"

For a long moment, we couldn't stop grinning.

"A call girl going by her real name takes an epic level of bravery."

I slipped the ring on. "I suppose you'd be one to judge bravery. I happen to know a place in Vegas."

Edwin laughed. "I'll put his ghost in one of my liquid nitrogen tanks, and get a certified delivery. We're gonna live happily too."

Edwin. I could get used to that.

"You sure this is what you want? Not some other girl you have in some other--"

"It's only been you," Edwin said. "I don't care what your body count is, you never forget your first time, and I could never bring myself to love any other girl, paid or not. We know what we are, and in a world where ghosts exist, I think you and I deserve a fairy tale ending, right?"

There was almost a Hallmark-level warmth in hearing that.

I love him too. And Edwin's right. Weirdness and all.

I put my arms around him. "Fuck yeah, let's make a lifetime worth remembering."



Thomas Van Boening was born and raised in Lincoln Nebraska. He grew up loving everything horror, fantasy, and science fiction. He works his day job as a graphic designer, draws and paints as a hobby, and still finds time to write other stories. Such works include his upcoming debut novel in the fantasy genre and a short story collection. As long as his lovely wife Sarah keeps the coffee coming, he'll never run out of ideas. His literary influences include Stephen King, Ursula K. Le Guin, Harlan Ellison, and Elizabeth Engstrom. Thomas can be found on Tumblr, TikTok, and Facebook.