

WINTER ISSUE 26

WITH STORIES AND POEMS BY:

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NORMAN COWIE

AND MORE

AN  ALTERED
REALITY

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

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Forbidden Ports of Call by David Gianatasio

Do not visit the Mega-Megalopolis. Pop: 100 trillion billion—but you'll see no one on its shimmering streets, where silence howls like a hurricane. You mustn't ride to the 999th floor and gaze into the light. If you do, you'll join the city's denizens forever, reborn of memories, steel and glass. Urban renewal = You.

Do not explore the gilded paths that wind past the Wailing River. Heed the larks' warning—how they hiss. And larks don't usually hiss. Nor rivers wail.

Danger! Do NOT travel the byways of the God Machine. Your number could come up, an endless string of zeroes sizzling on soulless screens. God has 9,000,000,001 names. The odds won't break in your favor.

Please, avoid the Planet of Sexy Doom! (That name's a dead giveaway.) Yes, harems laze in craters of honey and spice, eager to fulfill your desires. But you can't handle such action. They'll love you to a pulp. You won't reach the climax.

Under absolutely no circumstances should you enter the Mirrors of Your Mind and behold the endless permutations of what you'll never be. So many spinning faces, sliding in all directions like sad shrunken suns. They're all YOUR face. Some haven't shaved or trimmed their nose-hairs in years.

It's best to bypass Bayonne, N.J., which straddles a space-time rift primed to implode and devour half the known universe. Also, they're always out of Cherry Pi at Sally's Diner and that menu misprint's just too on the nose.

Shred your visa!

Trash your passport!

Of course, in some alternate continuum, you're already there. Nowhere and everywhere.

Enjoy your stay!

(END)

They're No Dummies by David Gianatasio

In a world of mannequins, humans model fashions, tech items and miscellaneous merchandise in department store windows.

Observe the tableaux: tennis rackets frozen for serves and volleys, phones to lips, poised for conversations that never begin.

"They seem so real," the shoppers say. "But then they move and shatter the illusion."

(END)

Dave's collection *The World Ends Every Day* was published in 2024 by Anxiety Press. Find Dave online at <https://www.amazon.com/stores/David-Gianatasio/author/B0BBSMRJ76>

The Poems of Simon MacCulloch

Vocation

It starts, as always, slowly: just a hint
Of tingling like a frosting on my limbs.
The dark, my lovely dark, betrays a glint
Of light, which leaps and flickers, flares and dims.
A voice is muttering something in my brain.
I know that it will leave, but come again.

It isn't God or Satan; They would not
Communicate with such a one as I.
I shift and stretch a little, wondering what
It wants of me. They never tell me why.
I glimpse a tall, gaunt figure, hood and cloak
Obscured in part by wreaths of perfumed smoke.

Another interregnum, then a shriek.
I smell that scent which trickles red on stone.
Those words - they call them Latin, Hebrew, Greek,
But nothing talks as loud as flesh and bone.
The hood recites a list of empty names
And sprinkles sizzling rapture on the flames.

I feel it in my nerves, and then I'm there,
Already sensing, probing - yes, perhaps
A wobble in the ritual pattern where
The shielding fails, exposing little gaps.
I have it! And I slither from the pentacle
To slay him with a squeeze of one fat tentacle.

Stained Glass

A window that shimmered in red, blue and gold
As if it drew breath for the tales that it told
Englamoured the chamber, as if to unfold
The presence of God in its layers of light.
Did ever a Lucifer glisten more bright?

It's pride and it's folly, they said, to pretend
To deity's blessing in spectra you bend

To impudent images. God does not lend
His light to the world to illuminate stories;
Beyond, in the sky, you may glimpse His true glories.

I took up a hammer and shattered the window
To let the great storm of Creation rush in, though
Destroying such craftsmanship seemed like sin. Oh,
The beauty of Kosmos! But that too shall pass;
You fool, said the shadows, your God was the glass.

Then blindly I scooped up the shards, and each shred
Of Godhood sucked deep of the blood that I bled
To stain itself darkly with martyrdom's red.
And thus the true image of God was released:
The pain of the Son, and the Father well pleased.

Guardian Angel

That rustle of wings at my side!
My guardian, the angel, is near
Embracing my arm like a bride
And filling my thoughts with the fear
That comes every time I'm reminded
We walk through our lives partly blinded
While others around us see clear.

So what does that visitant see
And what does he secretly know
Of that which is waiting for me
Wherever, whenever I go?
And why does my guardian remind me
Of fiends treading softly behind me
And hovering above and below?

I think that an angel on Earth
Is nonsense, unless it be one
Cast out from the place of his birth
Along with the morning's bright son.
I doubt that such legions are lonely
His motive can therefore be only
To catch me before I can run.

And so there's no evil to fear
No valley of shadow more dire
Than he who is already here

To follow my steps without tire
And pledge me with whispery laughter
To him and his kin ever after
Together as one in the fire.

Simon MacCulloch lives in London and contributes poetry to a wide variety of publications, including Spectral Realms, Black Petals, Exquisite Death, Yellow Mama and others.

FANG YOU VERY MUCH by Norm Cowie

The wolf loped along under the trees. It was dark except for where beams of light from the bright full moon pierced the night. The woods were inside a park in a large city, and as the wolf made its way through, he would stop to sniff, pee, and scratch up the grass to mark his territory. It was a beautiful night and he was having a great time.

Then he saw a park bench. Park benches were good because often you could find prey sleeping on the bench, especially at night.

He crept up to it, nose twitching as he tried to pick up a scent.

There was definitely a smell, but nothing recent. He trotted up to the bench, raised a leg and marked it.

My bench.

He turned, and saw something weird.

In the center of a grassy area, out of reach of the shadows from the woods, and in the full view of the moonlight was a person.

Sitting in a wheelchair.

Looking at him.

The wolf grinned a dog smile, and looked around to see if anyone else was around. Nope, no one. Guess it wasn't going to be a task to find dinner, not that it ever was all that hard. But weird that this time his prey knew right where he was. No sneaking up was necessary. And in a wheelchair, it wasn't going to be much of a chase either.

Too bad, actually, he enjoyed the hunt.

He walked carefully towards the person in the wheelchair. As he got closer, he saw it was a male, normal size and the man was looking right at him, no fear in his expression, though the wolf did pick up some nervous scents as he got closer. When he was about ten feet away, he stopped, and peered curiously at his target. Still no movement.

He was about to go into attack mode, when suddenly the person said, "I know what you are."

The wolf stopped, one paw in the air, and looked at the man.

"I mean, it wasn't all that difficult to figure out," the man continued. "The full moon, the people who stay out at night in the park. Homeless people can go missing and no one would ever notice."

The wolf let his paw drop and locked gazes with the human.

"And during the day you can go to the opera, or a steakhouse," the man continued, then looked thoughtful. "Though that begs the question on why you have to hunt at all, when you can buy all the meat you want in a city like this." He gestured around at the buildings surrounding the park.

The wolf continued staring.

"But I really don't care," the man went on. "I want something from you."

This startled the wolf, and he sat down, eyes still on the man.

Silence as they contemplated each other.

Finally, the wolf spoke, his lips curling weirdly.

"It is necessary to eat human flesh once a month."

The man didn't seem fazed that the wolf had spoken. "Yeah, I wondered. You have pain if you don't?"

"Yes," the wolf replied, but didn't continue. He stared at the man.

The man looked uncomfortable. “Um, you’re probably wondering what I want from you.”

The wolf said nothing.

“Uh,” the man went on. “You could help me, a lot.”

The wolf finally spoke again. “Why would I want to do that? I’d rather eat.” He stood, and now he showed fangs and his fur started spreading as he rose into a two-legged attack position.

Now the man looked terrified. He pulled something out from a pocket. It was a gun.

The wolf laughed. “Guns don’t scare me.” He positioned himself to leap.

“Silver bullets,” the man gasped.

The wolf paused.

“With a cross engraved on them, and dipped in holy water.”

Panting now, the wolf stopped.

“But I have something else for you,” the man said, looking a little bit more confident.

The wolf lowered a bit, fur starting to settle back down. “And what might that be?” He asked when he had control of his hunting instincts again.

The man brought out a large bag.

“I brought treats!”

Treats?

“Yes, I have several bags of treats. Chew bones, jerky, just about everything a canine would want.”

The wolf froze. He loved treats. No one was supposed to know this. But treats, how could he not?

He sat back down, eyes on the bags. Treats were the best thing. He could eat another human later. Drool started down the wolf’s furry face. He licked it away. “Fine, what are you asking of me?”

The man looked confident again.

“I want you to turn me.”

The wolf looked confused. “You mean turn your wheelchair around?”

The man laughed. “No, I want you to turn me ... into a werewolf.”

“Oh,” the werewolf said. He thought a minute. “Yeah, I guess I could do that.”

A sigh came from the man, not surprising the werewolf, who could sense his nervousness. “Okay, how would you do it?”

“First a question,” the wolf said.

The man arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“Why do you want to be a werewolf?” the wolf asked.

“Because I’m done with it,” the man said angrily.

“Done with what?”

“Being disabled.” He gestured to his wheelchair. “I’m sick of this chair. I’m sick of this life. Being a werewolf will heal me. I’ll be able to walk. I don’t care what other issues there are with changing into a wolf every month, or having to kill. I am just done with this!”

“Oh,” the wolf replied. The man was upset, so he let him cool down.

Finally, the man said, “So you’ll do it? You’ll convert me?”

With a smile, the wolf said, “Hey, for treats, sure thing.”

The man smiled back. “Awesome, so what do we do?”

“It’s a two-step process,” the wolf said with twisted lips. “First, we each take a small bite drawing some blood from each other’s neck. Don’t worry,” when he saw the man looked alarmed, “You can point your gun at me while we’re doing it.”

Relief. “Okay, then what?”

“We sniff each other’s butts.”

The man’s eyes opened. “We what?!”

The werewolf looked embarrassed. “Yeah, I know, weird. But I don’t make the rules. We bite each other under the full moon, sniff each others’ butts, and you’ll turn into a werewolf. That’s the whole procedure.”

A strange look went over the man’s face. He was so close. It had taken forever to learn about and then find a werewolf. But he would be able to walk again, dump this dumb wheelchair forever, maybe even live longer. He sighed, “Okay, let’s do it.”

Within a couple minutes, it was done. The man settled into his wheelchair and looked around. The werewolf started in on the first bag of treats.

“Um, when does it start to take effect?” the man asked.

The werewolf chomped another bone, glee on his face at the treats. “Oh, it won’t take place until next month’s full moon. But don’t worry. I’ve done it before. It works.”

“Oh, okay, the man said.

#

Months later in a European castle.

A casket opened.

The room was damp, dark, in the hidden basement of another basement.

The thin but muscular creature in the casket leaned up with its upper body, eyes contentedly closed.

As it reached a sitting position, the vampire yawned, which would help start its own inner juices start flowing after a being dead all day. Then the vampire, a count who had been alive for centuries, opened his eyes.

Then they widened, and popped open all the way

“Crap!”

A man was sitting nearby. He was in a wheelchair.

“What are you ...” the Count stammered.

The guy in the wheelchair gave a faint smile. He didn’t seem frightened.

That sort of ticked the vampire off, and a smile grew across his face. “Looks like I don’t have to go to takeout for dinner tonight.”

The man smiled. Still not intimidated.

“Because, um, you look delicious.”

The man didn’t say anything and looked at him calmly.

The Count frowned. “What’s the deal? Do you have a cross or something?”

The man shook his head.

“Garlic?”

This time, the man spoke. “Nope.”

The vampire was confused. The man could have staked him while he was undead. Instead, he waited for the Count to come back to life.

Then he noticed the wheelchair the man was in. He looked up at the entrance above. There were no elevators, no lifts or anything. “How did you get in here with that, um ...”

“I have certain talents, the man replied.

Before the count could say anything else, the man's body jerked. Then it jerked again, at least the top half did. The bottom didn't move. Then the man's body started shuddering and shaking.

The vampire watched in amazement as the man's back arched, his eyes widened and he groaned in pain. Then fur started sprouting from the hands and arm and the back. The hair on top of his head went wild, and as he grimaced in agony, his mouth was contorted, and his teeth elongated until they were all fangy.

"Oh, you're a werewolf," the Count said when the tremors finally subsided.

He wasn't too concerned. Werewolves and vampires had common food likes, but there was no reason for them to fight.

The man, werewolf, opened his eyes. They were golden and actually pleasant to look at.

"So what can I do for you, werewolf?" the vampire asked.

The werewolf took a moment longer to get his breath back. "Actually, I'm here asking if you would do me a favor."

The Count frowned. Then, he took a few seconds to let his body levitate out of the coffin until he was standing next to it.

He looked at the werewolf again. "Why would I want to do you a favor?"

"I get it, you wouldn't. But I brought you some treats that I thought you would enjoy."

The count smiled. "Treats? Do I look like someone who eats candy?"

A smile in return. "Nope, you don't. But he nodded at some boxes sitting on the floor. The Count hadn't noticed them until then, though now he was beginning to sense something coming from the boxes. Something sort of delicious. "I brought you some plasma."

The count's eyes widened. Plasma. Not blood. Plasma. Plasma was a vampire delicacy, since they could only feed on whole blood when they took down their prey. Plasma was harder to make, so it was harder to get your talons on it.

"And this came from AB Negative," the man continued.

Now the count started drooling. The most rare blood type. Just one percent of people had it.

"Um, ahem," he finally managed to say. "Uh, what if I said I might, just might be willing to do you a favor in exchange for this 'treat'? What are you looking for me to do?"

The werewolf looked him in the eyes. "Turn me."

"Ah, what do you mean, 'Turn you?'"

The werewolf sighed, and then gestured to his back legs spread out in front of him on the wheelchair. A tail poked out from behind it and was fluffy and unmoving under his right elbow. It was weird to see the werewolf still in a wheelchair after turning.

"I'm paralyzed," the werewolf said finally.

The vampire looked even more closely. Like the tail, there was no movement coming from the werewolf's back legs at all.

"How did that happen?" he asked finally.

The werewolf blew out some air. "Long story. But let's just say I'm tired of being in a wheelchair. I want to be healed."

"And you think I can heal you?"

The werewolf nodded.

"How do you expect me to do that?" the count asked with genuine curiosity.

"Like I said. Turn me."

The Count's eyes widened. "You mean into a vampire?"

The wolf nodded.

"I, um, can I even do that?" the Count stuttered. "I mean, you're already a werewolf."

The man's lips twisted. "I don't know. But it's worth it to me to try."

The vampire thought it over some and didn't see the harm it would cause him. If it hurt the werewolf, not his problem. He looked at the boxes of plasma. Yum.

"Okay, fine with me," he said finally. "I mean, you're sure?"

The werewolf nodded but looked determined. "How do we do it? Do you drain most of my blood, and then I drink some of yours?"

"Um, no," the vampire said, a slightly embarrassed look on his face. "That's, um, a story we made up. People don't need to know how we really do it, unless we are turning you."

Now the werewolf looked interested. "Really? Then what ..."

"We piss on you!" the vampire interrupted, his face would have been red with embarrassment if he had normal blood flow.

The werewolf grinned. "You're kidding, right?"

"No! we piss on you, urinate, pee, whatever you want to call it."

The werewolf laughed, but then stopped. "Wait, I'm going to be covered with pee?"

"Yes," the vampire said. "And we need quite a bit. I'll have to have something to drink first."

"Blood?"

"No, water, maybe some wine."

Sometime later, the fluids were consumed and the vampire peed all over the werewolf. Afterwards, the Count handed a towel to the werewolf. "Sorry it had to be done that way," he said with a chagrined look on his face.

The werewolf wiped down. "I get it. It will be worth it to get out of the wheelchair. How long before it takes effect?"

"The next full moon," the Count said.

"Got it, thanks."

After the werewolf left, the Count wondered what kind of creature was going to come from this. Some kind of hybrid wolf/bat. Maybe a wolf with bat wings?

#

A month later

The man was sleeping in his coffin. He slept in it every night but left the lid open because the conversion hadn't kicked in yet and he still needed to breathe. Plus it was hard to get into the coffin with his nonmoving legs. He was still able to go outside into the daylight, but he was beginning to notice some discomfort.

The moon would finally be full tonight, and he looked forward to its arrival with a mix of excitement and apprehension. Tonight might be the night where he could shed this damned paralysis. He had gone to sleep in the midafternoon, because he anticipated being up for much of the night.

It was dark when he felt things in his body, which woke him from his slumber.

He remembered this might be the night, and he got excited.

Then the werewolf changes started. He knew those changes, and wasn't shocked, though he wondered if the conversion would remove the werewolf from him. He was a bit surprised because he remembered the Count had changed before him when he was at the castle, so he thought the vampire might have kicked in first.

But it didn't, and he lay there in the gripping agony of turning werewolf.

When it was done, he felt like his werewolf self, just lying in the coffin. He had the fur, the fangs and it felt like the many times he'd been a werewolf. He tried to move his legs. Nothing. His tail, nothing. Still a paralyzed werewolf.

He sighed, and just lay in the coffin. Hopefully it would ...

Wait, something was happening!

Now all kinds of inner muscles, body fluids, outer muscles, organs, everything, began to shift and jump and move around, and he gasped as something hit his heart.

Suddenly his eyes bulged open, and then he closed them back. Sharp fangs, longer and sharper than his werewolf fangs, sprouted from his gums. His shaggy wolf fur became more glossy and straightened. His tail began to shorten, but it didn't disappear entirely, though he still couldn't feel it.

And then it was done.

His breath was shaky. Vampires breathed?

But he didn't hurt. There was no pain.

He lay in the coffin, and now he remembered he had done this for a reason.

He tried to move his leg. Nothing. Then his other leg. Still nothing.

No!

Well, maybe not. He decided to test it some more. He went to sit up, and when he tried, his entire body began to levitate and rise from the coffin!

"Wow!" He was amazed as he floated up from the coffin until it was a couple feet under him. This was amazing.

He could control it, even more incredible. He thought his body into movement until it was floating over the floor.

Okay, time to land.

He lowered himself and his feet touched the floor. As he continued lowering, his knees gave voluntarily and soon he realized they would not hold him. He would not be able to stand.

Damn it!

He was still a paraplegic.

Sure, he could float around with the levitation, but he couldn't walk.

"Damn."

Fleetingly, he wondered if turning into a bat would help, but he suspected he would be crippled there just like he was in his werewolf form.

He blew out some air, his mind spinning.

What next?

He'd tried werewolves, he tried vampires. Was there anything else?

Ghosts?

No, he'd have to die for that and it might limit where he could go.

He thought some more.

He was the first hybrid vampire-werewolf.

Big deal because he was still a paraplegic.

He was determined to keep fighting. He was going to find something that would work.

Then it hit him.

Another creature with strange powers.

And it could walk.

Well, shamble.

But he'd take shambling over a wheelchair any day.

It was time to do some research and find out where he could find...
Zombies.

Norm Cowie is a paraplegic and a writer, so after his spinal injury, he started writing dystopian short stories featuring the theme of disability. He has written a dozen novels, and one of his other disability short stories was featured on the site of the neuro health organization SRNA, and others will soon be published in the magazines Amazing Stories and Bewildering Stories. Find Norm online at www.normcowie.com

Chattering Teeth by George Larson

What was it? What could it be? The small package was addressed to the occupant, so I suspected the contents had something to do with the advertising gimmicks that most of us received throughout the year. Pure kitch. A pocket calendar, personally engraved pencils, a hokey keychain, maybe a pen or something similar. All reminders from our tax preparer or dentist or whoever. I was a valued client. Yes, that must be it, although occupant was not my name. But maybe occupant was sufficiently impersonable and drab as I felt. It fitted me, perhaps to be a recluse in my waning years.

I had gathered up all the mail and walked back inside the house. Except Sundays, this was my daily routine, one of several fixed actions to fill in my day now that I was retired and living alone. Funny how we all have our established patterns of actions. I had not thought much of these more-or-less daily chores until I had too much time on my hands. Frankly, I did not have an ounce of joie de vivre left. Idle hands are the devil's workshop as the bible said. And it was true in my case.

There was not much mail even though we lived in a consumer-based society. Just the usual advertising flyers, a couple of bills I'd hold off paying until the last minute, and the small box. It was all the detritus of living life in the twenty-first century. But the box was different. It was wrapped in brown paper with its sides glued tightly against the box itself. String encircled it to ensure nothing would inadvertently fall out during delivery. I held it up to my ear and shook it gently, determining if I could hear anything which might disclose the identity of its contents. There were no sounds. So, a clock or bombulet was out of the question in my sketchy opinion. It seemed safe enough. I was awaiting a full set of dentures to replace the broken ones. Maybe they had finally arrived.

I placed the unopened box on the kitchen table and looked closely at the address and other details hoping to find out who sent it. Galaxy Novelty Toy Co. in New York City was shown as the return address. A toy? This was a joke. It had to be since I never ordered such a thing. If it were a gift or gratuity somebody would be out of luck. I was much too old to be suckered into a swindle, if that is what this was about.

I was in no hurry to open the package, but I was downright curious just the same. Who would send me a toy and why?

I went to bed promptly after the 10 PM news and slept fitfully throughout the night. That was unusual since I was a heavy sleeper, at least according to my late dear wife. But the receipt and thoughts of the package had invaded my mind, and now my subconscious too. I could not wait to unwrap the damn thing and see what was inside.

After finishing my second cup of coffee, I gingerly unwrapped the package. Whoever prepared it for shipping spent a great deal of time making sure the contents were safe. They certainly were secure enough because it took me several minutes to untie it and remove the three sheets of surrounding paper. Maybe these were my replacement dentures. My eating soft food was

getting old. Lack of dentures also hindered my speech; it sounded like I had a mouthful of marbles. But the box did not look right. It was hand-wrapped and looked unusual. Once removed, the unpacking of the inside was easy. I just opened the top of the box and let the object fall onto the table.

Oh my God! I could not believe what I was looking at, a chattering set of teeth. It was almost identical to the one I played with as a kid. I laughed at myself remembering all the good times I had playing with it and showing it off to my friends and parents. It had dark red gums and pearly white teeth, just as I remember. The Chattering Teeth had a pair of stubby legs and a key to wind it up and set it in motion. On top of its head, were a pair of googly eyes with white irises and coal black pupils. The Teeth were given as gag gifts between adults, but it was the children who were really enthralled with them. I was pleased with my gift and could not wait to wind it up and to see it scamper across the table. My dentist would get an earful for playing a practical joke, but it was funny and there was more.

At the bottom of the box there were printed instructions which read:

Please accept this gift in the spirit in which it is given. Treat the set of Chattering Teeth with respect and care. For who knows what the future holds.

Respectfully, Your friends at the Galaxy Novelty Toy Co.

Those were not the words I expected to read. The text was ominous, almost eerie in nature. I quickly shrugged off the instructions and began winding up the teeth until the key stopped. I then released the switch and watched it skitter across the table while all the while making a yakety-yak sound. I enjoyed the scene as it wended its way, stopping just short of the end of the table and then turning itself around, moving in the opposite direction. It was amazing to see its intricate movements.

They were not my replacement dentures but something amusing, nonetheless. I could wait a little while longer to confront my dentist, as now I had something to play with while biding my time.

The days droned on, nothing of interest to spend my time, except the Chattering Teeth. The Teeth were now becoming the point of interest in my dull life, an obsession. I often took them out of the box. It was now time to play. I was amazed at how the Teeth maneuvered its way around the living room floor. It had a sixth sense in avoiding the legs of the chairs and TV stand. It was now making more noise as though speaking a new language. Its garbled sounds were becoming more distinct with every passing day. And that is when it happened.

Suddenly, the Teeth spoke to me in a tinny, mechanical voice which I clearly understood but confounded by what it said.

“Yakety-yak. Don’t look back. Take out the papers and the trash. Or you don’t get no spendin’ cash. If you don’t scrub that kitchen floor. You ain’t gonna rock ‘n’ roll no more. Yakety yak (don’t look back).”

I did look back and remembered the Coasters 1957 number one hit on the charts: Yakety yak.

It had somehow reached back into my memory and plucked out a tune with which I was familiar. If it could do that, what else was it capable of? I was now frightened to the very core of my being. I placed the Teeth back in the box and put the top on.

The next few days were a cacophony of discord around the house. The devious object talked incessantly about things I had in my mind for a long time. Some were very unpleasant thoughts, others not so much. Regardless, it was becoming a chatterbox. The only time it shut up was when I put it back in its box.

The next morning, I called my dentist and accused him of sending the Teeth to my home. Not the dentures, but the magical, mystical ones that were now playing havoc with my life. He averred he had done no such thing and flat-out told me I must have Alzheimer's or other disease of the mind. He put me on hold and when he reconnected, he said my new dentures would arrive in another three days. Before he hung up, he told me to find a new dentist. He certainly had lots of chutzpa for a young man who was still wet behind the ears. Youth, damn them to Hell!

That evening, I caught the Teeth poking its head out of the box, slyly surveilling the kitchen with its googly eyes. What was it up to? What more tricks did it have up its sleeve? The time was right to act. And I did. I pulled it from its box and stomped on it, breaking it into hundreds of shards of plastic. The inanimate object was dead, an oxymoron if there ever was one. I swept up the remains and deposited them in the trash can. Good riddance and goodbye. I was now a free man.

I slept long and soundly, only to be awakened by the loud singing coming from the kitchen: *Yakety yak – don't look back.*

Oh Lord, please, please say it is not so. But it was. The chatterbox was running back and forth on the linoleum floor like it did not have a care in the world. It did not, singing and talking to its heart content. Much of what was spoken was pure babble, other times its sing-song routine reflected intelligence and cogent thought. It had reconstructed itself overnight. How could that be?

But my cares were growing exponentially. When it stopped moving, it stared directly into my eyes. I could see the hatred and feel the growing tension between us. One of us would die.

I thought I was going bat-shit crazy, thinking it was alive. It could not be, could it? What if I were simply imagining things. Toys were now high-tech items with a variety of chips in them allowing them to speak, walk and God knows whatever else. Think Chatty Cathy. Yes, that was the answer. So, I ignored it for now, out of sight, out of mind. Right?

I waited patiently on the stoop of my front porch for the mail carrier to arrive. If my dentist were correct, I would be getting my new dentures today. He did and I was happy to have finished that bit of drama. I ran into the house, anxious to open the box and try on my new full set of teeth. I fitted the top row and then the bottom. They were a perfect fit, and I was pleased with the craftsmanship. Now I could smile again, feeling almost normal for a change.

When the chatterbox noticed my new choppers, it became subdued, so much so that it jumped back into its box. That was odd but it was fine by me because I had had enough of its abusive attitude. Before it slunk all the way down in the box, it gave a last look at me and saw me grinning from ear to ear showing off my brand-new, custom-made set of teeth. Well, it was more of a shit eating grin to tell the truth. The little demon was jealous!

Before I shut off the bedroom night light, I fixed a glass of Polident denture cleaner and plopped my new teeth in it. They would be clean by morning. I turned off the light and snoozed.

Sometime early in the night, I heard a clacking sound in the dark, close to my bed. Getting louder by the minute, it brought me out of my stupor, and I was now wide awake. What was happening?

I switched on the light and to my horror I saw the Teeth sitting at the end of my bed. I immediately sat up and as I did, I could see it change before my eyes. It now opened its maw wide, extending its mouth as it did so. Its teeth were sharp and its canines longer. It held a maniacal sneer, as best I can describe. Drool fell from its gaping mouth.

It was a sight of sheer terror. It quickly hopped onto the nightstand and pushed over my glass holding my dentures, spilling them to the floor.

Next, it ran up my chest and jumped into my slackened jaw. It pried it open with the full, strong spring mechanism in its workings. It was now permanently part of my mouth, part of me. The small key stuck out at an angle between my lips. It shot tendrils up into my cerebral cortex and I was now at its mercy, a slave to the thing. I was now merely a vessel for the Chattering Teeth. I passed out from the terror and trauma inflicted on me.

I am feeling much better now. My mood has changed for the better and I am smiling. It is not a natural smile but an overly wide grin. I now talked too much, mostly nonsense but that was OK. A chatterbox if you will. It did not make any difference overall. I was finally happy and would be for the rest of my natural life.

Yakety yak, don't look back!

Mendota State by George Larson

No football, no cheerleaders, and no marching bands here. No, Mendota State was not collegiate in the slightest. It was the oldest psychiatric hospital in Wisconsin and held many criminally insane patients during its long existence. Some gained notoriety for their crimes, others not so much. It was always a dangerous place, so much so that the worst of the worst were housed in a separate highly controlled wing. I know because I am the majordomo of the place and a keeper of secrets.

My spot was in the D ward or simply the D. Everyone in the hospital understood the significance of the letter, even many of our guests. It represented the seventh circle of hell where murderers, sexual deviants and other violent, perverted denizens called home. It was mine for the past nine years as well. It was a bat-shit place for the crazies who inhabited the confines of the solitary rooms, twenty-two in all and all occupied now.

Jeremy, one of the assistants, or more properly called aids, came into the staff room shaking his head, telling us Number 12 was refusing to take his meds again. We typically referred to patients by their room numbers to keep things simple.

Oh God, here we go again, I thought. Number 12 was paranoid schizophrenic and often acted out in unusual ways. Sometimes he refused to wear clothes, other times he pooped in his bed to simply carry out another tantrum. To show us who was in charge. Then and again, he refused to take his required medication. 12 was a problem child with an attitude. Back in the day, the predecessors would shoot him up with Thorazine to calm him. If that did not work, one would go the straitjacket and a time-out in the hole. If those methods failed, there would be a beat down to soothe the jangled nerves, ours not his. Not exactly by the book, the DSM-5 in this instance.

Jeremy and Kris went directly to 12 and asked again if he would voluntarily take his morning meds. He shook his head no, continuing to bounce on his mattress. They immediately grabbed his upper and lower body, overpowering him into a supine position on the bed. They then attached flex cuffs to his arms and legs, securing them on the metal head and foot boards. Next Jeremy put his hand over 12's nose and mouth in the classic style of burking. He reacted by squirming to get air in his lungs. Jeremy then released his hand covering 12's mouth but continued pinching his nose while Kris dropped two pills into his mouth. The gag worked and 12 swallowed his daily medication with no further fuss. But there was nothing funny about the act. This was our routine for those patients who refused a spoonful of medicine. It was a small victory for us, showing who ran the asylum.

It was the patients of course.

I've always had a strange, quirky interest in mental health and that's why I was strongly drawn to the subject. My family suffered from bouts of anxiety and depression but fortunately nothing more serious. I read all I could about the whole spectrum of mental disease in *Psychology*

Today, learning the basics of human nature and how the mind worked or did not. It was when it did not work so well that intrigued me the most. Nature or nurture? Or a combination of both.

Ed Gein. That was the name of the person who for many years occupied a room in Hotel Mendota. Along with many thousands of others, I was shocked at what he had done but also fascinated at the same time. His gruesome story would be later used by Hollywood as the basis for *Silence of the Lambs* and other films. Ed murdered two women in Plainfield, Wisconsin but that was far from the worst of what he done. He had dug up the bodies of several women in the local cemetery and fashioned knickknacks from their skins and bones. Bizarre objects such as lampshades and other items. But what he was best known for was a full skin suit sewn from the bodies of the dead. Ed had some serious mommy issues to deal with too.

Gein was arrested and charged but deemed unfit to stand trial. He was shuffled off to Mendota State Psychiatric Hospital to serve out the rest of his life in the institution. When he died his body was laid in a grave next to his mother and father in Plainfield. Mommy dearest, wherefore art thou, my beloved?

Ed was old news. He died long before I entered Mendota.

I felt the tension rising in the ward. Others could too. It seemed indescribable yet it was present. The psychiatrists and their techs made their usual rounds. The patient's dayroom was still occupied with the usual cadre of people. Movies were most popular on the large flat screen television but there was something in the air, something I could not discern. Then it happened, quickly with no one watching.

15 and 19 were standing in line in the cafeteria waiting to be served. For God knows what reason, 15 savagely stabbed 19 several times in the back with a shiv. 19 immediately fell to the floor with blood issuing from his wounds. The alarm went out, and paramedics responded but it was too late to save 19. He eventually died from the severe injuries to the kidneys. 15 screamed repeatedly: *he is the Antichrist!* It made no sense to any of us. Not surprisingly, he had experienced a psychotic break from reality. Number 19 was one of the meekest, least troublesome of the patients. After one hellacious hullabaloo, 15 was charged with murder but since he was already adjudged to be criminally insane, there was no change to his status. He remained number 15. That is how things worked around here.

But not for long. I had had enough brutality, the violence on the ward. It was time for some justice, some payback. And I would be the avenger. Perhaps I was having a bit of a psychotic break too. Regardless, vengeance would be mine. I had made my mind up. Enough was enough.

Looking around at the regulars in the dayroom, I quickly gauged the amount of evil in the room. It was enormous and I felt proud that I was to have a role, a major one, in their demise. This was my destiny. To be the savior of lost souls. By killing them, I would free them from their shame and torment.

Several of the patients were highly functioning individuals, meaning their thoughts and actions were rational, seemingly normal. The psychotropic drugs helped them stay focused for much of the time. They could speak cogently and act accordingly. These were the ones most

dangerous, especially ones with a homicidal bent. One second, they could be intelligently discussing politics and the next pushing you up against the wall trying to choke the life out of you. You never could let your guard down. Not even for a second. In the blink of an eye, your life could be snuffed out if you were not careful. That was the tension everyone lived under.

Keep in mind that all the patients had yet to be convicted of a crime since none were competent enough to stand trial. Competency hearings were routinely held and occasionally patients left the D to face punishment. But only a few. The rest were lifers.

Jimmy the Firefly was one extremely sick dude and a lifer. A pyromaniac to his very core. He was number 21 but we tagged him with the appellation because of the horrendous crime that landed him in Mendota. Jimmy was a boy wonder of sorts. Starting when he was seven years old, he began setting fires, small ones at the time. He would lovingly gaze into the flames, watching their majesty as the fire grew larger and brighter. He was mesmerized by his handiwork and thought his living creations to be his ultimate destiny. No amount of psychotherapy would help with his love for fire.

At 12 years old, the Firefly did the unthinkable, except in his own twisted mind. He set fire to his own house while his mom, dad and two older sisters were sleeping. None escaped the blaze. Jimmy learned his lesson well; that accelerant sped up the process. He was standing on the front lawn holding the gas can and smiling when the fire department arrived.

We had to be very careful of Jimmy. No matches or other contraband to start a fire. We also had to monitor what he watched on TV because scenes of fires would excite him to the point he would loudly squeal in delight. He could be a naughty boy when watching the tube.

I lifted the book of matches from Jeremy's jacket pocket. He was a chain smoker and a convenient mark. It was an easy snatch and grab, and no one was the wiser except me. I would prove that smoking does kill.

I waited patiently for the dayroom to clear. There was only one other patient other than Jimmy in the room who was heavily sedated. His snoring and drooling spoke volumes. The Firefly's eyes were glued to the TV screen, engrossed in a soap. I approached him from behind and lit a match and held it in front of him. He immediately averted his eyes from the screen to the glowing flame. He started mewling like a kitten at the shimmering light. While fixated on the burning match, I poured the bottle of Flaxseed cooking oil which I had swiped from the cafeteria. It ran down over his head and dribbled over his robe and pajamas. Still staring at the light from the match, I dropped it into his lap, and his clothes caught fire, sending black plumes of smoke into the air. Jimmy did not scream in pain or yell out in terror. He simply stared in awe as the fire consumed his body. He died where he sat. He was finally getting some poetic justice for his horrendous crime. I felt vindicated by my charitable act of kindness.

Of course, there was an investigation, but the conclusion was unanimous. Jimmy found some matches and had self-immolated. Cased closed. Another bed opened on D.

Rules on contraband were tightened. No longer could prohibited articles be brought into D by staff. What was good for the gander now applied to employees who worked there as well. No

one was punished for the lapse in security. Back to the same old, same old routine. The jailers and inmates wanted a calm, peaceful environment. At least those patients who were cognizant of their circumstances. Many did not know where they were now and did not care in the slightest.

But it was not to be. Number 15 was back in his room as though nothing had happened. As though no one remembered what he had done. But I did. Oh yes. I was the Lord's avenging, swift sword, and I planned to use it.

The med rounds progressed, and the patients continued to play their roles accordingly. A variety of sizes of colored pills voluntarily went down the throats of the willing or forced down recalcitrant ones. *Mellow them out* were the watchwords used by staff to describe the drill. Whether they helped or not did not make one iota of difference. The desired effect was the same: keep them calm and controlled so they would not act out. Easier on everyone.

I watched number 15 go about his day. He was no longer restricted to his room and could now move about the ward. I thought he had not been adequately punished for his crime. Some retribution was necessary.

I waited for the most opportune time to strike. It was just past morning meds that I made my move by sneaking into his room. He was startled at first but soon relaxed after telling him I was there to change his bedding. It was the right day but wrong time, but he was not paying attention. He was engaged in serious masturbation. As he continued stroking himself, I removed his bed sheet and wrapped it around his neck and pulled hard. So hard that his eyes bulged from their sockets, while putting his unoccupied hand on his neck trying to break my hold. It was to be of no use, a matter of too little too late. He climaxed as his life force drained out of his body. Number 15 was now spent and limp. He had no aspirations left in this life.

Once again there was a formal inquiry about what had transpired and who expired. It was deemed an accidental death, auto asphyxiation to be specific. It was a repetitive motion sickness that could not be cured by modern medicine.

My progress was measured in tentative baby steps rather than major leaps and bounds. I have been successful so far but not satisfied. I needed to do something dramatic, something big to kill more patients, to put them out of their misery.

But what to do?

I spent time mulling over my options. There really were not many, truthfully slim to none. I had to come up with a plan of action that would not point to me as the instigator, the culprit of these crimes.

I was living off and on in a fugue state since I began my quest to kill. I was in a disassociated frame of mind. Blanking out memory at times and not remembering things that I should. That condition scared me but would not stop me from completing God's clever work. Nothing would.

It would be laundry.

Wednesday was washday. The large hampers were collected from the rooms and pushed to the laundry. When I was alone, I sprinkled the remaining Flaxseed oil over each. The oil was especially flammable and served as a good accelerant. More of Jeremy's matches were lit and dropped into each of the hampers and I waited until they fully ignited. I then pushed each one to various parts of the D to help spread the fire.

It did not take long for billowing smoke to fill the ward. The smoke detectors sounded the alarm and then everyone capable panicked. Pandemonium reigned through the hallways, the shouting and screaming creating a cacophony of dreadful sounds. In the dense fog of smoke, I stumbled to the front exit. My body was being crushed by others who were trying to escape the inferno.

I was knocked on the floor and passed out likely due to a concussion. The last conscious thought I had was that I was about to die.

"Lucky, Lucky, thank God you're alive!" Those words spoken by Jeremy were the sweetest I'd heard in an exceptionally long time.

"I thought you were a goner," he said as I opened my swollen, stinging eyes. "We've lost nearly half of the patients," he commented as he helped me to my feet.

"But not you. You are one lucky dude. You are a survivor, number 7."

And that I was. Lucky # 7.

George Larson is a retired Special Agent of the Diplomatic Security Service, US Department of State. He has written eight novels and many short stories which have appeared in a number of publications and podcasts. You can find George's books on Amazon.

The Poems of Fhen M.

Cerberus and a Knight

He drank countless bottles of beer
cold night after cold night,
he drowned himself in *serbesa*
until his bloodstream ran with it.

In a frozen, grimy wasteland
ground cracked beneath layers of ice and dirt
Soni is a bottle of beer
clutched in the claws of a giant hound
his blood is what Cerberus thirsts to drink.
I am the knight-poet,
with a chainmail coif and helmet,
I wield a scythe, a bottle opener,
serrated, sharp, and soon,
Soni the drunkard, your time is near.

Balete Tree

She sleeps soundly,
beside her, a thick rope lies coiled.

Sprawling branches, aerial roots,
wide, shaded canopy
Jona is a Balete tree.

Her face on the tree trunk
harpies perch on the bough
like a woodpecker drilling holes.

The Balete trees are in The Wood
of the Self-Murderers by William Blake.

The sap is blood
flowing through the dark woods.

Gustave Doré's Wood Engraving

Sky of nimbostratus
a rocky, cliff-like edge
overlooking a red river.

Viscous liquid swirling
with the weight of countless lives lost.
The blood flows like a dark, relentless tide,
The river's surface seems to churn and seethe.

Eliot and Arthur descend to a ring,
like a rice pond field of a rice terraces,
and see the river of blood of
Gonzalo Mariano, Darwin Dormitorio,
Horacio Castillo, Leonardo Villa...

Half-human and half-horse creatures
stand guard on the riverbank
armed with bows, arrows, and paddles.

They shoot at souls of D'Pogi
(look, he's in tears and agony)
and his fellow fratmen
whenever they try to rise
too far out of the blood.

Fhen M.'s poetry career is marked by several notable milestones. His first published poem in Waray, "Uyasan" (meaning "Toy" in English), appeared in the 2019 anthology Pinili: 15 Years of Lamiraw. He has received multiple recognitions, including second place in the 1st Chito Rono Literary Awards in the Waray poetry (siday) category and several daily wins in the DYVL Siday Contest, a radio-based poetry competition. His published works include "Bamboo House" in Horseshoe (Spring 2024); "Bookcase in the House of My Ancestors" and "Spending the Night on Planet Mars" in Well Read Magazine: Best of 2024, Vol. 1; "The Eleventh Disney Princess" in the 20th Anniversary Edition of The World of Myth Magazine; and "Tetrapod" in Poetica #15. Find Fhen online at

https://otherpeople1990.wordpress.com/page/2/?fbclid=IwVERDUAOgogFleHRuA2FlbQIxMA_BzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAwzNTA2ODU1MzE3MjgAAR68iKQBoVe2NpPzF6B3JT5FhDhKvSEEnZQ1MDidJjrGPzfcAApaeumuJU6Muw_aem_qSpPaiKDS4cQ0s2abzTyUg

A LONG WALK ON WEAK KNEES by Daniel Crépault

Klaus leaned against the gleaming quartz wall, resting his forehead on its cool surface as he tried to catch his breath. A ping in his frontal lobe drew his attention to a message.

“What is it, Bruce?”

“Sir, the commuter shuttle is about to depart, but you seem to have left the embarkation area.”

“Yes, I know. I’m going to walk home.” Each word worsened the burning sensation in his lungs, but he was determined to continue with his plan.

“Sir, I would advise against that. The distance is approximately...”

Klaus terminated the connection and silenced his notifications. He took a few more deep breaths, steeling himself for what lay ahead. Adrianna’s face took shape in his mind, scowling at him, the way she used to whenever he overexerted himself.

“Don’t you start, Addy. I can do this.”

He imagined Adrianna’s face taking on that pinched look, the one she wore when she wanted him to know she didn’t believe a word of it.

Klaus stood and clenched his fists, then rushed through the passageway into the middle ring, emerging into a vast domed area. The sensation as his implants ceased feeding him data was jarring and left him breathless, like being immersed in icy water. Mentally, he’d known to expect the loss of augmented sensory input and data-stream access, but his physiology reacted like a trapped animal. Adrenaline flooded his bloodstream, quickening his pulse and setting his heart thumping in his chest. Klaus braced himself against the threshold and fought the dizzying panic clawing at his mind.

“It’s only temporary,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Just keep moving.”

Several moments passed before he could continue the journey. He looked ahead at the stone steps leading to a verdant meadow sloping downward toward a large town nestled into the valley. The light hurt his eyes, and his face ached from squinting. In the fields around him, sweating locals dressed in dark tunics harvested a bulbous purple crop. Klaus waved to the closest harvester, an elderly woman with stooped shoulders.

“*Solanum melongena*. Beautiful,” he said, pointing to the basket she carried.

Her dark eyes stared back, and she made no reply.

“The eggplants. They look excellent. What kind of fertilizers did you use?”

The woman shrugged. “You should have seen last year’s harvest,” she said, as she turned and walked back to the group of harvesters. Klaus opened his mouth to wish her a good day, then abandoned the effort and turned toward the flat stones leading to a narrow earthen path on a steep incline. He took small steps, spreading his arms out to maintain his balance. Most of the locals he passed ignored him, but others paused in their labour to look up and laugh at the strange old man flapping his arms as he descended the hill.

Klaus ignored their laughter and trudged on until, at last, he arrived at the valley floor. Here, the path widened through a tree-lined avenue surrounded by triangular wooden structures. The town’s archaic squalor shocked him as his eyes swept over the houses made of carved wooden beams. They were analog, lifeless, and devoid of ornamentation, and Klaus marvelled that anyone would want to live in such a place.

Each grouping of four houses was built around a small garden. Seeing the tight rows of lush green lettuces and bright red tomatoes brightened Klaus’s mood. As a fastidious gardener, he respected the skill it had taken to grow these in soil that looked too sandy by far. Smiling, he approached the closest row and reached out, rubbing a tomato vine with his fingers. Klaus raised

his hand to his nose. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the sharp, fresh scent. Its familiarity transported him back through the dusty halls of memory to happy childhood summers spent outside the dome.

The doors to the nearby houses opened with a woody crack, and children rushed out, laughing and chasing one another. Their parents followed, shouted warnings and admonishments, and then turned to greet their neighbours. Klaus crouched, trying in vain to remain hidden. Glancing through the plants, he saw the adults talking to one another about this and that, exchanging news, gossip, or gardening tips perhaps. His brow furrowed as he noticed the way the locals communicated by chattering directly into each other's faces, rather than politely looking away as they spoke. The ache in his knees was becoming unbearable. He could hear the distant whine of a commuter drone passing overhead outside the dome and wondered if this walk through the middle ring was a mistake.

Seeing him, a bronze-faced man left the group and walked over, blocking Klaus's path. "Excuse me, but would you mind not touching the plants?"

Klaus's pulse was racing, alarmed at such direct and unrequested communication and embarrassed by his own rudeness.

"Yes, my apologies, sir. I was just admiring them," he said, pointing to the tomatoes. The muscles in his face ached from forcing himself to smile and squinting against the brightness. He turned his head away and smoothed the wrinkles in his tunic with shaky hands. "*Solanum lycopersicum*, I believe. Lovely."

From the corner of his eye, Klaus could see that the man was scratching his chin, gazing directly back at him. "No trouble. Have a good day."

"Thank you. Be well, sir." Klaus shuffled around the man and stepped back onto the earthen path.

Klaus stole a glance backward and could see the man still looking at him. He queried the data-stream for the shortest path home and swore as he remembered why he couldn't access it. In the town square stood a large wooden structure with arms jutting out at odd angles, each pointing to a different destination and showing the distance in yards and miles. Klaus walked toward it and tried to remember from his early schooling how to convert miles to kilometres. He gave up, realizing that he could neither remember nor query the correct answer, and set off in the direction of the outer ring passageway.

He looked back and saw the man still looking at him, a smile spreading across his sun-tanned face. Klaus hurried on. The path ahead led up a steep incline toward a distant passageway. His foot stumbled on the uneven flagstones, and he fell hard. Pain exploded through his face, and brilliant hues of yellow, neon green, and vibrant reds danced through his sight. Eventually, the sharp pain in his forehead receded to a dull ache. He was sitting up, unsure where he was or how long he'd been there. When the world came back into focus, he saw that the tanned man was next to him, holding his head in some kind of headlock.

Fearing that he'd been attacked, Klaus scrambled backwards, kicking free from the man's grasp. The man didn't come any closer but kept waving his arms and pointing. As the ringing in his ears faded, Klaus realized the man had been speaking to him.

"...pressure on it," he said.

"What?"

"I said you're bleeding and need to put pressure on the cut. You hit your head on the ground."

Klaus reached a hand up to his face and regretted it. The pain was almost unbearable, and he swallowed hard.

“You’ve got a concussion, that’s for sure.”

Klaus looked down at his bloody tunic. “How long have I been here?”

“Maybe half a measure.”

“What?”

“Um, about 10 minutes or so, I guess.”

Klaus nodded, remembering something he’d heard about middle ringers marking time using dirt or sand or something. He tried to stand and fell back heavily.

“Hey, go easy. You had quite the tumble.” The man extended a hand toward Klaus.

He grasped it and was surprised at its sinewy strength as it pulled him upright effortlessly.

“Thanks,” he said, turning toward the passageway in the distance.

The man placed a hand on his shoulder. “Friend, you’d better let me help you. You’ll fall again if you try to go up that hill.”

Klaus turned and looked the man in the eye. “Young man, I am well able to walk up a hill without injury.”

The man raised his hands and nodded. “Of course, sir, it’s just that if you’ve got a concussion, your balance will be affected, and you could fall again.” He pointed toward the steep path on the outskirts of the town. “And I daresay the road ahead is less forgiving than our town square.”

Klaus wanted to argue, but could already feel the dizzying nausea and double vision throwing off his balance, so he assented with a nod. The man, who introduced himself as Edgar, ran back to the houses and retrieved a cylinder of grey paste that he applied to the cut on Klaus’s forehead. It burned, but stopped the bleeding and even numbed the pain a little. Edgar placed Klaus in a kind of wheeled cart that smelled of rotting vegetables and pushed it up the steep hill, winding around the earthen path and, as they neared the passageway, up stone steps.

Klaus lay back in the cart and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the sun was gleaming through the far side of the dome, and he could see the passageway to the outer ring where he lived. Edgar reached over and helped him out of the cart. Klaus stretched and placed a hand on his forehead. To his surprise, he found that the cut was healing rapidly and was already half its original size. He looked at Edgar and wished there was something he could do before they parted. Sending tokens was the most sensible and appropriate way to express gratitude, but Edgar had no way to receive or spend them. Still, it wasn’t right to simply walk away.

Klaus stepped forward. “Thank you,” he said, extending his hand. It was an old-fashioned gesture of friendship, he knew. But here, in this strange place, it seemed a fitting answer to Edgar’s kindness. The younger man looked surprised and smiled. He took Klaus’s hand with a crushing grip and pumped his arm vigorously. Klaus nodded goodbye and continued down the passageway. When he reached the threshold to the outer ring, his implants surged back to life. The sudden resumption of data flowing into his synapses was like entering a room full of shouting people. He focused on his breathing and, after a few moments, acclimated to the flood of information.

Klaus set off toward home, grateful for the dimness of the streets around him. It was late, and the exterior wall of the municipal building, grown from a single beryl crystal, glowed blue-green in the near darkness. As he walked past, he acknowledged the building’s queries, accepting its updates and newsflashes and allowing it to access his internal memory. The memory of his fall and accompanying physiological data triggered a medical request. Klaus continued walking and, moments later, he heard a faint hum as a medical drone hovered down to within inches of his face and sprayed his cut with an antiseptic smelling of lilacs. The fluid made his eyes burn, and he swatted at the drone as it flew away.

As he neared the large, fogged glass exterior of his home, the deep lines in his face rearranged themselves into a frown. Since Adrianna's death, the giant house they'd shared felt like a mausoleum, full of echoes and shadows. He ambled up the steps and crept through the front door.

The house's avatar winked into view on the landing.

"Good evening, professor."

"Hello, Bruce."

The avatar's facial features were a simulacrum of human concern. "The municipal hub relayed your data. Your cortisol levels are quite high, which isn't surprising given your distressing journey. I took the liberty of drawing a bath to your preferred temperature, and you'll find a glass of cider on the hearth."

"Thank you, but I'll skip the bath, and I'd prefer scotch instead."

"Certainly, sir. Would you like to talk about your day? I can have Dr. Kataoka attend to you in the study."

"No, that won't be necessary." Klaus had never warmed to speaking with the bespectacled psychotherapist, knowing that it was just Bruce in another avatar.

"Perhaps the Lady Adrianna..."

"No!"

Shouting at Bruce was futile, and Klaus reproached himself for his lapse in control, but the thought of a house AI masquerading as his wife was too much for him. He took a deep breath and exhaled, slowly. "I've told you before. Please do not ask again."

"Very good, sir. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do for you."

Bruce winked out of the visible spectrum but continued monitoring the house and its lone occupant. As he walked down the hallway, the floor tiles beneath his feet warmed to 103°F. The study was constructed of pale marble, and a fireplace emanated warmth as low embers crackled and popped, casting the darkened room in a strobing orange glow.

Klaus fell into his leather chair and breathed a sigh of relief. As he lay back, memories of the day's journey were projected into the air above him. The moment he'd tried to hide behind the tomato vines appeared, and Klaus smiled. Children emerged from the ugly houses, laughing and running after each other under their parents' watchful eyes. He reached the memory of his fall and shook his head. The pain in his head was gone, but his knees ached more than ever. The problem, he felt sure, was that he was carrying too much weight.

"Bruce, I'd like to discuss my diet."

The avatar winked into focus at his side. "Of course, sir. What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to reduce my daily caloric intake by 25% and halve my consumption of processed sugar and sodium."

"Very good, sir. I've drafted a menu reflecting those changes. Would you like me to prepare anything for you now?"

Klaus swirled the scotch over the lone ice cube in his glass. "No thanks. I'll finish this off and do some gardening."

"Understood, sir," Bruce said, disappearing.

Adrianna's face appeared in his thoughts again, eyes a soft brown, and with that slight smile she reserved for the moments before he recognized his own foolishness. "Don't start," he said, swallowing the last of the scotch. With considerable effort, he raised himself out of the chair and headed for the garden.

During the day, refracted light from the surrounding quartz and amethyst buildings filled the indoor garden. It had been Adrianna's favourite room in the house and, since her death, it was his favourite too. From the stone table in the centre of the room, Klaus picked up a pair of silver gardening shears and an automatic watering can, both of which were valuable antiques. Music emanated from hidden speakers, and he began the daily watering and pruning ritual, winding his way through soft pink canna lilies, bright red hibiscus blossoms, and thorny barberry shrubs. As he finished watering the orchids, he paused and reached out for the stem, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger, before raising it to his nose. It smelled vegetal with an acrid hint of pesticide, but evoked no memories, no associations.

Bruce winked into existence at his side and offered to refill his watering can. Klaus accepted and, while he waited, looked around the garden. There were still the heliconias and the plumerias left.

"Here you are, sir," Bruce said, extending the replenished watering can.

Klaus took it and continued his route, then hesitated and turned back. "Bruce?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Send in Dr. Kataoka."

"Very good, sir."

Moments later, a grey-haired man in a tweed suit and horn-rimmed glasses winked into existence a few feet away.

"Good evening, Professor. How are you feeling today? Is there anything in particular you'd like to discuss?"

Klaus walked across the stone steps toward the heliconias, the doctor's avatar following a few paces away. "Hello, doctor. I trust you are aware of the particulars of today's journey."

"Yes, and I must say I am glad to see you looking so well after such a difficult ordeal. Can I assume you'll be taking the commuter shuttle tomorrow? Bruce can book your passage for the usual time."

Klaus frowned. "Certainly not. I could have asked Bruce to do that myself. I need your research skills."

Dr. Kataoka nodded. "Of course, sir, proceed."

"I need schematics for a walking assistance device, like a cane or something of that type."

"Certainly, sir. What did you have in mind?"

"It needs to be analog, suited for mountainous terrain, and made of durable material. Oh, and I need it fabricated and ready by tomorrow morning."

THE END

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The Royal Summit by Jeremy Pelletier

Prince Prochorus fled across the open plain. The pack of hungry wolves was closing in on him. His lungs burned with the fire of exertion and his legs felt like sacks of wet mortar. He reached into his pack and pulled out a precious day's worth of provisions. The food would be of no use to him if the wolfpack devoured him body and soul. He dropped the food in the prairie grass and staggered on. The sacrifice of food was eagerly accepted by the giant wolves. It gave him time to scale the wall separating the vast plains from the immense forest.

The wall kept the wolves safely behind him, but Milzig Forest held its own dangers. He could feel the eyes of a thousand beasts burning into him as he followed the muddy path between the dark trees. Strange calls and cries rang out at him from large patches of dense undergrowth on all sides. Fierce chittering of creatures threatened him with deadly harm from their hiding places in the tree canopy over his head. His mission was secret and urgent, or he would have had a small army of palace guards with him on such a treacherous journey.

At last, he could see a glimpse of daylight up ahead as he traveled out of the forest, into the expanse of the Akmenain Hills. He spied his destination in the distance. At the summit of the highest point stood the ancient stronghold of Kurtort Palace. What happens there in the next few days will determine the futures of the Five Kingdoms.

The rocky hills were no slice of royal wedding cake either. The terrain was difficult and dangerous. Wild dragons were scarce these days, but not unheard of. Ravenous cave bears had been reported in the area recently. And one must always be on guard for serpents hiding under any of the rocks on the final leg of his journey.

There was movement in the shadows of one of the rocks as he approached. Instinctively, Prince Prochorus leapt to his right just as a deadly viper shot out from its hiding place straight at where his steps would have taken him. He paused to catch his breath and calm his racing heart. He thought he heard a growl off to one side. He whirled around and caught sight of the dark form of an enormous cave bear disappearing behind a boulder.

Had the bear seen him? It didn't matter. A bear like that could smell a man from two miles away. Adrenaline surged through the body of the young prince as he burned the last of his stamina on a reckless sprint up the final hill to the safety of the palace. The barbican door was open just wide enough for the prince to squeeze his way inside. He grabbed the handle and pulled the massive door closed behind him. He strained his body to the limit to lift the huge plank up to the brackets to bar the doors closed.

Inside the Kurtort Palace it was cool, dark and dusty. The lifelessness of the stronghold hung heavily over the young man. No one had been here for eons. Prince Prochorus was the first one to the summit. He caught his breath and had a minute to think. He had barred the other delegates of the summit from the palace. That hungry cave bear was still out there waiting for them.

He lifted the bar from the barricade brackets and pushed the massive door open just wide enough to peek outside. There was no sign of the bear or any of the other delegates. Someone

strolled out from behind a big rock. It was Princess Osanna of Adisvale. At least two of the five kingdoms would be represented here to deal with their collective calamity.

Prochorus watched in horror as the cave bear stalked out from behind the same rock, not far behind the princess. He shouted a warning and frantically waved at her. Princess Osanna smiled, waved and called a greeting back to him.

How did this princess make it this far on her own? The prince thought. *She always seems oblivious to the perils around her.* He stepped back inside and looked around. The rack of weapons near the front gate had been severely neglected for ages, but he picked out a sturdy spear.

The Princess neared the gate. The enormous cave bear charged her. It was almost at her back. She wasn't going to make it. Prince Prochorus gripped his spear and charged at the bear. Osanna screamed and ducked away from the tip of the spear as the prince's thrust drove the point past her ear and into the bear's gaping maw. The spear snapped with a thunderous crack. The jolt shook Prochorus, but he kept his balance. The bear roared in pain. Blood gushed from its mouth. It staggered away from the palace gate.

Princess Osanna turned around and finally saw the bear. "My goodness! What a vicious looking creature! You saved me from it, Prince Prochorus! How brave of you!" She lurched at him. Her arms constricted him like a reticulating python. She planted a wet kiss on his cheek. "My hero!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. We must be mindful of our surroundings, Princess Osanna. Perils lurk all around us at all times in these dark days." He lifted his hand to wipe off the kiss, but decided to leave it be.

"As the king and queen of Adisvale relentlessly remind me," the princess sighed. "Are the others here yet? We have much to discuss about this threat to our kingdoms. We must come up with a plan for defense!"

"We are the first to arrive, Princess. I know not if the others will be as fortunate as us in their journeys."

The two of them went into the palace and found their way to the council chamber. They wiped off layers of dust from the round table and the chairs. Prochorus set out apples, carrots and celery as Osanna prepared a pot of tea for the delegates.

"You didn't bring any of those delicious breads your kingdom is famous for?" asked Osanna.

"I was beset by a pack of ravenous wolves on my journey here, Princess. I had to sacrifice my supply of breads to save my own life."

A young man entered the chamber. His clothes were muddy and torn. Blood trickled out from a couple of the fresh holes in his garb. His pack appeared to have been crushed.

"Hale Prince Vilhelm!" exclaimed Prochorus. "By the grace of the Lord it is good that your journey to this palace was successful. We shall soon require the strength of the army of Towerforge if we are to repel our new enemy. But, my word! What has happened to you? It

appears your journey here has been eventful. Was there still enough life in that cave bear to dare attack a formidable foe as yourself?"

"I spied a great cave bear not far from the palace gate," panted Prince Vilhelm as he eased himself into one of the chairs at the table with a groan. "It was in no condition to put up a fight with the likes of me. My perils began before I nary reached the outskirts of my own kingdom. I was set upon by a pack of bloodthirsty brigands. I fought off a dozen of them, but their numbers were great. They overpowered me and my only escape was over the edge of Renfro Canyon. My tumble down the side was interrupted by many stones and trees. The rocks at the bottom broke my fall. I am afraid my pack took the brunt of my impacts."

Princess Osanna immediately began cleaning the mud from the prince and cleaning and bandaging his wounds. "That is terrible, Prince Vilhelm! My king and queen say that the brigands have become emboldened by the presence of the scourge we are here to discuss. It is said they will soon align themselves with the enemy, if they have not done so already."

A young lady trotted into the council chamber. "Many apologies for my tardiness, your highnesses. My departure for this location was delayed by word of a new peril in the kingdom of Huddleton. Princess Regina may not be able to attend this summit. I have sent my wizard, Nicodemus to investigate."

"You are most welcome, Princess Martina of Bentonite," said Prince Prochorus. "We will need the full strength of all five kingdoms to overcome our new foe. My expectancy is that your wizard, Nicodemus will be able to rescue Princess Regina and the kingdom of Huddleton shortly."

The doorway to the council chamber was eclipsed by the tall figure of a man in a shimmering green robe and matching pointy hat. "I have grave news, my royal friends," he panted. "The evil witch, Delilah has escaped her prison and placed a terrible curse on the entire kingdom of Huddleton. The entire kingdom has been forced into a deep slumber. I was unable to waken Princess Regina." The rest of the delegates gasped in horror. "King Lawrence was able to rouse himself just enough to warn me to flee from the cursed land and save myself."

"Hale Nicodemus!" shouted Prochorus. "Wizard and Grand Visor of the kingdom of Bentonite! Our council is much enchanted and enhanced by your wisdom. Yet you do indeed carry a solemn revelation to this stronghold. Our power is considerably diminished by the absence of Princess Regina and her kingdom of Huddleton. The five of us and our four kingdoms must endeavor to suffice."

"And suffice we shall!" proclaimed Princess Osanna. "We shall create a plan and see it through to rid our kingdoms of this new scourge. Let us start with the accumulation of knowledge. What do each of us know of this dragon rider and his dragon who have been terrorizing our kingdoms and devouring helpless maidens?"

Princess Martina stood up. "Where did this vile man come from? Where and when did he acquire that foul creature he rides? How can an enemy of such destruction strike our kingdoms from within without warning?"

Prince Vilhelm hobbled to his feet to speak. "My advisors inform me that he had been a humble bookkeeper of my kingdom until late. They say he gradually succumbed to his evil ways

after he commenced partaking in the foul elixirs of the dark apothecaries. His wife left him for a bread maker in the kingdom of Greensplain shortly after this. They say he journeyed to a far-off region and returned months later with his dragon.”

“My king and queen have often warned me of the perilous nature of the dark apothecaries and their foul elixirs,” said Osanna, rising to her feet. The rest of the delegation nodded in solemn agreement. “Now, their prophesies have transpired. One of our own commoners has become a fierce enemy within our borders. We must find a way to deal with him and his vile dragon.”

Prochorus rose to his feet to speak. He took a sip of tea and cleared his throat. “A problem I have heard about is that the will of the people is split. Many of our commoners cheer for this dragon rider and are all too enthusiastic about sacrificing more of our fairest maidens to him and his dragon. My advisors have informed me that several pubs in my kingdom have gambling pools on how many fair maidens he will take from us each week. He and his horrendous deeds must be stopped and soon. I fear he will soon achieve the status of folk hero, even as the true villain he has shown himself to be. Does anyone have any ideas on how to stop him and his dragon?”

Vilhelm stood again. “Divide and conquer! Without his dragon, this man is merely a man and can easily be bested by a small contingent of our soldiers. Without the man, the dragon is an aimless beast and, if not easily captured, will most likely return to the wilderness far away from our kingdoms.”

Princess Martina stood and beamed at Prince Vilhelm. “A tried-and-true strategy to be sure, good Prince Vilhelm. We shall set more spies on this dragon rider to find out when the best times to attack them while separated. I am heartened to ascertain that thou are not merely brawn and swagger, but of sound and sharp mind.” She blew a kiss toward the prince. Vilhelm blushed.

Nicodemus rose to his towering height. His pointy hat scraped the ceiling of the council chamber. “If the sound plan of Prince Vilhelm proves infeasible, I have another idea. The dragon rider is often seen and heard flying low over the main roads and streets of our kingdoms. I believe they can be captured together in a large fishing net strung across the roadway. If said fishing net has the proper enchantments, the dragon and rider will put up little struggle. Princess Osanna, your kingdom of Adisvale resides over a wonderful sea port. There are many fine fishermen at your command. Might you convince your king and queen to have your fishermen weave their nets together into one large enough to suit our purpose?”

Princess Osanna stood. “I have every confidence my kingdom has the will and ability to weave such a net. Perhaps several so we can lay our ambushes on several roads. As I have every confidence in your ability as a great wizard to perform the necessary enchantments on them.”

Prince Prochorus looked helplessly at Princess Osanna and then looked sideways at the wizard. His distraction lasted a moment before he rose to his feet. “Does anyone else have an idea to suggest to this summit?”

A loud voice could be heard calling from outside the palace. "Sally!" The name echoed through the halls of Kurtort. "Sally Adams, you come out of that playhouse this minute! It is past suppertime for our family. We are done waiting for you, young lady!"

Princess Osanna jumped up and began collecting her plastic tea set. "I am so sorry my friends. My mommy is calling me home for supper."

The rest of them stood up and began gathering their belongings. "We all need to get back to our homes for supper," said Prince Vilhelm. "Time to go back to being plain old Billy Tower."

They filed out of the playhouse. Sally picked her teddy bear up off the gravel and gave it a good look. "Petey Green! You and that stupid stick of yours tore a hole in Teddy's mouth. My mommy will have to sew him back up!"

"I'm so sorry, Sally," Petey said. "I guess I just got caught up in our playtime." He watched a red belly snake slither under a rock.

"We should be headed home too, little twerp," said Nick Benton as he shook Princess Martina by her shoulders.

"Mommy said we are having spare ribs and corn bread tonight, big brother," Mary grinned back at Nick.

A young girl wondered up to the five young kids. She rubbed her eyes and stretched her arms up in a huge yawn. "I am so sorry I couldn't make it to our meeting today," she said. "My aunt Delilah just got paroled and she is staying with us until she gets her own place. She kept us up all night last night with her loud music and fighting with her boyfriend. Mommy and Daddy made us all take naps this afternoon." She walked up to Nick. "And Daddy says he meant what he told you. If you ever sneak into our house while we are sleeping again, you might not live to leave."

"Don't worry about it, Princes Regina," said Petey. "We came up with some good plans. We can tell you about them tomorrow."

"I'm sorry about sneaking into your house, Jenny," said Nick. "I knocked on your door and there was no answer. It was open, so I walked in to see if anyone was home and if you were alright."

A deep rumble began shaking the neighborhood. The children looked in the direction it came from. It grew louder and louder. Soon they saw Emeric Horn, the former accountant, riding his motorcycle over a hill on the nearby street. They could see a young woman seated behind him with her arms around his waist.

"Here comes our dragon rider," said Sally. "And he has another maiden sacrifice with him tonight."

As the rider got closer the children recognized his passenger, despite her short skirt and makeup. "Miss Rasmussen?!" the cried in unison.

“I can’t believe our kindergarten teacher is going to be one of Mr. Horn’s conquests,” sighed Nick. “She seemed like such a nice lady. What is she doing with that drunk loser? Just because he rides a hog now!”

“We will put a stop to his reign of terror,” said Petey. “Our plans are already set in motion. His day of doom will come.”

Three young boys walked over to the children. One had a swollen and bloody nose; one had a black eye; the other had a swollen and bloody lip. They were all rubbing their rear ends. “Our father saw us attack you, Billy,” said Elias Brennen, the oldest and biggest of the three brothers. “He whooped us almost as bad as you did. We came here to apologize for our actions. We will leave you guys alone from now on. We thought we could be like Mr. Horn has been lately. Our father told us Mr. Horn is not the role model we should be following. He drove that point home with his belt.”

The council delegates accepted the apology and shook hands with the three Brennen brothers. They said their goodbyes and went to their homes.

The squirrels chattered at Petey as he walked back down the path through the woods. As he climbed over the fence to get into the Hendersons’ yard, he saw their cavalier spaniel puppies running toward him. He giggled as he threw himself on the ground and let the puppies caress his face with their tongues and floppy ears.

Mrs. Henderson walked toward him. “Petey, it’s okay for you to cut through our yard to get to your playhouse with your friends, but Nippers and Sparky here love you even without you giving them your mothers famous dinner rolls. Please stop spoiling the puppies with those treats. I promise you they are fed plenty here.”

“Alright, Mrs. Henderson. Thank you for letting me cut through your yard and play with your puppies.”

Petey Green went through his front door just as his mom was about to call for him. The scent of fish sticks and mac and cheese filled the house.

Jeremy Pelletier is a life-long Minnesotan and a software engineer by trade. He has enjoyed much of his time on wilderness canoe trips, playing in chess tournaments and riding in organized cycling events. He has been writing in a wide variety of genres and will soon have a science fiction short story published in Corner Bar Magazine. Find Jeremy online at <https://www.facebook.com/jeremy.pelletier.18/>

Around the Galaxy by Cameron Scott Kirk

The Earth male approached me.

“Hi, there.” The smile on his hairless face was meant to be charming, but it came off as both sickly and aggressive. I made a show of examining the empty seats on either side of me, pretty much the only empty seats in a bar that was otherwise jumping.

“You talking to me?”

“Sure am. Can I buy you a drink?”

I lifted my tankard. “Already got one.”

“Seems a shame to drink alone. May I join you?”

It’s hard to judge the age of these Terrans, but he couldn’t have been much out of his teens, maybe mid-twenties. But then again, what did I know from human males? I decided to humor him, and myself. This should be good. I nodded, and he slipped into the booth beside me. If I was not mistaken, he was wearing perfume. The scent of flowers on a male was far too effeminate for my liking, but apparently that was the way Earth males did it.

He waved a hand around the bar. “What brings a beautiful Antarian lady like yourself to a place like this?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. Instead, he snapped his fingers to attract the attention of a serving drone. When he’d placed his order, he turned back to me with a mouthful of teeth exposed. Another one of his smiles, or so I assumed. On Antari 5, the gesture indicated strong hate and would be followed by a physical altercation. He was, however, only trying to be friendly, by what I knew of human standards, so I kept my knuckles retracted and returned the smile.

“You think I’m beautiful? Don’t your kind find mine hideous?”

He shrugged casually. A little *too* casually. “I like a lady with a tough leather hide. Gives me something to sink my teeth into.”

“Oh, you bite?”

He winked and grinned again. “Only if you ask nicely.”

I pulled my lips back to show the incisor on my left side. I ran my tongue over it suggestively. The earthman lost a little of his bluster as he gazed at the sharpened tooth, one of many hanging from my jaws.

“I bite too.” He swallowed, and his eyes flicked to a group of Terran men sitting at the corner of the bar and looking surreptitiously our way, some stifling laughter. My little earth friend had by now completely lost his cock assuredness.

“Got a bet on?” I asked.

“What?”

“Where have you been?”

“Beg your pardon?”

I pointed to the massive galactic map on the ceiling, upon which tiny pin pricks of light indicated the home worlds of the various patrons. “Where have you been? Give me the rundown.”

“You mean ...?”

“I mean the females of varying species that you have conquered in your universal quest, my friend.”

The young fellow shifted uncomfortably and gulped at his drink. “Taurus 4, Centauri minor, ah ... Gorgonia and Neo Venus.”

“But never Antari 5?”

“No, none of the Antarian planets.”

I nodded. “Mmm. Well, they say you’ve never been anywhere until you’ve been inside an Antarian lady.”

He cleared his throat and sat up straight. “Is that what they say?”

“It’s what *I* say.” I laughed as he poured more booze down his throat.

He wiped his mouth. “My name is —” I held my hand up to cut him off.

“No names. It’s better that way, young friend. I accept your offer of copulation. Just think, after this night, you will be superior to your Terran colleagues, for you will be the only one to have bedded an Antarian female and bragging rights will be yours.”

The boy thumbed behind himself. “Tim says that he has been with an Antarian.”

I examined the group of men giggling like Orluvian girls barely out of the pupal stage. “Impossible. He still possesses both eyes.”

The young fellow frowned. “What?”

“Antarian women take one eye from their lovers.”

“But ... but ... why ... why would they do that?”

“It is to ensure monogamy.”

He choked and coughed. “Uh ...”

“A one-eyed male is clearly marked as a possession. If he engages in sexual relations with another, he is left blind.”

“But that’s ... that’s ...

“A sacrifice in the name of romance. It’s quite the commitment, I understand. Would you like an opportunity to think it over?”

The Terran nodded so vigorously I thought his head might tumble from his shoulders. He scrambled from the booth with great alacrity and despite my final words that I hoped to see him again soon, he did not return.

My hearts were broken. Still, I had a drink and my own thoughts to console me. I looked up at the galactic map sprawled across the entirety of the ceiling and my eyes were drawn to a tiny dot in the far reaches of the outer universe. Earth.

I laughed.

Terran Style by Cameron Scott Kirk

No species in the galaxy ruts quite like the Terrans.

It is a violent, primitive dance, and yet tinged with a sweet sadness, like both participants are dying and trying to cling onto life by clinging onto each other. I've never seen anything so tragic and yet so erotic. I turned my hand out, exposing my wrist. The little flying disc hovered over it, scanned the wrist and beeped once. My credit balance appeared in a brief beam from the underbelly of the machine. Immediately, the music began, and the curtains began to rise. The disc retreated to a discreet distance. A pedestal appeared to my right, and I reached for the drink sitting on it. Whiskey, smokey and luminous brown: a Terran drink. Everything here was Terran, from the décor to the moody blues music filtering through the surround speakers.

As the curtains completed their retraction, I scanned the room: more patrons seated in booths. Among the various alien species in attendance, I noticed a compatriot. I nodded and raised my glass of whiskey. She winked at me and her tongue extended into the air three feet in front of her. She curled the tip of her tongue, and I did likewise. She reminded me of Fre7ga. I sighed and turned my attention to the sunken stage and the large bed upon it. I hadn't come here to mope. I came to forget. Then, the Terran male and female made their way onto the stage. And I forgot.

They kissed and danced to that slow smoky blues. I gulped my whisky. When they had torn the clothes from each other, I gestured for the disc to come closer. Without taking primary and secondary eyes from the drama on stage, I ordered another drink. The disc had to swing around me like an annoying insect until I remembered to turn my wrist out. Beep. Another whiskey on a pedestal.

I glanced across at my fellow Antarian. She had eyes only for the man and woman on stage. For a moment, I wondered if *we* could make love with as much desperate passion. But no, we were too far removed from our animal ancestors. Light years separated us. They say that these Terrans are only twenty-five thousand generations distant from the species that birthed them. Can you conceive of that? A mere twenty-five thousand generations, or equivalent to a hundred thousand of their Terran years? Incredible.

The man was taking her from behind now. The Terran pelvis still accommodated this primitive form of intercourse. No other species in the galaxy could even *think about* fucking like this. It was simply an anatomical impossibility. I felt a queasy stirring in my loins. I hadn't had an erection since the Xan nebula but one was coagulating now.

I cast another secretive glance at the female of my own species. She was staring at me, and I averted my primary eyes. My tongue turned green in embarrassment. I made sure to keep it curled up in my mouth.

The Terran female was on top now. How these beings could make love without supporting braces and slings was beyond me, yet they did it unassisted and with a lithe grace. We were certainly getting our credit's worth.

With much distaste, I noted several alien species tugging at certain limbs or appendages as they watched on. I would not dare to assume that this was a form of masturbation, for interplanetary conflicts have been sparked for less offensive presuppositions.

When the male penetrated the female from above and their faces were close together, I had to wipe tears from the ducts in my secondary array of eyes. And then, they climaxed as one, and I suppressed a sob of grief.

The curtains began to lower, and the blues music began to fade. My hearts were racing as I made my way to the foyer. I hoped to see her somewhere in the crowd. It would not be an offensive gesture to casually ask what she had thought of the performance, and then perhaps we could get to talking.

Before I could locate her in the intergalactic throng, she tapped me on the shoulder. Her name was Than4ta, and she had a smile down the middle of her face that quite disarmed me. We were both clearly stimulated by what we had seen. She offered many intellectual observations, and I added my own.

As we left the theater arm in arm, a romantic hope sprang within me for the first time in an age. I thought once again of the Terran male and female. I understood their species was torn apart by conflict, both interpersonal and cultural. The passionate sex they shared was apparently not enough to placate the demons they harbored within their souls, perhaps was a very symptom of their erratic and primitive natures. However, their interplay had awoken something within me, something buried deep. The Terrans had given me a glimpse of another way of living, and I thanked them for it.

Their species may be doomed, but I wish them well.

Cameron Scott Kirk has published many short stories and novels, won a Best of Fiction award and been known to slay dragons, fight off invading aliens, and match the hardiest dwarf in a drinking competition. When he's not doing that, he's writing about it. Find Cameron online at www.cameronscottkirk.com

The Poems of Ramzi Albert Rihani

The Winner Takes It All

Between misery and happiness
a clash starts
agonizing the woman
searching for her lover.
Between distress and comfort
a challenge fades
relieving the woman of her anxiety

Silence filled the air.
So powerful
that an explosion was unheard.
So forceful
that it became her breathing space.

She washed her face with memories
until there were no more.
She was yearning to be what she dreamed of being
But she turned out to be what she has always been.

She did not raise her expectations,
so that she won't be deceived.
She did not lose confidence
because some people deceived her.

No effort was exerted to change
She was at peace with herself.
She fought to own her choices in life
thinking the winner takes it all
but realized that the real winner gives it all.

The Mask

Power dresses itself in the clothes
of the most courageous gladiator.
It looks at the mirror
And sees how weak it is.

It keeps the secret
as if it were its sanctuary

Not knowing that it is being watched
by all the people.

It slices the darkness out of the night
attempting to preserve a refuge,
but forgets that everyone
visits the refuge after sunset.

Nervous about being vulnerable,
it puts on a mask of a clown
then changes it to a lion,
and then back to a clown.
The lion reminds it of its strength.
The clown reminds it of its freedom.
Strength and freedom duel in its head.
Strength is noticeable.
Freedom is invisible and therefore invincible.

The clown mask becomes a living sanctuary.
No need to hide anymore.
There is a savior now,
an easy one,
that peeked from behind the clouds
before a heavy rainfall.

How better off we would be
if fake powers wear masks of a clown!

Touching A Fantasy

In the realm of her existence,
she conquers her past
and liberates herself with mockery.
She reinvents herself, longing for a new dawn
with colors no one had ever seen.

The book of her sleepless nights
opens to a stream of emotions
hidden behind a steel-solid mask,
like a prisoner who has never
seen the light for a thousand years.
The shield is a protection from the already seen.
No renewal, no restoration or revival.

Suddenly, a laser light seeps in unexpectedly
to provide a breath of life, laughter, and rejuvenation.

Up the eucalyptus tree
the song climbs, aiming for a miracle.
The campfire is silent, but the flame starts to ignite.
Unknown to her, a miracle is about to happen.
The dream is touchable. You can smell it.
Its color is the song's color.
The song of her endless passion fills the air,
stumbles and touches the long-awaited fantasy.

Ramzi Albert Rihani is a Lebanese-American writer. His poems have been published in several publications in the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland, Belgium, South Africa, and China. He received the 2024 Polk Street Review first-place poetry award. He is a published music critic. He lives in Washington, DC, USA. Ramzi can be found on Facebook.

The Art of Bill Wolak

Bill Wolak has just published his nineteenth book of poetry entitled *What Love Calms Only With Nakedness* with Expeditions International Publishing House. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*. Find more online at Mad Swirl gallery

https://madswirl.com/gallery/wolak_bill/



Figure 1The Scream of Sudden Terror



Figure 2 The First Warning From The Unknown

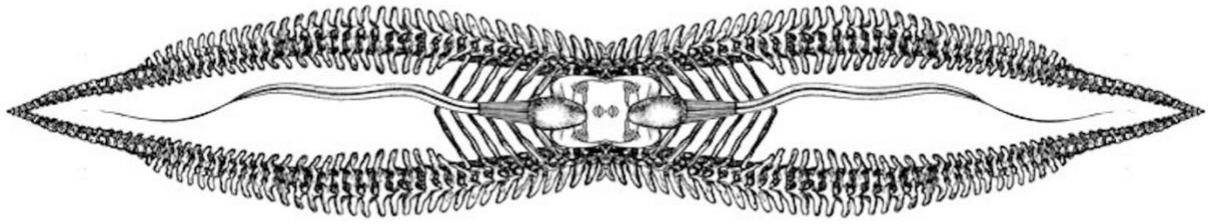


Figure 3 Deeper Than Light