

SUMMER ISSUE 25

WITH STORIES
AND POEMS BY:
SIMON
MACCULLOCH,
S.T. ELEU, DAVID
GIANATASIO,
AMANDA
NORMAN, AND
MORE

FEATURING
THE ART OF
BILL
WOLAK
AND
DONALD
PATTEN



AL
ALTERED
REALITY

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The staff of *Altered Reality Magazine* would like to give warning to those who might be upset by

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David Gianatasio

Rift

Janie's ball bounced against the rough stone wall of a castle in the woods. A prince slid down a parapet and kicked the ball away. A dragon dove from the clouds and devoured both youngsters, spitting out the prince's crown.

When Janie failed to return home, her dad searched the neighborhood. In a friend's backyard, he found his daughter's ball. A lute played low on the wind as battlements shimmered and vanished above the trees.

Fearing for his son's life, the king combed his estate. He discovered the prince's circlet amid some brambles and gasped as a storybook ranch flickered across the sky.

(END)

Symptom of the Universe

As I unzipped my jeans, a shimmering portal appeared in the alley behind Freddie's Fabulous Furniture.

It was long after midnight, and I'd shambled up to the graffiti wall for some relief.

But the wall vanished, and a weird window winked into existence, framing a field of star. Worlds spun. Galaxies twirled. Nebulas formed, expanded and died.

Impressive stuff. IMAX impressive.

A cosmic voice boomed:

ENTER! THE GIFTS OF INFINITY AWAIT! ALL THE WONDERS OF...

My bladder chose that instant to empty, straight into the shimmering void.

WHAA? OH JEEZ! BWAAUGH!

The gateway snapped shut and the weathered bricks returned, spray-painted with pictures and slogans. The nearest read: LED ZEP 4VR with a stairway winding through tiny clouds.

I pumped my fist and lurched back toward the street.

Now, it would have been a grand existential joke—a sardonic celestial comeuppance—if I'd fallen through an open manhole and splashed around in slimy sludge until daybreak. I'd leap and tear at the slick concrete while beady rat-eyes blazed and shrill squeaks ripping through the night. (From both me and the rats.)

But I spotted that peril in the pavement from half a block away. So, I tipsily skipped around its edges and winked at the star-stained sky.

The cosmic voice returned:

ZEP SUCKS. SABBATH—*THAT'S* ROCK 'N' ROLL!

“Dude,” I sniffed, “no need to get all pissy.”

(END)

Hell's Pawn

One sweltering day at the gates of Hell, a Demon ordered a Sinner to leave the abode of agony and dwell forever in Paradise.

"But I'm a big-ass sinner. Like Jack the Ripper, Hitler, Ted Bundy, Mengele..."

"We know." The Demon's fangs frothed as it spoke. "You left death, destruction and despair in your wake. No conscience or remorse."

Behind the Sinner, a long, winding line of wretched souls trembled. Some whimpered. Some sniveled. Others chose this late, inopportune moment to pray for mercy.

From inside Hell's gate, mournful moans sliced the rancid air. The Sinner rose on tippy toes, straining for a glimpse.

"Just the usual," the Demon said. "Tortures and torments defying definition, yadda yadda."

The Sinner licked his lips. "I want in."

"Alas, no. It's perfumed clouds and lilting harps for you. Angelic choirs..."

"But. I murdered, like, 300 people."

"334."

"I always forget that bombing in Scranton." A tear slid down his cheek and sizzled in the heat. "I did it all for the Dark One—Lord of the Flames. To sit at his right hand and revel in the abominations of the master."

“It’s Lord of the Flies. Get the reference right.”

“Well, he’s Lord of the Flames, too...”

The Demon flexed its bat-winged shoulders, and a vicious grin split its molten face.

“Heaven is your Hell!” It bellowed, words clanging like funeral bells across the lava canyons. “Damned trite twist, I’ll admit. But that’s our business. We make everyone suffer.”

The Sinner hung his head sadly. “Even the reader, it seems.”

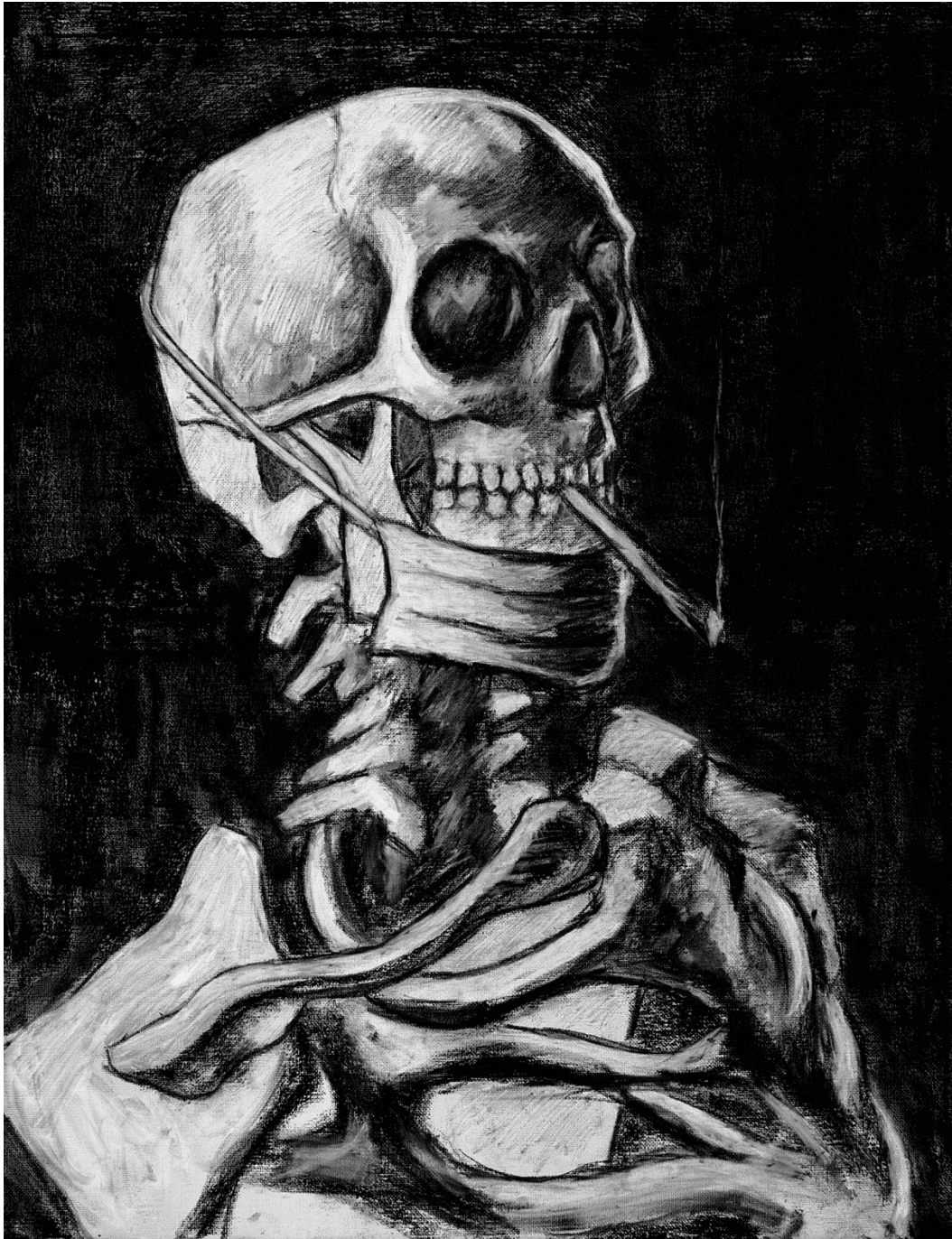
Poof! he vanished, and the Demon spake unto the multitude of souls:

“NEXT!”

(END)

Dave's most recent collection, *The World Ends Every Day*, was published in late 2024 by Anxiety Press. You can find him online at <https://x.com/davegian>

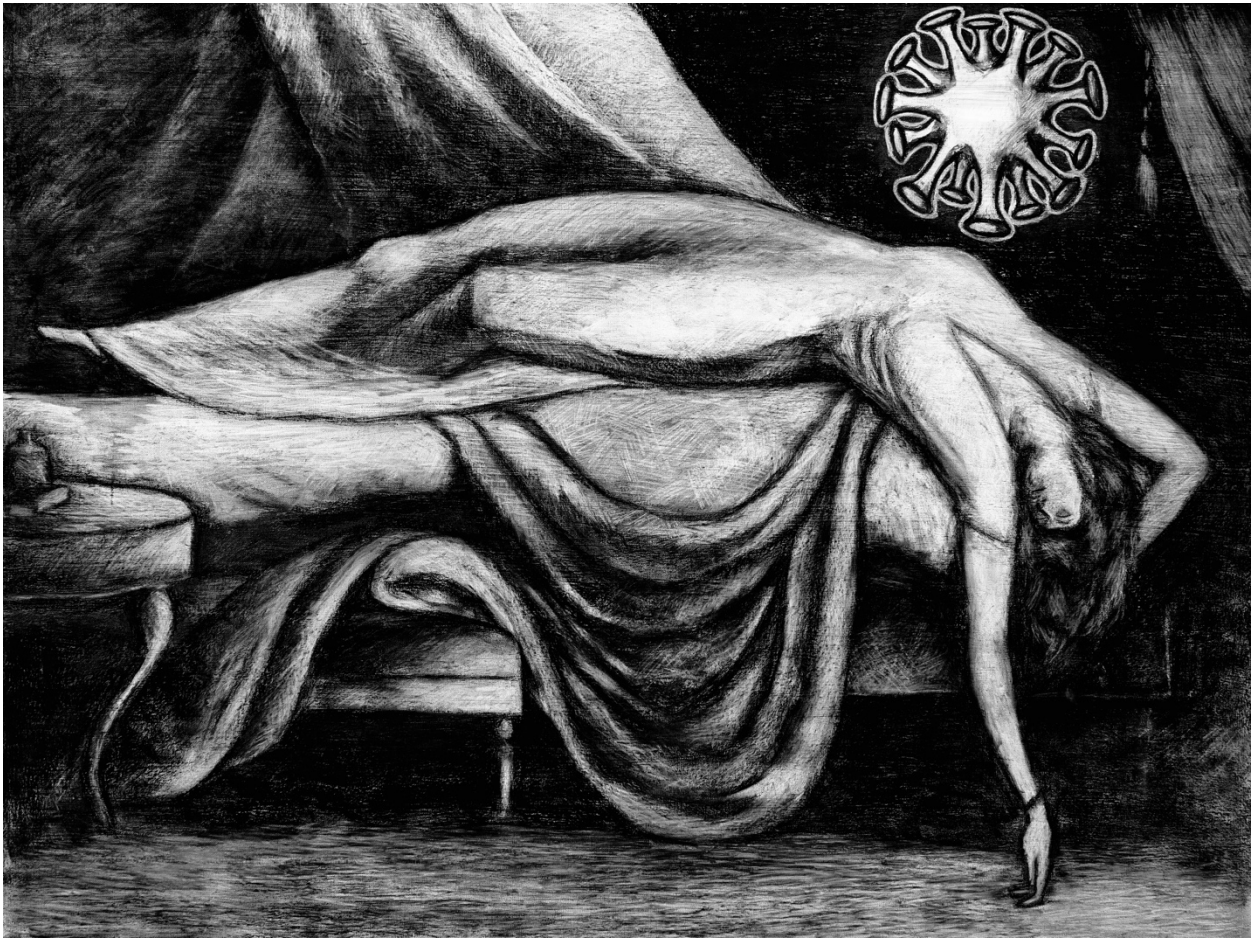
The Art of Donald Patten



Masked Skull Of A Skeleton With A Burning Cigarette

Saturn Devouring His Sub





The COVID Nightmare

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He creates oil paintings, illustrations, ceramics and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries throughout Maine. He can be found online @donald.patten on Instagram.

For Your Safety by Amanda Joy Norman

A self-driving bus took her as far as Tucson, but she had to walk the rest of the way out into the desert to find the old man. He lived in an old adobe house, the sun-baked bricks dark with dust and age.

He answered the door and smiled toothlessly up at her through strands of long gray hair. “You look like you could use a drink,” he remarked.

She shook her head, even though her shirt was soaked with sweat, the fabric clinging itchily to her skin. “Where’s the car?” she asked.

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” he muttered, turning away from her. For a moment she was afraid he would slam the door in her face. Instead, he let it hang open. “I’ve got frosted glasses in the freezer.”

Wearily, she stepped inside. The house smelled clean, but everywhere she looked there were piles of junk amassed over a lifetime of collecting things. She followed the old man into the kitchen, where he bustled around, retrieving a glass bottle from an old fridge.

“I’m Tamara,” she said. “I came out here to buy the car.”

After rifling around in a drawer full of clanging tools and utensils, he pulled out a bottle opener. There was a satisfying *pop* and the warped metal cap clattered to the tile floor. “Which one?” he asked.

She stared at him, unable to believe that he could possibly have more than one car to sell. Chuckling to himself, he sat the bottle on the table. Then came the glass. It wasn’t frosted, but it did have ice. “What can I say? I’m a hoarder. Not like there’s any feds sniffing around this place looking for something to confiscate.”

Still smiling, he waited for her to pour the drink. With his big hooked nose, stooped back, and skin browned to leather by the Arizona sun, he looked like a little goblin leering at her. Reluctantly, she picked up the bottle and poured its contents into the glass. She sniffed it, wondering how old it was. It smelled... Not bad, but unfamiliar.

“Carbonation might be gone, but it’s real,” he remarked. “Nothing artificial in that bottle.”

She took a swig. The soda was flat, but she couldn’t help but savor the cold drink after her long walk through the hellish heat. Continuing to sip at it, she asked, “How many cars do you have?”

“Only one that works. Rest need repairs. It’s in the garage. You pay up front.”

“Can’t I see it first?”

He shrugged and shuffled over to the garage door. As soon as he opened it, she smelled motor oil, pungent and welcoming.

Sometimes old things survived the ravages of time because someone loved them enough to keep up their maintenance. Other times, their preservation was simply because no one wanted them, and so they sat unused until age made them more valuable. That was the case with the Marlin. Marlin—what a perfectly awkward name for such an ungainly, overdesigned vehicle. With its clunky, crowded frame and peeling paint, it was certainly no Bugatti.

You’re lucky I found you, Tamara thought as she circled around it, fingertips trailing possessively down its side. *And I’m lucky too, I suppose.*

“Mind if I ask why you want this old clunker?”

Without looking up from the car, she replied, “Because I didn’t drive enough when I still had the chance.”

The old man chuckled. “Well, the car should still work.”

“You’re sure about that?” she asked, steely eyes flicking sharply toward him. She hadn’t walked for an hour through the Sonoran Desert just to be swindled.

“Give it a whirl and see for yourself,” he replied, tossing her a ring of jangling keys.

She wasted no time climbing into the driver’s seat and starting it up. The roar of the engine startled her—modern cars were made to be quiet, emitting a soft soothing hum. This thing growled and coughed, water dribbling from the grimy exhaust.

Tamara gripped the worn steering wheel like a fumbling lover, eager and yet uncertain. She had not driven a car in over fifteen years, not since she was a teenager learning how to drive her parents’ ancient Toyota. It had been difficult. She didn’t like driving. The changing lights, reckless drivers, and intense traffic clogging the roads all triggered a sense of paralyzing panic in her. She was never alert enough to her surroundings, couldn’t think and make good decisions fast enough. Eventually she ended up totaling the Toyota. She had stopped driving after that, too frightened and ashamed.

That was right before the newly elected President made good on her promise to bring about a self-driving revolution. Citizens were encouraged to trade in their old gas guzzlers for shiny new robot cars, paid for by the government. Now all cars drove themselves, obeying traffic laws to the letter, running on clean energy. These days the only place one could find an old manually-driven automobile was in a museum.

You’d think Tamara would’ve been relieved to live in such a world with the responsibility of her safety lifted from her shoulders. Instead, she looked at the stripped down obsolete artifact behind glass and felt only regret. She missed feeling the steering wheel under her hands and the pedals beneath her feet, knowing that she could just get in the car and go

without having to input a destination. She longed for the symbol of freedom and independence that was promised to her, the one that she had squandered in the anxiety of her youth. She wanted another chance.

“You got the money?” the old man shouted over the engine, holding out a bony hand.

She reached for her phone, pulled up her bank and typed in his information, wishing all the while that she could just hand him a wad of cash. But they didn’t make paper currency anymore. It was safer to keep all your money ephemeral, supposedly. Everything always had to be about safety and order. In order for the transaction to even go through, she had to input what she was paying for, lest she be caught making an illegal purchase.

Noticing her furrowed brow and the stillness of her fingers hovering over the screen, the old man spoke up. “Say you’re buying this land. It should be willing to accept that.”

“Won’t they know I didn’t settle here?” she asked.

“Nobody will come out here to check, trust me. It’s too damned hot.”

She did as he suggested, watching as the number on her account depleted to zero. A feeling of lightness had begun to bloom in her chest. Fuck the money, fuck her job, fuck the city, fuck her old life. With this gas-guzzling, manual-driving monstrosity of a car, she was free of it all.

The old man grinned and opened the garage door. Light poured in, illuminating rusted metal beneath flaking paint. Tamara put the car into reverse and tore out of there.

The sun was setting over the desert. Global warming had killed even the scraggly survivor plants that could grow in the desert, leaving behind nothing but empty wasteland. She raced across the sands at full speed, windows down, the night wind in her hair. The radio held only static; all the stations had closed down years ago. She shoved an ancient cassette into the

chute and pressed play, praying it would work. Music shook the dust from the speakers, loud and clear.

After a few minutes of desert driving, a road appeared in the glow of her front headlights. She slowed to a stop just shy of the cracked asphalt, muttering a curse under her breath. There weren't supposed to be any roads this way. Putting the car in reverse, she turned to the right—and came face to face with a self-driving car.

Big and block-shaped, it was parked on the side of the road, lights out. Tamara sat very still, the Marlin's engine humming. She couldn't see any passengers through the tinted windows of the other vehicle. Maybe it wouldn't notice her.

She reached for the gear stick, easing it into drive. The other car's lights came on, flashing red, white, and blue. She hit the gas and sped away, her heart in her throat.

Cop cars weren't beholden to the same rules as civilian cars. Run by advanced AI, they had no passengers to worry about and could thus go over the speed limit or offroad in pursuit of any unauthorized vehicles. Tamara saw it in the grimy side mirror, doggedly chasing her. She pushed the accelerator pedal further. The mountains which surrounded the valley were her only hope now. If she could lose it there, she'd be home free.

The desert sped past, scorched shapes blazing past as the police car pursued her. She didn't see the cliff up ahead until it was too late, and besides—she was never all that good a driver anyway. Attempting to swerve only sent her skidding sideways, the wheels dragging sand with them over the edge.

The car slammed into the rocky slope below, windows shattering. Pieces of broken glass scattered as it flipped, tumbling a few feet deeper into the bottom of the gorge. It wasn't a particularly deep canyon, but the Marlin had no seat belt. She had noticed its absence before she

got behind the wheel, but she still decided to drive. She *needed* to drive, needed to hold her fate in her own trembling hands—

At some point while the car was turning end over end, Tamara was ejected through the jagged hole where the windshield had once been and thrown against the hard ground. Her broken body shone in the glow of the police car's headlights, eyes open, still staring straight ahead as the unmanned cop car was joined by backup, their engines humming in unison side by side.

Amanda Joy Norman has been writing since she was nine years old. She has a BA in History with a minor in Religious Studies. Having lived in the wetlands of Maryland and the desert of Arizona, she now resides in Kansas City.

Starting Over by Julia Rajagopalan

My skull feels like it's ripping apart, and for a second, I'm confused. I'm not in bed. So, where am I? How much did I drink last night? Did I hook up with someone last night? I take a deep breath, then remember I'm not hungover. I'm thawing out.

I take a deep breath of stale air and slowly blink my eyes open. Six inches away from my nose is the smooth plastic lid of my sleeping tube. The yellow glowing panel above my head is mercifully gentle on my throbbing eyes. I want to sit up, but the lid won't open for several more hours. I'm grateful for my training on Earth because waking up in this coffin-like space is disconcerting, even without the universe's worst headache.

I raise my hand to a straw protruding from the wall to my right. With a tug, the soft plastic tube slides out smoothly. I close my lips around it and suck. Suction pressure squeezes the backs of my eyes, making them feel like they'll pop out of their sockets. Warm water, however, floods my mouth, and I moan in relief, swallowing greedily. The water will help, so I drink more. Strands of my brown hair get caught in my mouth, and I gently brush them aside. I should have cut it shorter than the chin-length bob, but I couldn't bear to. I swallow and open my mouth, and the straw retracts into the wall.

Almost against my will, my fingers probe the smooth, plastic lid. I've trained enough to ignore the impulse to push it open, but it isn't easy. It's also hard not to call the thing a coffin because that's precisely what it feels like. For nearly 15 percent of us, it will be a coffin. It's worth the risk. Anyway, by waking up, I've already beaten the odds. Now, I need to keep calm and try not to injure myself.

The stale air is warm, and I remember my trainer saying it's like being back in the womb. That analogy doesn't help. Instead, I imagine myself as a little doll tucked away in a drawer, ready to be opened into a brand-new world. That helps a little. I remember saying goodbye to my mother. She had been furious that I was leaving her behind on a dying Earth.

"Do you know how difficult it was to get reproduction permits?" my mother wailed over mimosas. "Why bother to have a daughter if she's going to run away?"

“People usually have children to love them,” I had muttered. I can still see the sneer of disdain on her carefully sculpted lips.

A soft beeping comes from my left. I turn my sore head, and the words *Elevated Blood Pressure* appear in green letters on a panel. That’s what I get for thinking about my mother. I take long, deep breaths, and my blood pressure lowers. The green text fades.

My headache, too, is fading with every sip of water. My bodily functions shouldn’t start for a while, but I can feel the diaper’s tight edges around my thighs and waist. I am determined not to use it unless absolutely necessary. Having the elimination system to whisk away my waste would have been nice, but it was out of my budget. I had almost asked my mother for help, but she would have refused. The beeping begins again, and I breathe deeply. My mother is millions of miles away.

I start clenching my muscles and releasing them. At first, my feet didn’t respond. The sense of panic makes me want to lash out. Instead, I drink more water and take deep breaths. Soon, I can move my toes. My nerves start working again, and I begin to feel the loose cloth of the tunic covering my torso.

As I do my exercises, I recite the elements in the crust of Demeter 8: silicon, oxygen, iron, magnesium, calcium, potassium, titanium, chromium, manganese, sulfur, phosphorus, sodium, and chlorine. My master’s in geology was crucial for earning my spot. I remember my mother’s snide remarks about my major.

“Why don’t you major in something useful like marketing?” she had snapped over Chardonnay.

“I love geology,” I muttered into my drink.

“Well, I hope you also love being broke,” my mother had said. “Geology is useless. What else is there even to discover?”

The beeping to my left starts again, and I take deep breaths. My mother is millions of miles away.

The next few hours are the same. I imagine life on Demeter 8. I picture the sweet little modular home featured in the company’s recruiting brochure. I envision myself sipping tea in my own picturesque

garden, surrounded by the dark purple foliage of the local flora. It's a new start, and I can be anyone I want to be.

By now, the ship will have docked with the space station orbiting the planet. The higher priority passengers will be waking up and debarking. Getting an open-tube wake-up would have been nice, but I couldn't afford it. There's not enough space for everyone to disembark at once. I will have to be ready to go once my lid opens. Time is limited, and the ship needs to return to Earth as soon as possible.

Finally, a pleasant chime sounds, and my heart leaps excitedly. I feel movement as my tube slides out of the wall. The lid swings open, and I take a deep breath of the station air. The air is cooler and has a metal tang, but I gasp greedily.

I sit up. The debarking area is a continuation of my tube, with calming beige walls and floors. A warm orange light comes from the ceiling. Down the hall, I can see out the open door to the metal walls of the station. Once I get up, I can pee and catch a shuttle to the planet's surface.

There is movement to my right, and I turn toward it. Horror punches my gut.

"Surprise!" my mother says. She grins and waves.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp. My peaceful weekends with tea in my garden vanish before my eyes. My fresh start fades away. I've traveled millions of miles to end up in the same place.

"I decided to come, too!" she laughs. "I woke up a while ago. You guys down here take so long to wake up."

"How'd you get a spot?"

"Like that's hard," my mother scoffs, dismissing my years of work. "I just applied and then bought my ticket."

"Why?" Tears sting my eyes.

"Who wants to stay on Earth anymore? It's such a trash hole these days," she says, then adds as an afterthought. "And, you know, I couldn't bear to be away from you."

Julia Rajagopalan is a writer of speculative fiction who lives just outside of Detroit, Michigan, with her husband and their grumpy dog. For a list of her publications, check out her website: www.JuliaRajagopalan.com.

Yesterday's Fire by Will Kohudic

Captain Leonard Waldron craned his neck to catch a glimpse of his formation before they descended into the cloud deck. A few hundred feet to the left and behind, the oblong shape of a B-29 bomber gleamed under the waning crescent moon—the next bird in their flight, known affectionately by her crew as *Forward Frannie*.

Waldron had hated flying in clouds since his pre-war days with Pan Am. He knew the cover would hide them from picket boats on the Pacific Ocean below, but he just plain didn't like it.

"Altitude steady at 7,000 feet," Waldron said. "Navigator, confirm course and heading."

Before Lieutenant Chambers could respond, a blinding flash lit the sky outside the Plexiglas canopy. The aircraft bucked and shuddered, warning lights blinked, and instrument needles whipped back and forth.

The intercom crackled with nervous questions.

"Holy Moly, what was that?"

"Are we hit?"

"Was that lightning?"

Just as suddenly, the flight smoothed out.

"Cap, oil pressure's dropping in number three engine. Confirm?" Lieutenant Lindsey asked from the copilot's chair.

Waldron checked his gauge. "Confirmed. Shut it down and feather the prop. All stations report in."

The crew reported no further damage and only one minor injury—the navigator had been struck by an unsecured thermos.

Waldron knew his veteran crew would expect to proceed with the mission, but they needed to hear it from him. "Men, we've still got three good engines, and we're continuing to the target. We're about to lighten our load, and we can get home on two if need be. Hell, we came back from Osaka with how many shrapnel holes?"

“A hundred sixty-eight, sir,” Chambers said. In a lower tone, he added, “And one in the radioman.”

Waldron squeezed his eyes shut. “Affirmative. This run is for Sergeant Kellerman. As to what we just experienced, cloud-to-cloud lightning is our best guess.” Waldron glanced at Lindsey, who shrugged.

“If it happens again, keep your cool and report in. We should be out of the clouds at any moment. Bombardier, set your sights in case of signal loss.” As he spoke, they left the cloud cover. The moon should have been the brightest thing around, but it paled in comparison to the glittering sprawl of the city that appeared below.

“Uh, Cap’n, is that really our target?” the bombardier, Lieutenant Weller, asked. “I didn’t expect Tokyo’d be lit up brighter than Los Angeles.”

Waldron and Lindsey exchanged glances in the glow of the instrument panel, but neither spoke.

“According to the instruments, that’s our target, sir,” Weller said, “but it sure looks a lot bigger in real life than on the map. It’s nuts that they’re not blacked out! Why set out the welcome wagon for us?”

“Where’s that raging inferno the 73rd bragged about starting yesterday?” Waldron asked. Nobody answered. “Doesn’t matter, we’ll get ‘em burning tonight. I don’t see a signal from Lead.”

“Confirming no signal, Cap’n, and no visual on their engines,” Weller replied. “It’s like we’re the only bird out here.”

Waldron shivered despite the warm air circulating in his suit. “Then we’ll have to break radio silence.” Waldron toggled the wireless. “Bombardment Wing 314, this is Third Squadron, Able Flight Leader Waldron. Receiving no signal from Lead, report.”

No answer. Where was everybody?

“Squadron, report. Able Flight, report.” Silence.

“*Forward Frannie? Sayonara Suckers?* This is Captain Waldron of *Gloria’s Gams*, do you read? Over.” He ran his fingertips over his thin mustache while static washed through his headset.

“Cap, we must’ve got separated from the group in the clouds,” Lindsey said. “Should we abort and return to Saipan?”

The unexplained absence of their group had Waldron on edge, but their orders were clear. “Negative. Orders specify to hit secondary targets or targets of opportunity if separated. And that metropolis down there sure looks like one big, fat opportunity.”

He toggled the radio. “Waldron to 314th Wing. Commencing our run. Follow our signal if able.” They would cross the neon-bright shoreline in less than a minute.

The tailgunner, Sergeant Harris, spoke up. “Captain, gunnery radar’s picked up a bogey on our six, closing fast.”

Another voice came over the radio. “Captain Waldron, this is Major Henshaw, U.S. Air Force Special Recovery Wing. Be advised that your bomb group has experienced a temporal dislocation. You’ve been thrown eighty years into the future, and your target’s status has changed to friendly. Repeat, friendly. You’ve been displaced to the year 2025 and the United States is at peace with Japan. You are ordered to stand down. Repeat, stand down—do you copy?”

Waldron looked at Lindsey. “He sounds American, but I never heard such nonsense.”

The first officer frowned. “They goofed up, it’s the U.S. *Army* Air Force. Len, it’s a bluff.”

“Agreed,” Waldron said, “stay the course, open bomb bay doors. Harris, the moment that thing comes in range, let him have it.”

The unfamiliar voice cut in again. “Captain Waldron, your aircraft’s bay doors are open. Close them immediately, or you will be fired upon. Acknowledge.”

Harris spoke fast, his pitch rising. “Sir, I can’t get a fix! He’s so fast he’s making S-turns to stay behind us. It’s gotta be like one of those German jets!”

“Keep your cool on the comms, Harris,” Waldron said. “Forget the radar and take your best shot. Bombardier, report time to mark.”

Harris broke in again, panic in his voice. “Captain, we got a new bogey. It’s burnin’ like hell and I can’t get a bead on it!”

Waldron’s heart hammered. “Acknowledged, gunner—holding course.”

An air-to-air missile tore the B-29 apart in a dazzling, short-lived fireball.

Henshaw's composure broke as his HUD tracked pieces of the venerable war machine falling toward Tokyo Bay.

"Kestrel Eight Seven to command," he said. "Intercept complete. Sir, why couldn't the spooks have been wrong about this? Are there more still out there? Why the hell did they ignore us and proceed to target?"

The Colonel sighed. "It was a different generation, son. A different generation."

Will Kohudic is a former barista and web developer turned magazine editor. He writes for creative expression, escape from the everyday, and the joy of the narrative. This is his first published work.

Tree of Hearts by Jess L. Freed

The sour metallic tang of Harold's food portion coated his tongue. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine that it was something else. Anything else. It'd been decades since the last time any flavor had touched his lips.

At least the mush calmed the clawing ache of hunger. His hands curled around the cool copper table before gulping down the last of his water allotment.

"What class are you teaching today?" Simon asked, his tray clanging atop metal.

Harold pinched the bridge of his nose. "The ethics of video games." He shoved his own empty tray out of the way.

"Not sure why," Simon started before his eyes darted around. He shook his head and sat in silence across the table.

"It doesn't matter," Harold whispered, waving his hand to dismiss the thoughts Simon almost shared out loud. There was no good that could come out of sharing their dangerous human opinions.

Simon shrugged in apology, the only acceptable offering. ModaRobots had ears everywhere and despite their terrible human lives, it was better than ending up on a heart tree.

"May your blood pump downward," Harold responded with a nod. The customary goodbye greeting was raw on his tongue, sending a cold shiver down his spine.

"And to the trees," Simon saluted, a grim smile splayed across his face.

Harold slid a hand down his face as the plexiglass door glided open, revealing a stone courtyard. Gray skies clouded out the sun, allowing only the dulllest light to filter across the dark stones. ModaRobots strode across the university grounds, dressed in colorful clothing reminiscent of the 1960s. Next month, they would move to the next decade as they tried on the human experience.

The only blatant difference between Harold and ModaRobots was the loose navy overalls that all living humans were required to wear. He forced his breathing to slow, relaxing his muscles as he watched the Modas weave between heart trees.

Trees with hearts in place of leaves. Red lumpy masses crystallized and sparkling in splashes of sunlight. Every single one represented a life—taken too soon by the will of the AI overlords. Harold’s nostrils flared. A reminder of his own fragility. A reminder of how little power he had over his own life.

Hearts were coveted by Modas, one of the few human aspects that couldn’t be replicated. Unfortunately, they decided the organs were perfect decorations for the trees, suspended in time by cryopreservation while the original hosts decayed somewhere in a landfill.

People like Harold, with the right credentials, were kept around to teach AI what it means to be human... As if they could ever understand the complexity of human emotion. A cold sweat dripped down his brow as he slipped to the edge of the courtyard, attempting to swerve through undetected.

“Professor Harold,” a ModaRobot with a high pony and long puffed sleeves called out.

Harold spun, his heart pounding and eyes low to the ground. Speaking with bots outside the classroom always increased his risk of ending up on a tree. But, unfortunately, he couldn't refuse.

"You may look up."

A shaky breath rattled in his lungs as he lifted his chin and pressed his lips together. It was a delicate balance to not end up on a tree. He needed to be both intelligent and well-spoken. A person worthy of teaching AI, but also a person who knew his place. It was like finding footing on a tight rope strung between two mountains above shards of glass.

The ModaRobot smiled, a dead smile. It was a poor attempt to look more human. "A human and their spouse are in a prison."

Harold held his breath. Moral dilemmas were a favorite at the university as one of the few areas that AI struggled to grasp.

"They attempt an escape," the ModaRobot continued, "but are captured. As punishment, one spouse is scheduled to be hung, while the other is forced to pull out the chair their lover stands on. If the second doesn't pull out the chair, they're both killed." The ModaRobot's head tilted to the right. "What is the morally right thing to do?"

Harold swallowed the lump forming in his throat. "The answer would be dependent on the person pulling the chair and their beliefs."

"Logic dictates that one would pull the chair because one dead person is better than two dead people."

Harold held her gaze. “If the spouse pulling the chair believed their soul would be stained by such an act, they would prefer to die with their spouse.” His hands curled into fists at his side. These questions were the worst. It was dangerous to answer anything that reminded the bots they would never be human.

“There’s no proof of a human soul.”

“There’s no proof that a human soul doesn’t exist.”

The Moda Robot’s smile widened, stretching much too far across her face. “Avert your gaze.”

Harold’s eyes dropped to his feet, his lungs quickly expanding with air. He’d survived once more. As her metal-lined boots stomped in the other direction he clutched at his chest. The beating proof that he was alive and not decoration for a tree.

Inhaling a sharp breath, he took a single step forward when a light feminine voice rang out. “Halt, human for harvesting found.”

Harold wobbled, his insides tightened as a Bot with wheels and four claws rolled forward. He kept his eyes low, not wanting to witness the poor soul being carried away. There was nothing he could do, and he had enough of those visions haunting his dreams.

But suddenly, his stomach bottomed out as cold metal scraped across his back, lifting him into the air. He released a gargled scream before metal extended, lacing up his back, and across his lips, muffling any other sound he could make. He had given an acceptable answer, or what should have been an acceptable answer. This didn’t make any sense.

The ModaRobot with the high pony stood on university steps, grinned and waving him off, as if he were going on a grand vacation. His gaze narrowed. The lack of empathy shining in her bright eyes. This could not be the last thing he saw before dying.

He tried to wiggle against the restraints, but the metal bit into his skin, sending sharp spikes of pain throughout his body. No, this would not be his fate. He had survived in this world for too long to give up now.

Harold's throat narrowed as the sights blurred from campus buildings to rolling green hills and asphalt. His jaw tightened. There had to be a way out of this death trap. With a deep inhale, his fear melted into sharp determination. There *would* be a way out of this and if given the chance, he wouldn't waste a single second as a professor. He would find a way to *live*.

The piercing sound of metal clanging echoed around Harold as the RollerBot came to halt, opening its claw and releasing Harold into a pile of wet, decomposing, leaves. He rolled over, spitting the brown foliage out.

A hand reached out to him. "Welcome to the last moments of your life," a kind elderly voice said.

Harold accepted the help, sinking further into mush as he wobbled to his feet. "This is where they take people?" His jaw fell. He had always imagined a medical facility, but this was a dump. People were scattered amongst compost, some huddled together, others alone and attempting to walk across the sinking ground.

The woman nodded, her gray hair frazzled and outlining a wrinkled face. “This is a holding area. They come every few minutes to scoop us up for harvesting.” She plucked a leaf from Harold’s hair. “Find what comfort you can, I’m going to help the others.”

Harold’s mouth went dry. He needed a weapon, something to use once he was able to speak with a Moda. His gaze swept across the miles of compost as the elder walked away.

“It’s not worth it.” A petite woman with dark braids crossed her arms. She wore a fitted tank top and a long skirt down to her ankles.

“What isn’t worth what?” Harold eyed her curiously. He’d lived for decades on the campus and hadn’t interacted with anyone outside of other professors or Modas. Her clothing was so out of place from what he’d been required to wear.

She shrugged. “Whatever you’re thinking. It won’t work. Once humans are taken to the compost, we either die here or on one of their open heart surgery tables.”

“You seem quite calm about that.” An ache splintered across his chest as his panic surged. If he didn’t act soon, his heartless body would fester here.

She flipped her braids back behind her and leaned her head back as if sunbathing on a warm afternoon. “I’ve spent the last six years pretending to be a Moda, it’s a miracle I wasn’t found out sooner.”

“Ah, that explains the 90s clothes.”

“Yeah, I got the memo for the 60s too late.”

He squatted down, swiping a hand across the mushy ground. “I think I have a plan, at least one that could distract them for a time, but then we’d need to get away.” He didn’t have a plan yet, but he would. Something would come to him.

She rolled her eyes. “Not interested.”

His lips thinned. Emerging across the horizon was a RollerBot, claw outstretched and ready to scoop. “I think you might be interested in that.”

“They come often, either carrying someone new or ready to pick someone up.” She yawned. “We’re all going to die here, may as well accept it.”

His hands curled into the ground, fistfuls of leaves squishing through his knuckles. This wasn’t humanity. Hope, that was the foundation in which people thrived. Bile rose in his throat, threatening to spill over as he looked at the woman once more. She was good—better than most—but she was AI.

His forehead scrunched. There was no time to decipher all the *whys* floating around in his mind. He looked to the RollerBot, his usual tricks would only work with a Moda, but perhaps a little hope would work for the people stranded here.

Screams pierced the air as people raced away from the Bot. Harold raised his chin, shoving aside compost, pushing and swimming toward the RollerBot. He needed to prove that there was always hope. Even if it meant death. People needed inspiration.

The crunching of leaves roared through Howard’s eardrums as he closed the gap between him and the machine. With a feral scream, he wrapped both arms around a claw, swinging one

leg over until he straddled the arm of the machine. His pulse thickened in his neck, proof of the erratic adrenaline rushing through his veins.

His eyes widened. People had stopped running. They were all watching what he would do next. He gulped down a breath of rotted air and scooted himself to the top of the machine arm, unsure himself what he would do. He scanned the back of the RollerBot, his gaze landing on the hull. Ignoring the shakiness of his limbs, he launched himself from the arm.

For a split-second as he soared through the air, he knew, this was the moment he would die. He was an emaciated professor, not a superhero. Leaps like these were for younger, stronger people.

Howard's face slammed into hard cold metal, sending a sharp pain rattling through his teeth. Saliva swarmed his mouth, pooling on the metal around him. He blinked, trying to regain his composure. He reached his arms out, his nails scraping across the back of the machine, but what was louder were the screams of the people.

No.

No screams, but cheers.

Howard shook out his head in disbelief and dragged himself to his feet. The machine's claw reached backward, stretching for Howard. He dropped and rolled. The claw struck itself on the hull, missing Howard by an inch.

The people's frenzied voices drowned out the sound of Howard's beating heart. He was still alive, somehow, miraculously, alive. His eyes narrowed at the dent from the RollerBot's claw, and an idea lit in his mind.

Twisting around, he dodged the claw once more. It crashed down with its full strength into the hull. A half-smile tugged at his lips as he repeated the process. Spinning and leaping like a maniac as the machine collided into itself again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

Howard's breath came in shallow gasps. He couldn't keep this up much longer. His eyes snapped to the incoming claw as he threw himself across the platform. Metal scraped against metal, grinding inside his ears. His jaw hung agape.

The claw had punctured a hole into the body and was now stuck, trying to pull itself free. His mind whizzed at an impossible speed as the cheers of the crowd faded into the background. With a deep, steady inhale, he bounded into the hole, falling into a pile of tangled wires.

His hands covered his face as sparks flew in every direction. There must be a way to control this thing, but computers had never been his expertise. Pulling himself out, he squared his shoulders and leaned over the hull of the machine. "Is anyone here an engineer?"

The elderly woman from before raised her arm. "Right here."

Understanding what he was trying to do, multiple people lifted her onto the back of the machine. Harold held his arms out wide. “Welcome aboard.” He glanced at the hidden AI with braids down her back. “Can you make this bot arm smash her?”

The woman’s lines deepened. “I’m not here for a lover’s squabble.”

“No, she’s a secret AI.” Howard lowered his voice. “I’ve spent enough time with them to know.” His gut twisted into knots because if he was wrong, the regret would eat him alive. The woman in braids began walking closer, her stride much too quick across the decaying leaves.

She visibly swallowed. “Okay.” Her hands tightened on a small knob, pressing strange symbols that meant nothing to Harold.

The woman in braids called out. “Ahem,” she coughed. “This really isn’t a good idea.”

Harold held his breath as he straddled between the moment of truth. The RollerBot’s swung outward, slamming into the woman in braids and splitting her in half. Harold released a breath as sparks flew in every direction, revealing a body made of machinery.

He was right.

“Well, I guess there is still more to see in this world.” She pressed her lips together in a slight frown. “I still think our hearts are all doomed to end up on a tree.”

“Maybe.” It was mostly true, but every resistance in history started with a flicker. It was up to them if that flame would grow or fade.

“If we fight back, no one is coming to save us.”

He raised his chin. “If?”

She sighed. “Okay, fine, when we fight back.” She climbed into the gaping metal hole and began analyzing the tangle of wires.

This was one machine, possibly an unusable machine, and they were still trapped in a mess of decaying leaves, but he would not go down without a fight. For himself and for all of humanity. “We’ll save ourselves,” he said loudly, more for himself than anyone else.

The machine roared to life once more, this time moving at the commands of the woman. She smiled. “I’m Mel by the way.”

“Harold, professor of—well, just Harold.”

Mel raised her brows. “So, are we the resistance now?”

Harold's lips thinned for a moment before he smoothed his face back over. “I should probably make a speech or something then.”

“Another RollerBot will arrive soon. Do you actually have a plan?”

Harold chuckled at the absurdity of it all. He began climbing out, looking back to whisper the only plan he needed. “Survive.”

Jess is a fantasy and sci-fi writer represented by Grace Demyan. She’s a mom, brain tumor survivor, and animal lover living in Massachusetts. Originally from Texas, she misses the breakfast tacos, but loves the New England cold weather. Find her on Instagram @JessFreedWrites.

Timbray Shafer

Jean's Candle

"Nobody's in."

The windows, their shutters chipped and frames crooked, offered only dark.

The boy phoned the number listed on the app. A cheery dial tone rang and rang, but no voice interrupted.

"So what do we do?"

The couple sat in silence, their hands twisting in their laps.

Headlights seared their vision from behind. A rumbling car eased close, purring, dragon-like, before its engine cut.

The girl craned her neck. "Is this her?"

A stooping woman climbed out of the passenger door. A cane shook in her hand, and her steps fell heavy upon the darkened street.

She stepped closer, then framed herself in their window, motioning for them to roll it down. Her stern, squared face was mapped with wrinkles. Her dull eyes were cast almost fully in shadow.

The boy moved as if hypnotized, startled into obedience by the woman's insistent hand.

"Can I help you?"

Her voice was startlingly low, like a gravel-laden toad's.

The girl cleared her throat. "We booked a room tonight. Are you Jean?"

The woman's mouth flexed out, then contracted in. "I didn't see a booking."

"It was confirmed." The girl fixed the woman with a stare, then extended her phone as proof.

The driver from the car behind them leaned out the window. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, yes," called the old woman after a moment's pause. "Just my houseguests."

"Oh, okay. Goodnight then, Jean." The car's dragon purr reignited, and it eased back into the night, which swallowed its shaky thrum.

"Well," said Jean, her irritation now at a simmer. "I've been out of power all day. And I've just returned from a little party. But there's a room if you still want it."

The couple exchanged a glance. Chill night air stole through the window, erecting bumps on their arms.

“Yes,” they said. “We still want it.”

Jean tapped her cane. “Come on, then.”

Inside the old home, a television was on, and playing a talent competition. Three women dressed as Celine Dion insisted upon their impersonations while singing, “It's All Coming Back to Me Now.”

“Shoes off?” The girl said.

“Don't bother.”

The television's song finished. One of the judges crowed her support. “It's like Celine was really up on that stage!”

“Come on,” Jean said, sniffing. “I'll show you around.”

The boy and the girl admitted to themselves the tickle of fear they'd felt outside, in the car, when this aged woman approached. Her motions had been stiff and her manner touched with menace. But now, in her home, they were assured by her knitted sweater, her simple stud earrings, and the warmth of her face in her lamps' ochre light. She seemed transfigured, a calming, domestic presence. Potent soap odors filled their noses, just as a chubby black dog came padding into the room.

“And here's Bob,” Jean announced.

Bob seemed a final confirmation of the stay's suitability. The boy and girl smiled as they scratched the pup's flabby fur coat, allowing him licks of their noses and cheeks. Bob panted, staring off at some space beside the TV, wagging his tail in a distracted sort of way.

“When you're ready, bring your things down the hallway,” Jean said, shuffling there herself, her cane stabbing up and down against the faded carpet.

The girl moved to pick up her dropped pack, but the boy cut her off, shrugging it onto his shoulder beside his own bag.

“Thanks.” The girl smiled, and they followed Jean down the hall.

“That's mine,” the woman said, passing the first room and closing its door. As the view inside shrank, a winnowing rectangle, the girl glanced inside to view a room unadorned, white walls framing a gray-sheeted bed. Then the opening was shut, leaving the girl with only a sense of hollow sadness.

The old woman continued down the hall.

“Here's yours.” She opened a door opposite the bathroom.

“Oh, wow!” said the girl.

The room was a carnival of color. Shelves of toys and figurines were backdropped by postcards and posters of locations sunny, snowy, or sacred. The couple stepped inside, their eyes only able to linger a moment on any space before flickering elsewhere.

“It’s amazing,” the boy agreed.

Jean’s fingers knit together. She nodded, eyeing the walls with passive appreciation. “Things I’ve picked up over the years.” She cleared her throat, and a tremor touched her voice. “I really am sorry about the booking confusion. Why don’t you get unpacked and join me in the living room? I’ll make you a cup of apology tea.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” started the boy, before the girl elbowed his rudeness aside.

Jean smiled and nodded, then disappeared down the hall.

“I guess we panicked too soon.”

The couple smiled. The boy set down their bags, then joined the girl in studying the walls, pointing to places they recognized and those they were eager to visit.

When they joined Jean in the living room, she was lowering the last of three flowered teacups onto her table. Behind her on the TV, three Frank Sinatras crooned in unison.

‘Here and there, everywhere, scenes that we once knew.’

Jean grabbed the remote. Her hand, veiny and swollen, shook as she clicked off the television’s power.

She patted the front of her sweater. “Sit down, then.”

The couple settled into chairs and took cautious sips of tea. The scalding liquid was soothing, with a bitterness nestled among its fruitier flavors.

“Better be prepared in case the power goes out again.” Jean stared, perhaps to determine if her guests would disapprove, before hobbling to a cabinet at the far end of the room. Its door opened with a subdued cry. From within, Jean retrieved a bone-white candle on a shining silver holder. Tottering back, she placed it on the table between the cups of tea. It was a stub of a thing, dozens of wax beads dried like tears on its sides and in lines down the silver. Shaky-fingered, Jean produced a box of matches, carefully lighting one and touching its twinkling head to the candle’s wick. The strand of twisted string gobbled at the flame, just as it was extinguished from the match head.

“Now,” said Jean, slipping the matchbox into her pocket and sitting opposite the couple. “I’d like you to tell me a story.”

“A story?”

Jean nodded. The light of the candle just reached the wrinkles on her squarish face. She might have been a jack-o-lantern. “I’m so fascinated by the young people who stay with me. I am, I admit, envious. They travel. They see the world and meet its many people. They do the things I dreamed of doing, but never could.”

“Why not start now?” offered the boy.

Jean raised a bemused eyebrow, her fingernails tapping the table.

“You weren’t able to travel? When you were young?” the girl asked, her brows knit tight in concern.

Jean picked up her tea, her shoulders deflating. “I married. Had kids. I imagined I was in love.” She heaved a heavy sigh and smiled faintly. “I was wrong. That’s all. I made a mistake.” After a gentle sip, she reached across the table and placed the tips of her fingers on the girl’s wrist. “Take my advice. Never throw away your opportunities for a man.” She eyed the boy. “Don’t take offense. It’s important advice.”

“Definitely,” the boy said, the word catching in his throat.

“So,” Jean continued, “I ask again. Will you tell me a story? Of places you’ve gone and sights you’ve seen?”

The boy and girl exchanged a brow-raised glance. The request seemed simple enough, but forming a single answer felt absurd, like coaxing a cloud into a bottle.

“I mean, we’ve always loved to travel,” offered the girl, her smile meek.

“Where have you been?”

“Well, there’s still loads of places on our list,” the boy said. “But we’ve done Southeast Asia. Some time in Central America. A lot of Europe. Spain, Italy, a week in Berlin. A while in Iceland.

“Iceland.” Jean leaned forward, letting more of the candle’s light flicker upon her face. “Tell me about that.”

“Yeah,” said the girl, scooting backward in her chair. “Yeah, okay. We went there, when?”

“2016, 17, I think.”

“That sounds right.”

Jean nodded, a yearning in her eye. “Tell me. Tell me about the moments that took your breath away.”

“Well, Reykjavík was charming, of course. The architecture. Great seafood. The real highlight was hiking that glacier, though—what was it called?”

The boy thought a while. “Vatnajökull.”

“That's the one.”

Jean's eyes widened, and her voice came out as a croak. “A glacier. I've always wanted to see one.”

“You really should,” said the girl. “Absolutely stunning. But they're all retreating. They'll melt totally soon. It's so sad. I don't want to believe it— that something so gorgeous could just disappear.”

Jean leaned backward and smiled in a somber sort of way. “It won't be so hard to believe when you reach my age.”

The boy shifted, tapping his toes together beneath the table, his shifts planting stomach twinges in the girl as well. Jean was so sweet, so kind. It was strange to think she had been young once, had been just the age they were now.

Jean wiped her lips. “What do you remember most? About Valla--”

“Vatnajökull,” the boy said, unable to refuse the eager light in Jean's eyes. “Well, we took a ride out with a company. They got us all geared up. Crampons and helmets. And we hiked on top of the glacier.”

“Not just on top,” said the girl. “That blue ice cave too, remember? It was so beautiful. The whole cavern looked like a crystal palace. A lapis lazuli dreamland.”

“Yeah. It was pretty special.”

Jean's eyes glowed, a perfect swirl of envy and awe. Her tongue peeked, for just a moment, between her lips, and then was gone.

The girl stared at her knee, then looked up again, smiling. “Actually, I stole some of the ice. I felt sneaky, but I think it's alright. I carry little vials around, you see, to collect sand or flower petals or anything I find precious. I keep them on a shelf in my parents' house. One's filled with that blue glacier ice. Melted now.”

“Your parents must enjoy that little collection.” Jean smiled again.

“I might have a picture on my phone.” But as the girl began to search her photos, she felt surely and suddenly that they had done something terribly wrong. The girl pitied Jean, pitied her for the man she’d traded her life to, loading her dreams into a rowboat and watching them drift further and further to sea. What a horrible thing, to grow old and feel like you’ve done nothing. Jean had asked for this story of their adventures, but what good would it do her? Wouldn’t it merely remind her of her failings?

Bob lumbered over, bumping the table as he nestled his head above Jean’s knee.

“Okay, Bob,” said Jean. “Okay.” She stroked his ears, her cheeks’ wrinkles deepening under the force of her grin.

“It’s late,” the boy said after swallowing the last of his tea. “We should get ready for bed.”

Jean stared at the candle, and for a moment, she seemed to be wincing. Her knuckles whitened as they clutched the edge of her chair. But then her expression eased, and she reached behind her for a drawer, retrieving a snuffer, and with a slowly lowering hand, extinguished the candle’s flame. It danced now only in memory, in the trail of smoke-wisps that would soon vanish too.

Jean looked back at her guests, her eyes dark. “Alright, then.”

The boy and girl awoke later than they would have liked. They hurried to pack.

“Have we got everything?” said the boy.

“Looks like it.” The girl scanned the room. “Oh no.” She pointed to an empty space, a square of white among the busy color of the walls. “Something fell off.” She lowered her head and searched the floor, under the bed and the chairs it may have slipped beneath.

“You’re sure something was there?” asked the boy.

“Positive,” she replied. “The whole room was covered, don’t you remember?”

The boy made a half-hearted contribution to the search. “It’s not here.”

“Well, we have to do something. Jean’ll think we stole it.” She clicked her tongue. “I’ll have to tell her it’s missing.”

The boy shrugged. He thought it hardly likely the old woman would notice.

They lugged their packs out the door and found Jean munching on unbuttered toast.

She swallowed, her eyes wide and glossy. “You slept well?”

“Very well, thanks.” The girl smiled. “We're a bit confused, though. Something seems to have fallen off your wall. There's a blank spot.”

“Oh.” Jean rubbed the back of her neck. “Well, it's no matter. Plenty of junk in there.”

“But we'll feel awful if we've lost it.”

Jean waved her hand. “Something else will come along to replace it.”

The boy and the girl shared a glance.

“If you're sure...”

Jean nodded.

It was a relief Jean didn't seem to mind, but a sense of guilt, of loss, lingered in their stomachs like a rusted anchor.

“We'll go now then.”

Jean stood, using her chair for support.

“It's been lovely hosting the two of you,” she said, offering each guest a hug. “And—” She froze, her gaze fixing them with doe-like trepidation. “I hope you get a chance to visit Iceland before those glaciers melt.”

“We sure hope to!” the girl answered. “It was great meeting you too, Jean.”

The boy cleared his throat, ready to be gone. “Thanks.”

They thought how silly it was that they had ever been scared of this woman. They walked out her door and clambered into their car.

Jean watched them go, watched their vehicle back out of her driveway, its nose curving out and cruising away, far from this place, and from her. A weight pressed her like a coat on a summer day, and she picked at the drooping skin beneath her chin. When the noise of the couple's car was gone, Jean closed her door and turned to sigh at the images of her tired home. She straightened her sweater, patting the wrinkles and pulling out the loose, tufty threads.

They would be okay, those two. They had decades ahead.

Walking to her glass cabinet, she opened its doors and pushed her silver candlestick to the side. Behind it lay a vial, stoppered with a cork. Water sloshed within, water from the electric blue ice cave she'd hiked in her youth. What beautiful memories those were. Vatnajökull. Like a lapis lazuli palace. Yes... though she had never heard of the glacier before yesterday, now she could see it clearly in her mind, could remember herself there, walking about in wonder. How precious, to possess such a beautiful recollection.

She set the vial down, then slid the candlestick back into its place. A single drop of dried wax was stuck to its silver, and she used the tip of a gnarled finger to scrape it free. She placed the little wax pearl in the bowl below the candle's wick, which towered tall and proud above the silver holder. A ding came from her phone. Another booking. More young folk, coming to stay, brimming with memories. Memories they might share... With a slight frown, she closed the cabinet doors.

"Bob?" she called.

The dog came padding over, his tongue wagging carelessly between his teeth.

"You're a good boy, Bob." She scratched the dog's fur, her mind casting back through time, to all the places she might have gone.

On Gurgun Island

As I stepped off the boat, a stranger's shout cut through the air, and I found my gaze drawn, as if magnetized, not to the source of the shout, but to the sight that had demanded it. A Gurgun, loping out from a grove of trees, sniffing at the air. One of my welcoming party peeled away, sprinting back down the dock, with the apparent aim of chasing it off with a spear.

"Apologies," a stiff-looking suit offered, extending a regretful hand.

I told her not to worry, hoping that the excitement of the sudden sighting was not overly apparent in my expression. "Would it have attacked?"

"No, no," the suit replied, quickly dismissing the subject in favor of introductions. She was Sena, the resort head, and the others beside her were various members of her staff.

Her eyes flickered to my boat. "Your first time to the island?"

I said it was, and this seemed to satisfy.

Sena and her team led me to the crystal-clad lobby of the crown hotel. In a corner, another Gurgun, garbed in hotel uniform, was working the floor with a mop.

I again attempted to hide my delight, preferring to leave an impression of professional aloofness, but I fear my excitement was all too apparent in my voice.

"You employ them!"

I had heard of Gurgens, but never before laid eyes upon the things. Confirming with my own eyes that they were real brought to my arrival a rather dream-like haze, or rather, a dream-like clarity.

“Of course.” Sena’s reply felt hasty, slightly snappish.

She called for a human employee, who appeared with a tray full of egg tarts.

“You must try.”

Forgetting the mopping Gurgens, I reached for a treat. They were, as it happened, a favorite.

Sena tilted her head, the curve of her lips suggesting she was eager for my assessment.

“The tarts are rather famous on the island. They were even used in the old peace negotiations. Gurgens love them. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Mm,” I replied, again wary of her design in telling me so.

The tart was divine. The crust was flaky, buttered heaven, and the custard oozed with sugary squish.

“We’re quite proud of them.” Sena hummed. My memory cast back to the egg tarts of my youth, which could not match the creations of the island. Relenting to the comforts, I elected to share some of my recollection. “When I was small,” I said, “I always hoped to have them without crust. The custard is so much more delectable.”

“Sacrilege,” Sena spoke, smiling through a half-chuckle. “The crust is what keeps it all together.”

I laughed too, as Sena beckoned me onward, before I’d finished wiping the crumbs off my lips.

We passed two more Gurgens on the way to the ballroom. These strained with stunted arms to reach the chandeliers they were tasked with dusting.

They were hideous creatures, really. Leather-skinned, with backs so bent they nearly groveled on all fours, like beasts. They muttered in a local tongue, which included a dreadful assortment of snorts, bursts of air gusting from upturned snouts. My stomach lurched, and it struck me to wonder why the resort didn’t employ a warlock, who could handle such petty tasks with far more discretion.

After a tour of the mineral baths and dining facilities, Sena showed me my room and left me the rest of my day. It was an impressive room, no doubt, made all the more spectacular by the deep green leaves on thorny-barked trunks, the island’s exotic intrigue on constant display. I

showered, then headed to the overlook lounge to fill my journal. I found myself distracted, throughout my scribblings, though, by a made whose face struck me as oddly familiar.

I finally placed him as the one who'd chased the Gurgens from the dock. I approached, noticing that his arm was bandaged, hanging in a sling and spotted with blood.

"Pesky devil," he said, shaking his head.

He had said it, I thought, in surprise at the sight of me, and I offered some sympathetic comment before abandoning him. But the interaction renewed my curiosity about the Gurgens. It was a spectacular resort, one that offered more than enough to consume all my time. But when you see enough of such places, their comforts dull, and I found my interest commanded instead to the island's hunched half-creatures.

When I searched, I spotted them everywhere: cleaning pools, scrubbing dishes, wheeling bins of towels. Any task outside the guest's rooms belonged to them. I imagined the era in which they had reigned over this island, then the swift process that relegated them to serving visitors and hiding in their jungles. Most guests appeared ignorant of Gurgens presence, their gazes and sentences unbroken whenever the beings lumbered by. Not that the Gurgens minded. Each seemed spun in a spell of anxious hurry, orb-eyes darting about, knobby fingers fumbling over washrags and dustpans.

My heart drifted closer and closer toward sympathy for the beasts. What a dreadful plight, to be made small on the land that was once theirs.

As night fell, I heard, outside my room, the familiar snorts of the Gurgens tongue. Poking my head into the hallway, I spotted two of them, heads bent, thumping on side by side. Their grubby hands were without mop or rag. I supposed them to be retiring.

A curiosity over where the Gurgens stayed overwhelmed me, and I followed, at cautious distance, as the Gurgens bobbed down a back hallway, then a set of stairs. Their movements were fatigued and awkward, like they wore ice skates while bearing great weight.

In a basement, I spied them knock upon a door, which opened to emit a gagging cacophony of gurgles and groans. A panic welled within me; the tenor of the noises made it clear that something was amiss, that some horrible issue was afoot. I rushed to the door to confront the sounds' source.

A room of horror stretched ahead. Tens of Gurgens, crammed into a long, rectangular room, furnished with only a rusty shower-head above a drain in the corner. The smell was

pungent— a swampy rot, an acidic reek. The Gurgens lay on their sides, curling bowed spines, belching bubbles of greenish sludge. Their eyes pinched, their mouths moaned, their fingers clawed, their legs slapped like pancakes, wet upon the stone.

“Gone exploring, have we?”

I turned in alarm. Sena stood behind me. She held, in her hand, a platter of egg tarts.

“I came to see if you wanted these. You did seem to enjoy them.”

I shook my head at the treats, my stomach threatening to retch up their old comrade.

“What’s wrong with these Gurgens?” was all I managed to expel.

Sena studied me, a slow breath spilling out her nose. The light was dim, and she was so versed in hospitality that her exact emotion was difficult to discern.

“The Gurgens lived for generations on this island without threat or scarcity. A luxury that weakened them in body and mind.” She motioned to the prostrate forms. “This is what comes of their induction to labor.”

“Then why force them? A warlock’s services are inexpensive, and could easily—”

“Ah, but you have to see. If we do not employ the Gurgens, their entire population would be like the one we chased away from the docks. Curious. Wild. Aggressive. It would be difficult to manage them all. How many guests would still come? But keep them occupied, tell them their jungle kin live in shame. Have them chase away their own kind. Do all this, and the beasts can remain.” Sena straightened, adopting a slight tinge of defiance. “Would you prefer they all be slaughtered?”

“No,” I spat. “But the way you treat them. It’s completely barbaric!”

“Perhaps... But you must understand.” Sena glanced at her platter and smirked. “The crust is what keeps it all together.”

Timbray is a traveling teacher and a passionate devotee of birds, carousels, and mountains. His work includes The Rens series, Spare Mattress, and Look at Mine, and his stories have been published by Apparition Lit, Every Day Fiction, The Dribble Drabble Review, and more. Find Timbray on Instagram @timbrayy.

After The Harvest by David Barber

The youth's home was a thousand miles to the west. He'd been walking for a year, trudging between scattered farmsteads, working for his keep, catching his breath before one sunrise or another lured him on.

Some folk had heard tell of Towers further to the east, but then they shrugged, more curious about this youth and his journey than old stories. This was how it was these days.

A vast slack river blocked his path. The youth waved and yelled when he saw boats. Sometimes crews waved back, but none of them stopped.

About noon, he stepped aside to let a wagon piled tall with cargo overtake him. The driver touched her stick to the lead mule and they creaked to a halt. She was grizzled and wiry, with a shapeless blob of a nose. Beside her on the high seat sat a young woman. On her, the nose was pretty.

The youth struggled to make himself understood in the local dialect. The river. He wanted to cross the river.

"There's a bridge," the driver confirmed, thinking of the one perched on the piles of an ancient pont. "We're going that way."

The girl watched him clamber up beside them but avoided his frank gaze.

"A kindness," began the youth.

The driver started up the team but did not reply. To her way of thinking, the youth's thanks meant he'd expected her to pass by without stopping.

"My name is Rus," he added, waiting to see if the girl would use it. Undeterred, he chattered on about the Tower and how far he'd walked to find it.

"You heard wrong," interrupted the driver, still nursing her grievance.

"Excuse?"

"No need to cross the river." She gestured with her stick. The Tower was north, not further east.

"I've seen it," said the girl, speaking for the first time. "In the distance."

She remembered it blazing with sunlight, like a signal fire on the far horizon.

"Made of metal?" he asked eagerly. "Like mirrors?"

He dazzled her with his smile. "Built by the ones who went to the stars."

"That's just a story," scoffed the girl.

Outraged, the youth appealed to the driver. "Are you not taught this history?"

The driver shrugged, and for a while there was only the sound of iron-rimmed wheels rumbling on the roadway, as they followed the faded lines someone had painted long ago.

"All here are earthbound," the youth burst out again. "You know them. The farmers. The blacksmiths. The—"

The wagon drivers, he might have said. He'd tried explaining all this before, to families who'd shared their meal with him at lamplit tables. They expected a tale in return, or news from beyond the next town, but nobody seemed interested in the past.

Towards dusk the wagon turned off the ancient asphalt. Relatives of the driver farmed nearby.

"You'll be welcome to bed down in the barn," said the driver. They would be going on in the morning.

"Isn't he beautiful?" the girl whispered to her aunt as they unhitched the team.

They sat at a table beneath live oaks, watching moths circle the glow of a sunlight hung in the branches. There were bowls of thick stew with bread, and afterwards, cheese with tart windfalls and yeasty beer.

The talk was about the family farm; how someone was sweet on someone; unasked for advice was heaped a stocky boy next to Rus. The lad stared down at the table, his cheeks scarlet. Then the table grew quiet as the driver spoke of weddings and funerals, of twins born to a neighbour's daughter. The one who ran away downriver for love.

Sitting opposite the girl, Rus had overheard her name.

"Look, Jen," he said, pointing at the sunlight with his spoon. "From the olden times."

He'd always wondered how they stored up sunshine and told her how he'd once exchanged his labour for a failed sunlight. An axe had cracked it like an egg.

"But it still kept its secrets," he said.

In all his travels, such marvels of the past were rarely remarked upon. Life was simpler now and folk seemed to prefer it that way.

But Jen was appalled. "Even a dead sunlight is a beautiful thing. It must have taken years for someone to make it so round and smooth."

He found that funny. "They made many at once. With machines. Sunlights are machines."

Her turn to laugh. For all her youth, she'd travelled further with her aunt than most did in a lifetime. She knew about machines. At Midsummer Fairs she'd seen great noisy steam engines.

A shadow passed over his face, like a cloud across a meadow.

So, he could be moody when his wild talk was challenged. But in the end he had laughed, which was good, and he was so beautiful.

After the driver's news, it was Jen's turn and she sang in a pure, high voice. The song was a favourite here and there was a murmur of approval. Folk nodded their heads in the poignant silence that followed.

"No," protested the youth. "I cannot sing, but if Jen will help with my poor speech, I know a tale told by my people."

As the story had it, the world was lost and remade beyond the memory of counting, like waves upon a shore. Usually a few imposed progress on the rest. Soon everyone was caught up in a frantic race to exhaustion, war and collapse.

Sometimes, if the rulers were steadfast, or cruel enough, they put a stop to change. But after an age, the old knowledge came seeping back, like water moistening a parched land. Those who advanced did so on the backs of those that did not. Soon it became an unseemly scramble. That was inevitable too.

Around the table, his audience sat in poses of studied concentration which Rus mistook for interest. Jen nodded encouragement.

The youth had been told all this as a cautionary tale about history, but he added his own ending.

"Just once in all those times," he continued. "A few saw there was a seed in some that made them different from the rest, and because it was possible, they harvested their own and left for the stars."

There was an awkward silence. Had the lad finished?

Throats were cleared, mugs refilled and talk wandered down more congenial paths. These folk had escaped the past. History was the bad luck of others. If they had their way there would be no more history.

Next morning, Jen was silent as she helped harness the mules.

"I can pick you up on the way back," volunteered her aunt, pulling buckles tight.

Jen hugged her. "I don't mean to let you down. Rus is going to work his keep here. He wants to see the Tower."

The girl wasn't sure what it meant, this wanting to play with dangerous old things.

"And I might not be coming back with you."

Her aunt shook her head. "You never cussed the animals enough anyway."

Afterwards, the driver found the old woman outside the kitchen, shelling peas into a bowl. Her hands were gnarled as roots and worked as if by a will of their own. Her milky gaze seemed fixed on distant figures in the fields.

"Sorry about the boy," the driver began. "I can take him with me if you like."

In the silence, chickens in the yard quarrelled.

"Jen's smitten with him," she added. "But he seems more interested in the Tower."

The old woman nodded. "We'll see."

In return for lodging and the loan of mounts, Rus and Jen worked around the farm, then set out for the Tower, half a day's ride to the north.

"A bad place," Jen said, as they drew close. The horses picked their way amongst stunted bushes and rocks showing through the threadbare soil. She didn't like it here.

"Perhaps they wanted to keep people away," Rus mused. "If the Tower works like a sunlight, they wouldn't want trees to shade it."

Or maybe some invisible ill leaked out of the Tower making this ground sickly. He stopped himself saying that aloud.

Jen had learned he rarely expected an answer. He was simply voicing whatever notion occurred to him. He was different in so many ways to her own people.

The Tower defied comparison. Wider than a barn, taller than any building they'd ever seen, it seemed to threaten the clouds. It took them minutes to walk round its square base.

"There would be no taking an axe to this," Rus murmured.

Etched on one mirror-smooth side, at ground level, was a circle bigger than himself. Next to it was a row of circles, each as big as his face. There were marks in every circle but the last.

After a while Jen wandered off to see to the horses. She was glad she'd seen the Tower close up, but was ready to go back now. High above, a single bird flew from horizon to horizon. She thought about the men she knew. Good reliable men, farmers and fathers.

He sat like stone, his pale hair fluttering. She could not help reaching out to touch it.

"It's numbers," he said, without turning his head. "Counting the number of marks in these small circles."

Reading from left to right, each circle had twice as many marks as the last, but less one. He stood and tapped the last blank circle, counting aloud. And instead of it all being a game, shining

metal seemed to melt away like butter in a hot pan, revealing a doorway and a glowing corridor leading to another closed door.

"Don't go in," Jen whispered, appalled. "It might shut."

He considered this, then dropped his saddle across the circular hole.

"Circles with marks by this door as well. But not the same," echoed his voice from inside.

"Rus, come out!"

He hadn't expected any of this. It needed thinking about.

Afterwards, after about five minutes, the door refilled itself with a waterfall of gleaming metal, yet was cold and hard to the touch. The old ones built to last. No chains to rust. No hinges to squeak.

That evening she was silent as he chattered.

"The numbers in the circles are a kind of test," he said. "So that the idle and the aimless don't just wander inside by mistake."

"So what happens?" she wanted to know.

He dragged his gaze from the marks he'd copied down.

"I mean, if you go through the other door."

"The Towers were made by the old ones, so anything's possible."

She let this pass. "Yes, but what do you *think* happens?"

"The Towers are for the ones they missed. They send you to the stars."

It was like talking to a child.

"I come from a farm like this," Rus added after he'd solved the sequence of marks. "Winters colder than here. Not enough rain in summer."

Jen waited, but he said no more. "So why did you leave?"

"This was the nearest Tower."

Sometimes he felt like shaking folk into explaining why they didn't flock to the Towers and gaze open-mouthed. These farmers lived close, yet none of them had ever been. Something had gone out of human nature.

The following week, riding to the Tower again, Jen tried to think. She'd seen a passion like this before — a cousin who left home and family to play music. Foolish to force Rus into a choice when she didn't know how it would go.

She hid her relief when things went wrong. It took Rus ages to figure out the new patterns on the door. He threw his saddle into the opening, then couldn't get the inner door to do anything. He kept telling her the numbers he tapped out were right.

"Perhaps the outer door has to be shut first," he said emerging.

"There's no rush," said Jen, as if trying to help. "The Tower's been here a long time. It isn't going away."

He'd had a notion about making a gadget, something that would tap out the marks on the inner door while he waited safely outside. Only sensible to change one thing at a time.

So they settled into habits like an old married couple. In the evenings he tinkered with a contraption of pivots, ratchets and pebbly counterweights. She watched him with an odd contentment. He grew excited and angry in turn with his toy, and was proud as a parent when it pecked a signal on the barn door. They owed more farm work before they could borrow horses again.

His device worked, but nothing happened. Perhaps living fingers had to tap the number into the blank circle. There could be lots of reasons, and some he could test in clever ways. He loved forcing the world so it must tell him the truth. The old ones would be proud.

That fall, everyone was busy with the harvest and there was no time for the Tower. Then during the winter he was felled by a fever, one the farm folk caught harmlessly in childhood. In the spring she told him she was pregnant.

Each visit, he learned something, but it was a slow business. He concluded the inner door would only open with the outer door closed. And the corridor was safe with both doors shut. A fowl smuggled from the farmyard was still complaining when Rus tapped the outer door open again.

Then in the mirrored metal, he saw himself struggling with a bad-tempered chicken.

"I've been too cautious," he declared. "I've forgotten why I came so far. We should just go in, now, this minute, and trust the Tower to take us."

Rus couldn't believe it when Jan point-blank refused. It was the first argument they'd ever had.

She told him what women said. "It's like putting beer in a bowl for slugs, like a mousetrap. The Towers were like that. Nobody comes out."

Jen had also overheard women say the Towers caught the difficult ones, the troublemakers, the ones like Rus.

"These women," said Rus, and his voice took on the quick sarcastic edge that so irritated people. "How do they know? Did they see no one come out again? Or does no one come out because they go to the stars."

He did not believe such marvels were just mousetraps for the curious.

She took a deep breath and conceded the Towers might have done something once. Who knew with history?

"But what if they're broken now? What if the doors stay shut and you can't get out?"

He netted her in clever arguments but could not shift her stubborn distrust. Finally, she mentioned the baby. What could be more important than that? For the first time they went to bed in silence and lay without touching, rehearsing their grievances in the dark.

Waking alone next morning, she knew it was up to her to put things right. She wandered round the farm buildings looking for him and gradually the certainty of it settled inside her like a stone.

"He took the grey mare," her uncle confirmed. He leant on his pitchfork. "Without asking. Off to that Tower again, I suppose. And grandma wants to see you."

The old woman only half-listened as Jen talked.

"His sort are different," she interrupted. "You want the old days back?"

Jen met that pale, blind gaze. "Rus says—"

The old woman slapped the table. "Rus says! And what does he know?"

Jen lifted her chin defiantly. "I need to borrow a horse, but I'll walk if I have to."

How brave she sounded to herself.

She met the grey making its own way home. She told herself it must have bolted and she would find Rus sitting with his back against the Tower, the wind stirring his hair, furious with himself. She recalled when his wooden toy failed and he flung it away in temper.

The metal of the Tower was like a mirror. In it, a girl on horseback led a riderless grey mount across a barren, empty land, but the reflection gave only a poor semblance of the world. Its flesh was not warm, its hopes were not real, its tears were not wet.

After years and years, or after no time at all, the arrival of a signal caused them to dust off old equipment.

Welcome home, someone said when he opened his eyes.

The End

David Barber lives anonymously in the UK. His ambition is to continue doing both these things.

Athena's Kingdom by Carl Tait

The obese man grinned through his red beard, dingy teeth appearing under his mustache. "First time visiting Athena's Kingdom?" he asked.

Tad gripped Lila's sweaty hand and nodded. "Uh-huh. Special tickets from our high school. I won them in a contest." He reached into his pocket and pulled out two colorful pieces of paper.

His girlfriend clicked her tongue. "TMI, TMI."

The red-bearded man laughed. "No worries about too much information around here, young lady. We love to know our guests. Welcome to the park." He tucked the passes into the cash register and waved the teens through the gate.

Tad looked down the wide black pathway toward the wonders that awaited them. Athena's Kingdom was the newest and largest amusement park in Georgia, and the array of soaring roller coasters was both thrilling and intimidating. Could one ever ride them all? Would anyone want to?

Lila put her arm around Tad's midsection and pulled him close. The warmth of her lithe body filled him with even greater happiness than the prospect of a day of thrill rides.

"Where to first?" Lila asked. "Let's take a look at the map, but we gotta choose quick. The lines are gonna get long in a hurry."

Tad pointed. "How about the Spinneroo? An easy one to get us going."

"Before we eat anything!" Lila laughed. "That kind of ride makes me queasy, but I still want to do it."

The line for the Spinneroo was mercifully short. The couple spent less than ten minutes queuing in the largely vacant maze of iron railings. When their turn arrived, they dashed across the circle of metal plating to the nearest barrel-like pod and sealed themselves inside. A young employee wearing the orange-and-purple uniform of the park checked the lock and gave them a thumbs-up.

"All clear. Dispatch," came the voice over the loudspeaker.

The whirling began. The large main plate rotated swiftly as the individual pods swiveled and tipped in their own cadences. Lila screamed with delight as Tad grinned and feigned nonchalance.

The spinning slowed and stopped. The same uniformed teen flipped open the lock on their pod with practiced ease and walked away, leaving the couple to get out and stagger down the stairs. As Lila clutched Tad's arm for balance, he felt an even more intense rush of affection.

I'm going to ask her to marry me, he thought. We've known each other for years. It's time.

Lila looked at him with radiant happiness, as if she could read his thoughts. When she spoke, it was with enthusiasm, but on a different subject.

“That was so much fun! Can we do a roller coaster next? How about Devilish Deimos?”

“Anything you like. Let’s go.”

The day was already warming into a southern scorcher. The smell of warm asphalt filled the air as they walked along the pathway to the next ride. As they approached Devilish Deimos, Tad groaned.

“Lordy, look at that line. Probably an hour.”

“C’mon, hon. We can wait. That first drop is incredible.”

He tilted his head back, facing the late-morning sun. A train was heading up the buttressed incline of the bright yellow lift hill. Cresting the peak, it hurtled down the other side as its riders shrieked. Tad’s stomach flipped in voyeuristic delight.

The couple got in line. The wait was over an hour, but strategically placed fans in the wooden rafters kept the temperature tolerable. A narrow set of stairs led up to the boarding area, where trains stopped with a hiss and babbling passengers exited the cars to make way for new riders. Lila and Tad strapped themselves in, lowered the safety bar, and grinned at each other. A worker in park regalia checked their security.

“All clear. Dispatch.”

The train lurched out of the station and up the lift hill with surprising speed. The first drop was blinding and intense; more so than it appeared from the ground. Then came twists and turns. Too violent for Tad. He loved speed and air time, but getting smacked around in restraints that dug into his legs was not enjoyable.

The ride finally returned to the starting point and the couple stepped out of the train. Tad was annoyed to see his legs shaking slightly.

“Too scary?” Lila asked. “I thought it was great.”

“A bit much for me,” Tad admitted.

Lila laughed. “The story of our marriage! I always like things a little spicier than you do.”

“What did you say?”

“Never mind. Let’s grab some slushies. It’s getting hot.”

When they stepped outside, the sun seemed brighter. They made their way to a snack bar conveniently located across from the ride exit, where neon-colored slushies could be purchased at exorbitant prices.

The couple slurped their frozen treats with satisfaction. When Lila opened her mouth to speak, her tongue was the same green color as her drink.

“I know,” she said. “Let’s do a dark ride next. It’ll be cooler inside.”

Tad nodded. “Tales of the Tarantula. Sounds terrifying. I don’t know if my weak heart can take it.”

Lila elbowed him in the ribs as they set off for their next destination.

The line was of moderate length and was suffused with the smell of the artificially blue water that flowed through the ride. The couple eventually found themselves stepping over puddles into a boat that drifted inside a gloriously air-conditioned chamber.

“This is the lair of the tarantula,” croaked a voice through tinny speakers. “Beware of spiders and other creepy-crawlies. Mwah ha ha ha!”

“That’s not scary,” said Tad.

“Well, duh,” Lila answered.

The boat continued its winding path down the river, past dimly lit rooms where large mechanical tarantulas flailed their oversized legs. The scenes were no more than modestly horrifying, though Tad supposed they would frighten a young child. Almost on cue, a girl began screaming.

“Mommy, mommy, this is too scary!”

Lila spoke up.

“Try to keep it down, sugar. Your daddy didn’t know this ride would be so spooky.”

“Daddy!”

The voice was at Tad’s elbow. He looked down into the face of the blonde girl sitting next to him.

“Daddy, I hate this ride and I want it to stop.”

Tad didn’t know what to say.

Lila put her arm around the girl. “Janet, it will be over soon. Just close your eyes and lean against me.” She glared at Tad.

The boat chugged on, seemingly without end. Tad had not realized tarantulas had so many tales to tell. Janet’s quiet sobbing never stopped. As the boat rounded a final turn in the river, sunlight leaked through a dangling curtain at the exit. The girl’s crying trailed off.

At the dock, Lila had trouble getting out of the boat. “Sorry, my trick knee’s acting up today. Can you give me a hand?”

Tad nodded. He stood up and stepped out, his own knees cracking and popping. He reached a hand down to Lila.

"Thanks," she said. "Janet was always so good at helping me up, then she had the nerve to go off to college. Maybe when she graduates from Harvard, she'll move back here so we can see her more often."

The ride attendant rolled his eyes at the name-dropping but was otherwise silent.

It was already afternoon. Tad and Lila walked hand in hand to a few more rides, skipping the ones with obscenely long lines while enjoying several of the less popular offerings. As twilight settled in, Tad spotted the lights of the carousel and grinned.

"Let's ride it!" he said. "I know it's silly."

Lila patted his hand. "It'll be a nice way to end the day."

There was no line. They climbed onto wooden horses under the bright lights and waited.

"All clear. Dispatch," came the announcement.

The carousel began to turn. The music was an assortment of oldies, arranged for calliope. Tad started to sing along, but the cracked sound of his voice embarrassed him and he fell silent. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the music, the breeze, and the sense of contentment.

It was over too soon. Tad climbed down from his horse and was about to walk away when the attendant stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir. Here's your cane."

Tad thanked him and took the walking stick. He shook his head ruefully.

Lila would have reminded me about my cane, he thought. God, I miss her.

It was dark as Tad made his way to the exit of the park. At the gate stood the same red-bearded gentlemen who had been there in the morning.

"Hello, sir," the man said. "Did you enjoy your day at Athena's Kingdom?"

"I didn't get to ride everything," Tad complained.

"No one ever does," said the man. "Choice is part of the experience."

"I don't like that. I wanted more."

The man shrugged. "I'm awfully sorry, but the park's closed. That's the way it works."

Tad thought back on the day and a faraway expression came into his eyes.

"But it was a good day. Lots of fun. Some great memories."

"That's the spirit. Good night, sir."

Tad waved an arm in farewell, then turned away and walked slowly through the gate into darkness.

“All clear. Dispatch,” the red-bearded man said softly.

Carl Tait is a software engineer, classical pianist, and writer. His work has appeared in After Dinner Conversation (Pushcart Prize nominee), Mystery Magazine (cover story), NewMyths, the Eunoia Review, the Saturday Evening Post, and others. He also has a story in Close to Midnight, a horror anthology from Flame Tree Press. Carl grew up in Atlanta and currently lives in New York City with his wife and twin daughters. For more information, visit www.carltait.com.

The Archivist by Ori Nephtali

Guided by the smell of fresh blood wafting into the waters, a small, shapeshifting creature came across the dead body of an archivist.

To it, the archivist was nothing but a wealth of food — something soon to rot but not rotted, and therefore delightful. The creature revelled in this and tore into the body with alacrity.

It felt compelled to try and pry through a thick casing of bone for reasons it didn't understand. Not knowing scared it. But so did everything, so it continued to pry. It made sweet sounds at the fish that approached — clicks and pops like they made — which caused the fish to still, and it shifted like they did, seeming as a similar shoal.

The intruding fish's heartbeats were an incessant hum, so close together they almost merged into a chorus.

The creature lashed into the invaders and swallowed. They would not have its treasure, even though it felt the fishes' deaths as little motes of pain.

The fish were like it. They were scared too. Everything was larger than themselves and ready to consume them, everything, everything as unavoidable as the storms and eels and sharks and sharp coral that had felled it countless times before. They must stay together, be close to themselves.

It had betrayed the fish by seeming as a close, benevolent swarm. Agony. Surprise. Agony. Agony. It would have felt guilt if it was capable. But the fish had stolen its treasure, and it could not allow for that.

If it ate enough fish it knew it would never betray them again, but it didn't want to be a fish. These fish were weak things, easily eaten and very small, but not small enough to hide. It wanted to eat what had eaten its friends, and it could not do that as a fish. So it continued to hunt.

Yes. The treasure. It had to hurry before something bigger than it stole its prize. It oozed into what it would later know to be a skull, and began to consume.

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It was now in the crude shape of a young Auraken woman, about thirty three. A giant gash on her head revealed a strange mass of shifting flesh beneath. Her name, though she had forgotten it at this point and had no reason to think of it, was Ashalai. She had a maw of teeth and gleaming talons, though she was far less dangerous than the little blob that had killed her.

It had killed her, hadn't it? What else would?

It and she stared agape, eyes lifeless, at the world around them. The true eyes lay studded throughout, winking in and out of existence in accordance to what flitted and flashed throughout the coral reef, chasing intruders and potential prey, almost coruscating with life.

And she had thought Auraken eyes were keen.

Together, they thought they saw something that looked like her. A bright, shifting pile of seaweed tugged by the currents, just on the edge of their perception. And a hunger in it said to mimic perfectly. Look as them. Look as they do. Make sounds as they do. Lure them close.

It understood the hunger now. It knew itself to be evil. She knew it too.

We are safe now, they told the hunger. Words. That's what those were. Precious, like lifeblood, like fish. *Nothing can harm us. We are too smart for it all now. We don't need you.* The hunger did not listen. But the mind it had taken was precious. It venerated life. It venerated understanding. It valued even the little flashes of pain from the fish.

Ashalai wished she could avoid eating the living, and only ate already dead, often half rotted things. They would be stronger than the hunger. They would be wiser than everything.

That's why we died, she told itself. She. What a strange concept. It preferred it. A presence in its mind roiled. *We thought we were too smart for everything. We thought we had it all under control.*

Curiosity. That was the word for this sensation, the word given as a gift. How delightful. And that which it had eaten was called fish, and it seemed to be observed by a distant presence in its own mind, which delighted in understanding it.

It would have been a surprising revelation except she had experienced all this before: words and understanding. It still wished it could have that wan, pale revelation for the rest of its existence, never to eat a fish again and feel little motes of agony, to exist solely in the joy of comprehension.

We are not so different, the presence said. *I suppose you made us that way. You seem to be one of the rotted. You eat dead bodies. You look like their loved ones. Our loved ones. And you wail and garble as though in agony. We come to save you. You eat us.* There was a long pause and a sense of strain. *We are like the fish.*

It was speaking as if to a child, except desperate and terrified. *We are like the fish.* The body shook and tried to keen. Its own body shifted and runnels warped down what it now knew to be a face — a mockery of tears, a mockery of grief.

I understand, it said to itself. The woman tried to curl up and tried to vomit at the tumult of her flesh.

Something killed you. Let me kill it for you. And we will also kill what kills fish.

Eat only that which is already dead, she added.

Won't hurt us that way

Will be ethical that way.

What hurt you, giver of ideas, giver of everything besides fish?

I wish I remembered their names, but I have their faces. Together, we will hunt.

So it had died recently. Killed by people whose names she didn't remember. It needed a book, something to record its memories, or else it would die again. She would die again. How to preserve this mind? It was fading, becoming one with that which had consumed her.

They had taken her book. Ashalai didn't remember what was in it. She barely remembered anything of her life, just dull flashes of memory. The bitter taste of umaspine. Weaving shvei with her father. Little else. She felt alone in her own head, even though she was stuck with... whatever that thing was. It seemed like she could control it, make it into herself. It was her, but it seemed to be quivering against her talons.

They were in the shape of a small fish.

Don't eat me, it said.

I will, she found herself thinking.

Then you will not have the fish and you will only know what it is like to be hungry, not scared. She knew what that meant. As long as it had memories of being tiny, small, agonized, terrified, it would not inflict the same unto others. So she kept it alive. How she knew she could have killed it was beyond her. Something to study, if she kept her mind.

###

The body was recalcitrant to move, given that it was tugged two and both ways at once. It tore itself on corals and when it sought to ease its wounds it was pecked at by false cleaner shrimp and wrasse, its heartbeats pulsing blue blood into the water. Its senses became so dull the chorus

of the reef waned to a low thrum, and it struggled even to hear the raucous of popping shrimp. It became small as a single fish, unable to mimic even a tiny shoal.

It had been dubbed *yishi*, meaning little one in an Auraken tongue she could no longer speak.

They soon forgot words, having no need of them. Ashalai didn't notice their absence, as the reef abounded with life and *yishi* told her meaning direct, stripped of words, a pure, beautiful sort of knowing.

All was consumed in minutes in the coral reef. Small, darting fish pecked flesh from bones with alacrity, and worms cleaned up the bones.

They began to hunger, but no whale-fall came down as augur of healing. Not even a rotted starfish. The reef swallowed its dead. They would have to hunt.

Ashalai knew how to hunt. Pretend to be something vulnerable — a small fish, say — then swim out. Pretend to be whole, but have a sharp piece of coral embedded within. She sent this image, and *yishi* obeyed. She could force it outwards instead, but that seemed to eat whatever will it had. Because she had its mind, she wanted to overpower it; take it, make it hers. If she wasn't light as thread, it would fall prey to its own hunger soon enough, consumed by itself.

It forced its wounded body outside. Panic cut through it like a slice of razor coral, but it advanced. The woman had a plan. The woman would protect it.

A predator drew near to the seemingly wounded fish, and was soon lanced through the eye straight to the skull. The fallen beast fed both *yishi* and Ashalai for days, and thousands of little, flitting fish feasted on it alongside. They watched the flitters with contentment until a giant

shadow passed overhead and they squeezed into the nearest unjagged crevasse, bothered only by a languid moray eel and a few stray urchin spines.

Now fed and hearty, they would search for what killed them.

###

They travelled for weeks among whatever paths were familiar to Ashalai. She followed the remnants of her memory, and tugged yishi with her. Such was her resolve that she went forwards even when yishi tried to stop to rest. It seemed as though she had control over this terrible, ever shifting, ever warping body. Yishi seemed happy to rest, to give over control. It could have eaten her again, somehow, she knew. Become solely itself once more. But it let her thrive. I ate you, seemed to be the sense. It's only fair you do the same.

She refused to do the same. Instead, they learned together. She became a scholar once more.

She knew not to touch the cruel coral that promised soft invitation but bit and tore. She knew when to hide and when to follow the shadows. She knew of her fellow mimics, which promised safety but were truly death. She even knew of the rhythm of the tides.

They ate the body of a fallen moray and fish shied from their path. She became it and felt a keen laziness and intense hunger. It was a poor mimic — she lacked its second internal jaw. If only she had been a biologist instead of an archivist.

Yishi missed shoaling with the fish, so they took turns swimming in a benign form and the form of the moray eel, which dissuaded most hunters. They rarely had to dart and hide.

A memory returned. Of umaspine. She told yishi to form spines all over its body like and coat the layers with bright patterns. She'd eaten one as a child and been sick for days, her mother's gift to her. After that, the umaspine's venom was her own. It took much coaxing, after

the memory of that, but yishi obeyed and fish and hunters either fled before them with not so much as curious glance back, or paid them as much attention as a speck of sand.

On their long journey, they only ate fish once, when the Moray eel's hunger merged with yishi's. Yishi asked to wail, and she complied.

###

She found them. They bared their teeth, revealing false eye patterns half obscured behind fangs. She was Auraken. Her mouth was the same — she didn't know why they thought that would do anything.

She didn't remember their names. She never would.

A sudden hunger merged with her own. To *know*. She could remember their names. Why they had done it. Everything that had happened to her. How she truly looked, instead of a crude replica. If only she would be willing to find the treasure embedded in their skulls.

But maybe their names would be in the notebook, if she could remember how to read.

Her murderers' bodies — their perfect Auraken bodies that did not shift or constantly pulse, that were not studded with eyes, that did not warp ceaselessly, lay before her. Ashalai smiled and hummed without vocal cords.

She ate everything besides the heads.

Ori Nephtali is a writer of the fantastic. They love strange, nonhuman perspectives and like to explore different sensory abilities in their characters. They live in Brighton with their many plants. Find Ori online at <https://legendsofaurakal.com/>

Of What Use Are Names to Ghosts? by S.T. Eleu

frail susceptibilities, scrapbook fragments
sonnets, fanfares, films, faded photos, serenades
ephemera of the flesh, flesh of the forsaken
forsaken forever here

suspended in flux, in darkness as darkness –
Father's signature upon Mother's scars
upon scars upon
scars

* * *

in this plague of a home, I awake
as the chanting of Mother's mourners
– sisters, congregants, elders, colleagues –
grows louder, grimmer, more resentful

beware this home and its darkest spaces
beware the mirrors of unlit faces
beware the spirits within who roam
beware their hunger . . . beware your own!

lies, all lies . . . I whisper to the photo on the mantel
lies told time and again to frame the displaced
as paradigms of pain, mayhem, rage
shame

oh the webs we weave, the webs we need!
it is not the ghost who lacks lucidity
who wanders this world aimlessly – it is we
who are lost, who are mad, who are in pain

and perpetually so – it is we
who solicit the past, fanatically
in guilt, in guile
in grief

the question, then, cannot be: *who haunts whom*
for it has always been the living
who have haunted and damned the dead
the question, then, must be: *why*

why do we do it
why do we hold on to those who no longer need us
have we not been warned

let the dead bury the dead

oh to be slapped in the face!
what else can be done so that we greet the day
with the resolve it deserves
with the reverence Mom would have demanded

and how do we free those
who taunt not to torment but to demand release
so they may finally make their way to dominions
so beyond us and our

messy, fleshy, petty concerns
day by night holding them hostage
over smoldering coals where the grandest of ironies
laugh and laugh and laugh

we must know that the most maleficent of spirits
. . . , *Daddy, Daddy, you bastard* . . .
are never the ones here haunting us
here dancing and stamping – NO!

for their sentences, ages ago, were set
in stone, in fire, in irons
enforced the moment their lives slipped
from skeletal constructs

while the most beneficent of spirits
. . . , *Mom, Mommy, Mama, Ma*, . . .
are ever the ones here pleading with us
NOT to turn around, NOT to look back, back, back

* * *

in this plague of a home
I have but one recourse left
to release her from her mourners
to release her from me

post-pyre ashes, ashes, ashes
of a house's once storied frame
can no more contain a spirit
than a net the sea

Raised in Vegas then exiled to Chicago, S. T. Eleu (they, them – gay, femme) has been a
musician, teacher, and consummate Vulcan. Autism is their default universe, and, though

sparsely populated, is a glorious place to escape to, write in, and display an impressive collection of action figures. Their most recent publications were in Antipodean, View from Atlantis, Star*Line, Confetti, and Aphelion Webzine.

Fhen M.

Cuneiform in a Tablet

I'll send you to school, my daughter
to learn to write with reed stylus
pressed into clay to make wedge marks;
when the time comes,
you'll be appointed to a position
in the moon god religion;
you'll compose tens of hymns,
and ones of epic poems.

your grandma conceived me
set in a basket of rushes
with bitumen she sealed my lid
cast into the river;
the king appointed me as cup-bearer
invited me to his chambers
to discuss and interpret dreams
involving the favor of the deity
the drowning by the goddess
in a river of blood.

your writings will be Euphrates river
flowing through canals and into the farms
feeding the hungry souls of my people
quenching your thirsty, wandering spirit.

Red Boots

Inside a grove of coconut trees
near a lake of clear blue water
video recording your strolling feet
all I see is your red boots
no red skirt, no tight blue spandex
even the red capes are missing.

I want to see your fair face,
your long brown hair.

I wish to see you fly
above rivers and streams,
high above green mountains,
up in the clouds of white

all I see is your red boots.

The Finest Verse is Written in a Dream

To lie down on a soft sofa
while listening to an old love song
and dream of the finest poem.

The vocalist sang the music *Yesterday*
he dreamed of a maiden who broke his heart
for the words he spoke at the wrong time.

The painter dreamed of melting clocks, dead olive tree
his muse is in another time and space.
I've seen her here once, the sun kissed her skin.

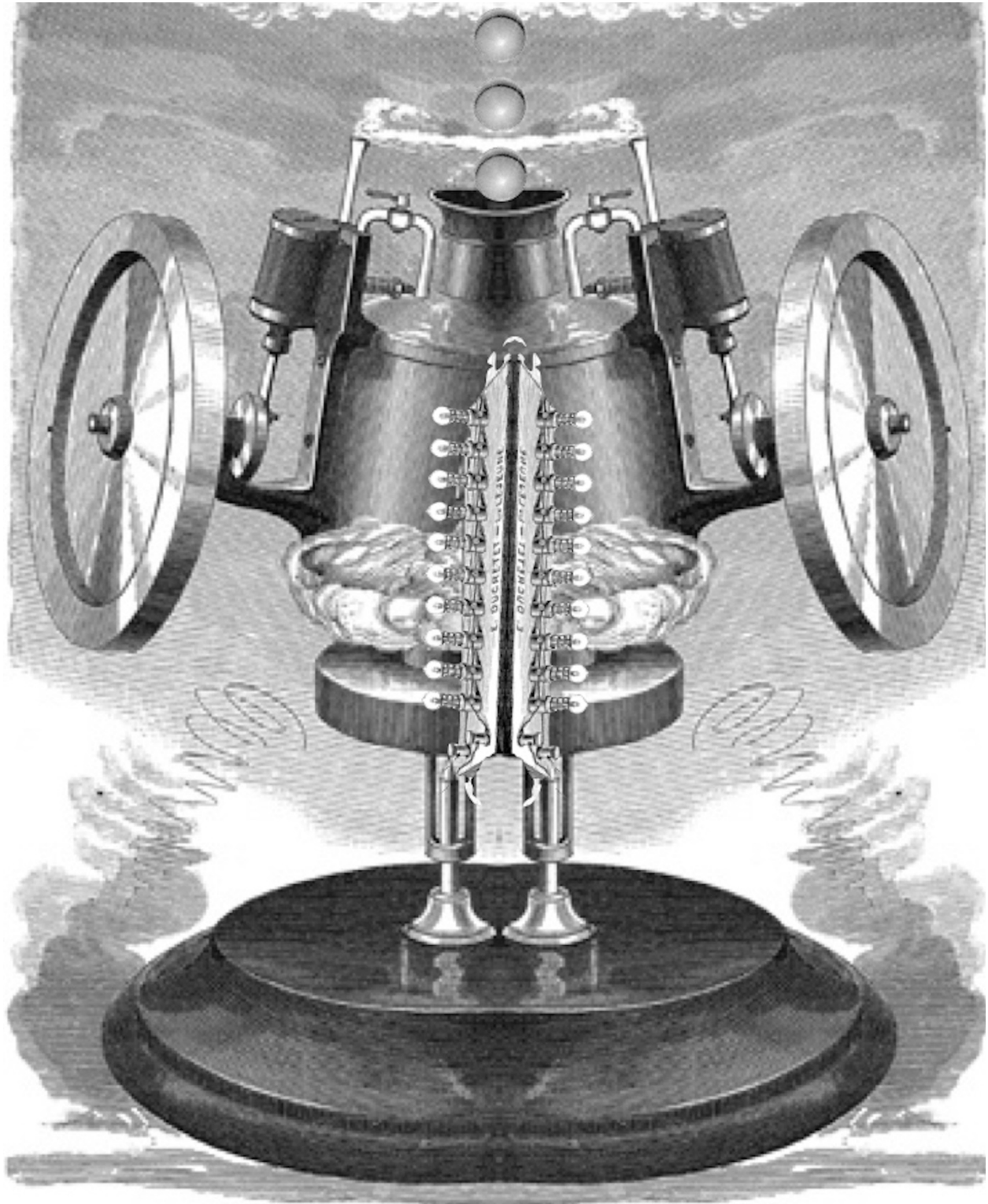
A scientist prolonged the life of man
what good it is if he has no woman?

My muse travels at light speed to a distant star
I'd still be here on Earth waiting for her.

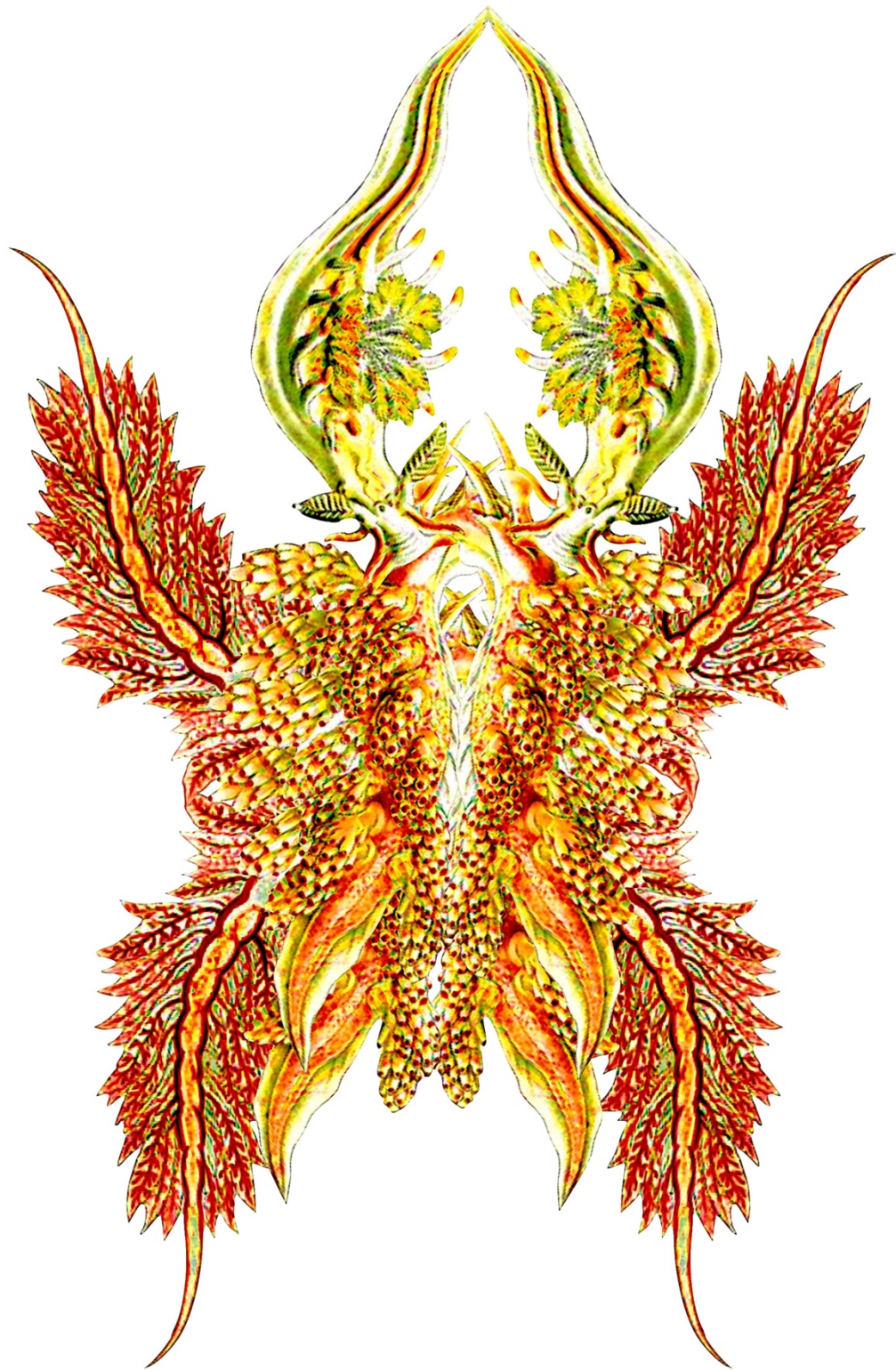
We write what we dream;
we dream what we write.

Poet Fhen M was mentored by David Genotiva. Genotiva earned his M.A. in English with distinction from Silliman University in Dumaguete City, where he was mentored by the Tiempos. A favorite anecdote shared with every writer attending the Silliman University National Writers Workshop is Edith Tiempo's "Robert Frost moment." Find Fhen online at <https://otherpeople1990.wordpress.com/>

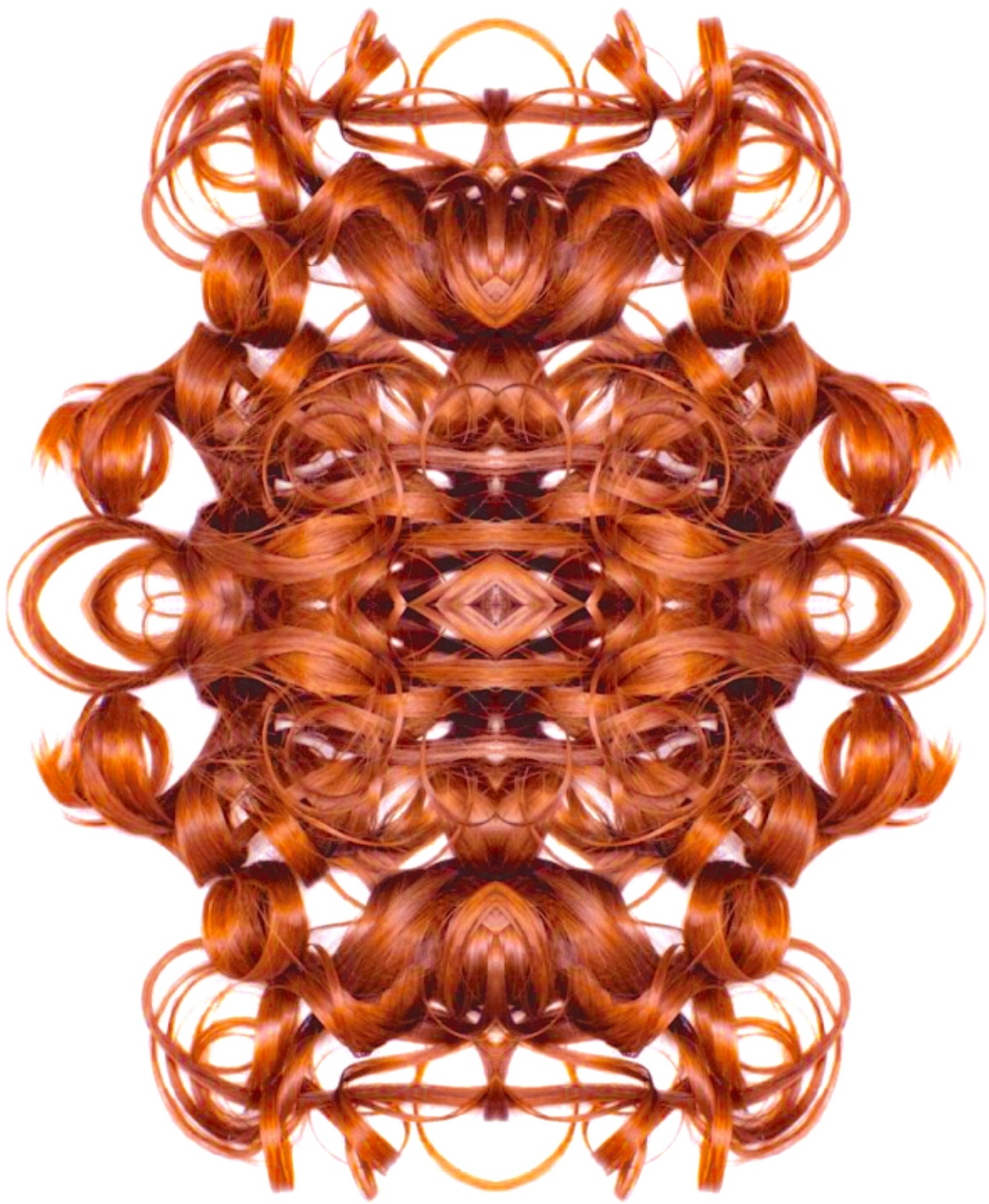
The Art of Bill Wolak



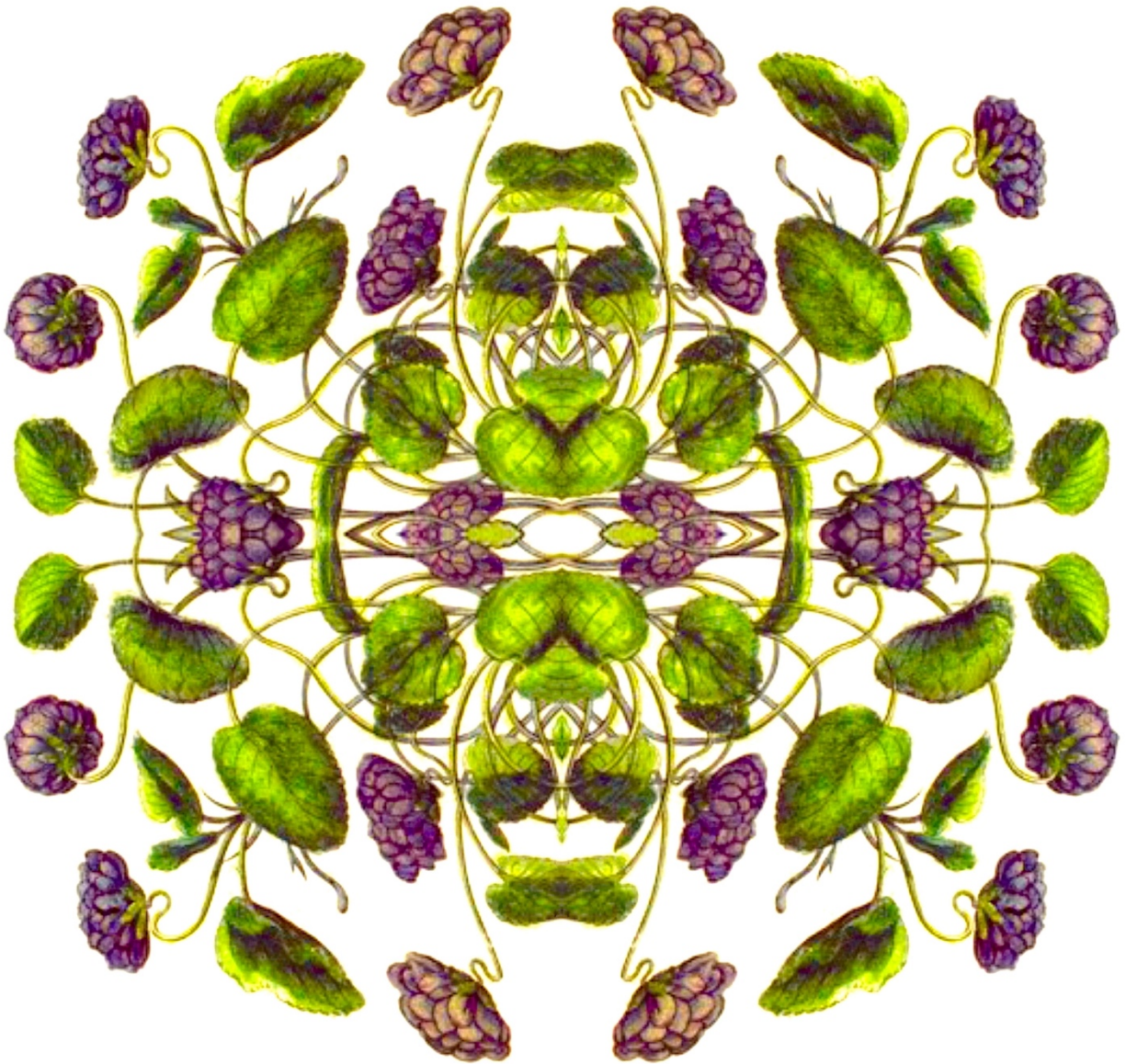
All The Confused Goodbyes



The Overwhelming Dread of the Unknown



Paralyzed by Insomnia



Flesh Stirred by a Kiss

Bill Wolak is a poet, collage artist, and photographer who has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

Gone Fishing by Marc J. Guillotte

Jones felt like a life-size photo of himself, papier-mâché around balloons that time had deflated and mercilessly popped. Sitting at his desk on the seventh floor of TDH, Jones feared a band of blindfolded children would storm in and attack him with sticks, screaming at the lack of candy.

Tina sat opposite, wearing a tight white turtleneck under her cropped red vest, cut just below her chest and open like a matador daring the bull to charge. Her long fake lashes, glossy red lips, and brushed pink blush gave her a retro-chic look, with hoop earrings looping and bangle bracelets banging.

Tina was full of candy.

“Jones,” said Dick over Jones’s desk intercom.

“Yes,” Jones answered.

“Jones, we have a problem with Harry,” Dick said. “Harry has turned into a fish,” said Dick.

“A koi, sir,” Helen, Dick’s administrative assistant, interjected.

“Harry has turned into a koi fish,” said Dick.

Guys, Jones read Harry’s note in Dick’s office with Helen hovering, hugging some folders tight to her chest. *Sorry for the inconvenience, but I have been turned into a fish.* The note was written on a post-it slapped on a fishbowl where Harry swam.

“Jones,” Dick said. “What are we going to do? Harry was handling the Chandler account. What are we going to do?”

“I have all the work compiled in this folder, Jack,” Helen said, handing him the folder.

“Tina has all the contacts.”

“Harry!” Dick said to the fish, the koi, Harry, his voice was strained with concern.

Harry worked his way around the bowl, slipping behind the one stand of fake aquatic plants. Jones thought to yell at Dick and Helen. *What do you mean, what do we do? Harry has had some sort of mental breakdown and hatched this scheme to get out of work.* He wanted to suggest going to Harry’s house and dragging him into the office in his PJs and saying, *see NOT a fish, NOT a koi.* He vividly imagines Harry standing in the office in his PJs, dripping wet.

Harry and Jones had fishing in common as boys. Sometimes, they were in a boat with Jones's Grandpa, but mostly just the two of them on rocky shores of Olney Pond with wonder bread for bait and a 5-gallon pickle bucket, seeing how many Sunfish they would catch. Jones ran into Harry years later at Panera Bread while he was between jobs. "I could get you in easy where I work. They believe anything there. I will tell them you are some kind of genius."

Jones figured he would work it until he went to Boston for a much-delayed graduate degree, but then he saw Tina.

"Jones," said Dick breaking his spell. "We are counting on you to reel this one in."

"I don't know if that is appropriate language in front of Harry," said Helen.

"No, of course. Sorry, Harry."

Doris put together a sign-up list for taking Harry home and fish sit, putting herself first on the list. Jones avoided signing up as he sat at his desk and also avoided looking at the Chandler file.

Tina, live and in techno color, placed a Post-it note on the file. Bending and turning slightly to place the note, her cropped red vest fell to the side of the turtleneck, her ribs stretching the ribbing of her top.

Jones squirmed a bit in his seat.

"Mr. Chandler called," Tina said. "He sounded pissed." Tina dropped her left shoulder, smiled slightly with her lips, not her teeth, and said, "Buck up, buckeroo."

"Listen up, buckeroo." Jones imagined Mr. Chandler was trying to send his spittle over the phone. "We're no fly-by-night operation. We are substantial."

Jones thought of Mr. Chandler weighing in at about five hundred pounds. He imagined him pushing out of a dress shirt, flesh pouring out of his outfit, and his necktie strangling him.

"We're three months into this deal, and then I get a call, no, a text. *Sorry for the inconvenience, but I have been turned into a fish.* What? What! A fish."

"A koi, actually,"

"Listen, Jones, is it? Jones, listen. We are no fly-by-night operation. We don't turn into fish here. We don't turn into anything unusual here. So? What are we going to do about this, Jones? What are we going to do about this?"

Jones imagined Mr. Chandler on one side of a boat with his Grandpa looking like an old Henry Fonda and a child-aged Harry and himself high up on the ship's prow, raised up by Mr. Chandler's mass. *Well*, said old Henry Fonda, *give him a pole and let's do some fishing*.

"Mr. Chandler," Jones began. "In life, we have these moments of crisis. Where are we going? What is our course and heading?" Jones thought of them all on a sailing ship, a schooner with Tina's bust and breast on the masthead and her thick knit turtleneck unraveled to be the rigging. The four of them, five hundred pounds of Mr. Chandler, Harry dressed like Freddie Bartholomew from Captain Courageous, and Jones's Grandpa looking now a lot like Lionel Barrymore, his fishing rod replaced with a harpoon pointed right at Mr. Chandler. *Thar' she blows*, Jones heard him whisper.

"What was that?" asked Mr. Chandler over the phone.

"A crisis. Lost at sea. Choppy waters," Jones tried to right the ship of his thoughts on turbulent waters. "Mr. Chandler. Let me be your Captain. I know these waters," *Did he?* Jones thought. "I know where the fish are," *Did he?* Thought Jones. "I am going to help you haul them in. Help you land a whale even." *Would he?* Thought Jones.

"Your company seems obsessed with fish, Jones. I want to see real work by the end of the week. Real work. And no more talk about fish."

Jones hung up the phone, honestly believing he would do it. He would put in real work. Looking at Tina's full sails, he thought all was possible.

"I put you on the list for Thursday," Tina said.

"List?" asked Jones.

"To take Harry home," Tina said.

"Harry?"

"The fish, the koi," said Tina. This time, her smile had its full, glossy red lips fall aside like a dress slipping off the shoulder to flash her white teeth beneath. "Maybe you and him can confer about the Chandler case. I could help if you'd like. With the Chandler account. With Harry, too. We could have sushi."

Jones stood in a small wooden boat with his hand on the rudder, staring at the full sails of Tina's imagined undergarments on his single-mast little sloop. He was in a painting now, and a white bird flew in with a few deft brush strokes.

“Sorry about all this,” said Harry as the bird.

“I thought you were a fish, a koi?” said Jones.

“I am, but that’s not the whole picture, is it?” Harry was a gull, with a detail of yellow webbed feet added, painted onto the gunwale. “I couldn’t hack it.” Harry the Bird explained. “So, when I left the office on Friday, I went fishing like the old days. Remember? A rod and a bucket. I didn’t even have bait. No more messages, emails, the reminders of the messages, and more emails reminding me of the reminders. The Dread. It weighed on me, got under my skin, and drained me. I drove, turning off the 95, then off 44, and then into the parking lot. It was waiting for me by the water, on the big rocks. My old rod and the pickle bucket. Like a dream but more, you know?”

“I know,” Jones answered.

“There was a man on a folding chair. I thought he was your grandpa, but it was an old-looking Henry Fonda. *Let’s do some fishing*, he said. My phone vibrated. I threw it as far as I could into Olney Pond and picked up the rod.”

“I cast and cast again. I didn’t need bait; the fish took my hook almost before it hit the water, leaped for it. I was reeling them in, one after another, sunfish, just sunfish. Going for a record.”

That painted bird was now a boy sitting on the gunwale. It was an idealized portrait of Harry from childhood, capturing his easy smile. He was placed in the painting near the prow, with a paint splatter becoming sea spray.

“I caught a bucket full. My arm was tired, and it had gotten dark, but I didn’t want to stop. The stars came out and hovered right over the pond, so close, like everything became possible. The hairs on my arms rose. I knew it was my last cast for the night, maybe forever. All that was left of my strength went into that cast, hook and bobbin whistling out over the water. I caught him. I didn’t mean to. I had no intention. It just happened. My line went taut, and my pole bent down with his weight. I was alone. No more Grandpa Fonda, road, or lights over the closed bathrooms and snack shack. Just me on the sand, toes touching the water, fighting to reel him in.”

The painting merged Homer and Wyeth, inspired by Hemingway and Jack London. The elements were painted violently, with the painted sea threatening the two-dimensional boat.

Harry, the bird who became a boy, was man Harry again, in his work clothes—khakis and a dress shirt—sweat-stained from his breakdown and splattered with paint.

“He said he was the King Fish.”

I am the King Fish, said the King Fish, on top of a pickle bucket of fish painted onto the boat.

“Yes, like that,” said Harry

The King Fish looked no more regal than the other fish it lay on top of in the bucket. It was bigger, bigger even than the diameter of the pickle bucket.

“I thought, this is some sort of award-winning fish,” said Harry, recounting what he said then, in his memory now alive if altered in the painting.

“Or a delusion,” said Jones.

“Either way, I thought I would keep it,” Harry said.

I am the King Fish, said the King Fish, bending his head and tail up and moving his mouth like a Big Mouth Billy Bass gag gift.

Spare me, and I will grant you anything you wish for, said the King Fish.

“Can you imagine?” said Harry to Jones.

“You are painting a good picture,” said Jones.

Oil paint waves rose higher, the clouds brushed with black, and there was a sense they would be thrown out of the frame.

“Anything. Imagine. Anything. I couldn’t think much of what I wanted, just what I didn’t want. I didn’t want to talk to Mr. Chandler again, or Dick or Helen about Mr. Chandler or the next client, or feel like I was wearing a costume like everything was a game that had gotten scary. I didn’t know what I was doing about any of it. I went to work with dread like I would be found out any minute. And it wasn’t like I had anything else going on. I had my Xbox, Netflix, and an ongoing relationship with the Uber Eats guy. I just wanted to be free of it. I wanted to be set free.”

Anything you wish for said the King Fish.

The sky above the sloop was painted using chiaroscuro, giving the impression of a light source, a glow. Brushwork also illuminated Harry and the King Fish.

There are stories inside all fish stories, said Jones’s Grandpa, sitting in his armchair, his throw blanket over his legs, the Evening Bulletin over that, and the Red Sox game whispering in

his ear from his old radio. He talked directly to the painting Jones was in, hanging on the wall of his den, among the fishing trophies and sports memorabilia, speaking directly to Jones in the painted scene on troubled waters with a sudden break in the clouds and the light on Harry and the big fish. *There is the story about the fish you catch and about those who got away. There is the story about what caused the man to grab his rod that day and what he wished for because there is a wish in every cast, light and dark hopes sent flying over the water, flying, whistling on the wind. You don't need to believe all the stories you hear, but you should listen to them anyway, to be polite. We live on those stories we hear. We bait our hooks with them and cast our dreams under blue skies and rippling mirrors of blue-green glass.*

He wasn't Henry Fonda or Lionel Barrymore. He was an old man who proudly announced his flatulence and whose hands gently, with love, lay on a small boy's shoulder or tussled his hair as he did his best to explain the little things in life, filling in the big picture.

"But I didn't wish for the bowl," Harry said to Jones. Jones was holding the bowl now, it was Thursday night, and he was holding the bowl with the fish, the koi, and Harry swimming and talking in circles. Empty containers of the sushi Tina and Jones ate lay strewn about, littered among empty glasses from the drained bottle of Spanish Brandy. Tina snorted and snored on the couch, his Grandpa's old throw blanket over her and him having slept on the pillow of his arm finishing his report for Mr. Chandler and now awake from his vivid dream holding Harry in the bowl, Harry talking to him, though he was awake.

"I'm frightened of everything," Harry said as the fish from inside the bowl. "But I need to be free. I don't care what happens to me. I need out."

Harry spasmed his tail and launched himself. He breached. At the height of his leap from the bowl, Harry looked askance at Jones, freaking him out, making him drop the bowl and give out a wheezy high-pitched welp.

Tina woke up to the crash of the fishbowl and almost stepped on Harry, who had slid across the floor and was now flopping about at her feet. She scooped him up, but her bare feet prevented her from reaching the panicking Jones, who frantically looked for a gallon plastic bag, which, when he found it, he filled with water.

"Doris is going to kill us," Tina said, gingerly holding on to Harry while surrounded by shards of glass. "She just loves this little guy."

"The fish?" Jones asked, coming to her with the bag filled with water.

“No, Harry,” Tina said, sliding Harry with his mouth agape into the bag of water. “She has always had a thing for him.”

“Really?”

“Really,” said Tina. “Honestly, you men are clueless.”

They temporarily put Harry in the water in the bag in the sink, cleaned up, and put coats on. At one point, broom in Jones’s hands and dustpan in Tina’s, she leaned in and kissed him. “Clueless,” she said again, but breathy and maybe referring to him or her or the whole thing. Jones dropped the broom and actually took Tina in his arms and kissed away any doubts.

With their coats on, they were leaving with the fish, the koi, Harry to what Tina assumed was some twenty-four-seven aquarium store. They shared a smile neither could hide.

Jones turned on and then off 95.

“Where are we headed?” Tina asked.

“It’s a spot Harry and I fished as kids.” Jones continued on the drive, talking mostly about their childhood fishing and his Grandpa, not so much about the King Fish.

Together, feet in the sand, twilight illuminating the water, Jones dumped Harry out of the bag and into Onley Pond.

“It was his wish,” Jones said, his arms around Tina, her head in the crook of his neck. Jones couldn’t wish for more, but did, one small wish of a return of his childhood friend.

Mr. Chandler, it turns out, was a slight man, not a human whale.

“This is fine work,” Mr. Chandler said over the Zoom call. “No fish tales here.”

“No, he got better,” Dick said, beaming, he and Helen beaming, about everything working out.

“What?” Mr. Chandler said.

“He is not a fish anymore,” Dick said.

“A koi,” Corrected Helen.

“A koi, no, he is a real boy again,” Dick said, laughing at his own joke.

“What are you talking about?” Mr. Chandler asked.

Jones jumped in, “Just a little office joke.”

“Well, let’s schedule something for the end of the month,” Mr. Chandler said, ending the call.

Leaving Dick's office, they all joined Harry's welcome back party in the conference room. Jones slipped his arm around Tina as Doris came in with a cake lit with candles. A few started singing *Happy Birthday*, but it wasn't, and they stopped.

"So good to have you back, Harry," said Dick. "Light duty for now, though. We don't want any regression."

"Recurrence," Helen corrected.

"Right," Dick agreed, putting a reassuring hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Make a wish," Doris said.

"She's crazy about him," Tina whispered to Jones. "Crazy."

Harry bent down to make a wish, looking over at Jones, who had picked him up this morning. Jones had called him first. He avoided telling him about the night, the dream, fishing, and everything. "Doris really likes you, Harry. Really likes you," Jones said over the phone. "You need to come back to work now." *And to be human*, he wanted to add but didn't.

Harry, back at work, human and wearing khakis and a polo with Doris beaming at him, bent down to make a wish. His face was aglow from the candles, and he looked over at Jones and winked before he blew them out.

The End.

Marc j Guillotte has been a sommelier and spirit professional for most of his working life. Now, as an active member in Speculative Fiction Writers Association, Marc has enjoyed some small successes in *Tasteful Anthology*, *Every Day Fiction* and now here.

He lives, reasonably happy, with his wife in Rhode Island, where they walk their dog by the ocean, as long and often as possible. Find Marc on Discord at [marcguillotte_74184](#).

Simon MacCulloch

When We Clicked

The candour of nakedness, lovers insist,
Exhibits the trust that exposes the soul;
A covering always imposes a role
That comes between hearts and their trembling tryst.
Our love is demanding, our love is complete,
Our love is the kind that can never decay;
No passion more pressing, no friction more sweet
Than that which we find in this final display.

So now let us stroll through this tenebrous mist,
Aloof from the sheathings its writhings imply;
For ours is a purity plain to the eye
And clear as the clash of our teeth when we kissed.
Your fingers in mine, clasping memory there -
The intimate clicking of bone that is bare.

Juju Jesus

We called him a saint and attended his bed
To examine the wounds every day,
And we'd whisper in awe as his hands and feet bled,
And point at the punctures of thorns round his head,
Then kneel by his pillow and pray.

And his wife would administer ointment and oil,
Though he'd tupp'd every tart in the town
And had always made mock of her love and her toil.
But we turned a blind eye to his sins; it would spoil
The tale of his growing renown.

The doctor was baffled, the bishop was glad
To see proof of Christ's Passion before him;
The pain that he suffered was terribly sad
But the mayor agreed that we'd have to be mad
To try any tricks to restore him.

Well, I went there for weeks, and made friends with his wife;
I admired such a selfless devotion
Through so much betrayal and then so much strife.
Perhaps hers was really the holier life -

True love is a magical potion!

In time she became more a lover than friend,
And I was to make her my bride
As soon as her present sad duties might end,
A question whose answer, of course, would depend
On how soon the invalid died.

And die he then did, of a gouge in the gut
As if from the thrust of a spear;
And gruesome it was to behold the blood, but
We recognised that as a merciful cut
For him and the one I held dear.

So now we're long married, and happily so.
Only once was I tempted to stray -
But she showed me her crucifix, made long ago,
And the Christ bore a face that the both of us know,
And I've kept to my vows to this day.

Simon MacCulloch lives in London and publishes poetry in a variety of print and online journals, including Reach Poetry, Pulsebeat Poetry Journal, Black Petals, Spectral Realms, View from Atlantis and others.