
FALL 26
ISSUE
WITH POEMS AND
STORIES BY:
LEE ANDREW FORMAN
DJ TYRER
MARK TFANSON
AND MORE...
ALTERED
REALITY

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Collected by Abigail Linhardt. Cover art was produced by MidJourney and edited by Scarlet Liberty. Formatting by SpaceDragon Creations.

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Three Stories by David Gianatasio

ANGEL ON MY LEFT SHOULDER, DEVIL ON MY RIGHT

Love.

Hate.

Heal.

Hurt.

Feed.

Starve.

Create.

Destroy.

Give.

Take.

Share.

Steal.

About what I said earlier, to be more precise, love others as you love yourself.

Screw that. Hate, hurt, starve, destroy, take, steal, kill.

Starving’s OK, in moderation, if you're abstaining to help others.

Clearly, since I'm a devil, I meant STARVE OTHER PEOPLE.

No need to shout.

It's self-evident, what I meant. Also: starve little animals.

You're on a roll today.

I didn't sleep a wink last night.

Conscience bothering you?

Very funny.

Mildly amusing, I thought.

Murder!

Look, isn't that a bit on the nose.

I can whisper whatever I like.

Mostly, you shout.

Fine. Murder.

That's better. The volume I mean. Not the sentiment.

Your schtick gets awfully old.

Yours too.

Crush! Destroy! Mutilate! Cheat!

This one's cheated on taxes for years.

I know.

So why go there again?

The more times you do something, the more sinful it gets.

Repent.

Oh, please. Now THAT'S a on the nose. And old hat.

I stick with the classics.

THERE! Another expense report fudged.

A trip to see Moby at the Vegas Sphere ... a La-Z-Boy recliner, oh my.

Points for creativity!

Not from me. Maybe there's a work reason. An innocent explanation. Moby’s a client?

And the recliner?

He needs to sit down?

You're too trusting and naive.

It's in my nature.

True.

Wait, Moby’s big enough to play at the Sphere?

Let’s just say, we did a little deal.

sighs Repent!

These aren’t Puritan times, sheesh.

Ah! See, form deleted. No fraud after all.

The goody two shoes!

I knew I'd get through.

Sin of pride, you winged wanker.

That's crass and sophomoric.

It's in my nature.

Love.

Hate.

Heal.

Hurt.

Feed.

Starve.

Create.

Destroy.

Believe.

Obey.

Believe.

Obey.

Obey!

OBEY!

OBEY!

OBEY!

NOTES FOR THE MOST AWESOMELY GREAT SF STORY EVER

The government bans all books. Luckily, the author's an amateur inventor, so he builds a time machine. His work will live in the past. Or the future. Whichever.

Remember to say he's a REALLY GOOD amateur inventor.

Twilight Zone-level twist:
-- The time chamber crackles with haloes of light. The book's title sparkles like a tongue of fire: THE HOLY BIBLE. (Remember all caps.)

Randomly insert some artsy crap:
-- That's when I slip through a temporal paradox into a room full of monkeys. Charles Darwin grabs my hand. "A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life,' he howls. 'Now, go out and evolve!"
-- Marie Curie swims through a dimensional rift and shouts, "My face is on fire!"'
-- Neil Armstrong splashes down, wailing, "It was so gray. So empty. The carnival of lights blazed like a mad inferno. I stood alone, staring into the face of eternity. My heart ached. My soul ached. Every fiber, every sinew, each synapse. It's all too much. That blazing firmament … We're fearsome red giants … Fiery bands of titanium oxide ... Let me shine! Let me shine!"

Remember to include a full page filled with the word "stars" repeated in different fonts, sizes and colors. For effect. Or affect. I forget which.

Possible last lines:
-- Then everything changed.
-- It was all a dream. Or was it?
-- Suddenly, the author's grandson appears, shoots the guy in the head and whispers, "Asshole," before winking out of existence.
-- In the beginning…
-- The end?

Screw it. I'll just post cat pics and porn instead.

SHADOWS KNOWS?

I.

I cranked up the reading lamp, and my shadow peeled itself off the wall. It sauntered to the sofa and plopped down across the cushions. “You’re just a shadow. Why don’t you fall through?” My shadow stared at a point past my right shoulder. “This feels freaky.” I exhaled, hard, rifling the pages of *Proust for Dummies* until I winced from the papercuts. My shadow pointed at me with a spectral finger. I buried my face in a football-shaped pillow I bought years ago at a New England Patriots game.

II.

The next night, as I brushed my teeth, my shadow brushed his teeth, too. We rinsed and yawned together. When we finished, my shadow flashed me a big thumbs up, though my hands were still at my sides. My shadow opened his mouth and revealed a shimmering, inky darkness. He tilted his head back in silent laughter. I gargled and spat on the wall. Green minty freshness dripped down my silhouette’s fuzzy features.

III.

At 2 a.m. I lay awake, sweating hard. Shadows danced madly: the bed, bedside table, my cushy chair with Teddy Thread-Bear. Though perfectly still in the room, their images bounced around the PVC panels that crept from floor to ceiling. My shadow rode the shadow-bed, magic-carpet style. Then, in an instant, everything slid back to normal. Except for Teddy. Who was frowning. Or maybe he always frowned. Either way, his stuffing rained down around me, a polyester-fiberfill snowstorm that cast shadowy blobs in every direction.

IV.

“So, you’re my shadow.”

Or, from my perspective, you’re my shadow. Deep stuff.”

“It’s trite and insubstantial. Utterly predictable.”

“Well, what do you expect from a shadow?”

“So, what’s it like in your world? What do you do for kicks?”

“We do everything you do, right along with you. Because we’re shadows. Anyway, I’m here on a mission.”

“Are you going to steal my soul and transport it to your murky domain?”

“Hm, what? I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Your mission…”

“Right. I’m here with a warning: Your teddy bear’s planning to kill you.”

“What? Sorry I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Never mind.”

“I feel like we’re making this up as we go along. No plot, no direction. Stream of consciousness. The shadow knows nothing.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

IV.

I cranked up the reading lamp. Teddy Thread-Bear sauntered to the sofa and plopped down across the cushions. He stared directly into my eyes. “So freaky,” I moaned, rifling the pages of *Knitting for Ninnies*. Teddy picked at his muzzle with a grimy paw. I buried my face in a cylindrical pillow that commemorated the USS Nautilus, America’s first atomic submarine.

Later, as I brushed my teeth, the bear brushed his fuzzy maw beside me at the sink. We rinsed and yawned together. I gargled and spat. Green minty freshness trickled down the toy’s furry features.

At 2 a.m. I lay awake. On the wall, my shadow nodded toward the bear and made a slash-throat motion. The PVC panels rained down, soft as feathers, trailing moonlight from the half-open window. I counted the stars that suddenly danced across my field of vision. They bathed the room in cascading pinpricks of light.

Teddy crawled into bed with me. I grinned and stroked my beloved boyhood pillow decorated with smiley clouds wearing slippers and nightcaps.

(END)

David Gianatasio's most recently story collection, BFFS @ the End of Time, was published this year by Alien Buddha Press. Find David online at https://www.facebook.com/dave.gian.1/

Planet Joyce by Patrick Carella

I spent the first eight years of my life in apartments, but I've always loved trees—watching them from a fourth-floor distance as they swayed and colored the world. I once read that trees can communicate with one another, that they sense harmony and danger. Like us.

For ten days, the airspace around El Paso was restricted—no flights in or out. Not even the military was informed.

The government tracked their arrival months before and tried to destroy the craft in space—because of course they did.

They came from a planet behind Neptune, one that scientists had never gotten a clear look at—about ten times larger than Earth. The visitors didn't have a name for it, only one that translated simply to *Joyce.*

The delegation found it quaint that we named the planets in our solar system after Roman gods.

From their description, Joyce was very much like Earth, with one exception:

Joyce was completely devoid of trees.

They didn't come for our organs.

They wanted our wood.

The planet once had tree-like life. Over the millennia, it disappeared—climate collapse, atmospheric loss, stellar evolution. All that remained were fragments preserved in salt, encased in resin.

To them, wood was a ghost substance, ancestor matter—proof the world was once softer, wetter, alive.

What replaced it were massive fungal columns, coral-like land growths, and vascular "reeds" that grew horizontally—refined into a pulp-like substance used much like wood.

But it never came out right.

The results splintered wrong, aged badly, or produced a smell unsuitable for domestic life.

Here was the deal: we would give them wood of any kind—trees, saplings, discarded furniture, demo'ed house decks, telephone poles. In fact, the scrap wood was more usable, as they would never kill a tree.

In exchange, we'd get rare earth elements—uranium, graphite, and vanadium—along with gemstones like tugtupite and nuummite.

An endless supply. Better than mining.

We kept waiting for the second shoe to drop.

It never did.

The only things dropping were discarded chiffoniers, guitars, and saplings.

They didn't mind waiting four or five hundred years for a tree to mature and then die.

To them, it was just a drop of sap in the celestial bucket.

On Joyce, wood reappeared slowly. Not in forests or groves, but in rooms. A mantel. A picture frame. A single chair placed too carefully to sit in.

For a while, only the very rich could afford a wood fire. People gathered not for warmth but for the smell. It was described as calming, ancestral. Some said it reminded them of dreams they hadn't known were theirs.

Wood-framed homes came later. One beam was often enough. Houses were built around it.

It was around then that Joyce began sending cultural delegates instead of engineers. The exchange had matured beyond logistics. They wanted to understand the civilization that had unknowingly preserved the one thing their world had lost.

That's when I met her.

I got to know her after the exchange had been in place long enough that it no longer felt provisional. I looked out the window of my dwelling made from reconstituted fibers: millions of saplings dotted the landscape.

There were things I gave up: wooden baseball bats, the eventual taste of an ice cream stick, walking around Steiner Street, admiring the Painted Ladies.

It didn’t seem to matter.

She looked exactly like us. If anything, that made it easier to forget what she was.

Her eyes—like all of Joyce’s inhabitants—were arbor-colored, hers a hypnotic shade of mango.

We saw each other regularly. Not intentionally at first. There were reasons—meetings, shared spaces, the kinds of obligations that repeat themselves until they stop feeling like obligations.

I noticed she waited longer than most people. Not for effect. She simply didn’t rush the space between questions and answers. I found myself filling that space with less chatter.

Once we walked through an arboretum after a symposium. I apologized for how ordinary the trees seemed.

She stopped beside an aging maple and rested her hand against the bark.

"You apologize for mountains too?"

I laughed.

She closed her eyes.

"This one is speaking."

"What's it saying?"

"That it's tired. But not yet."

She kept her hand on the bark.

"Do you know how old it is?" she asked.

I guessed.

She smiled without correcting me.

"We measure our history by governments and wars. You measure yours by rings."

I looked up into the canopy.

"It doesn't feel old."

"It isn't," she said. "Not to itself."

A breeze moved through the leaves.

She tilted her head, listening again.

"What now?" I asked.

"It remembers a dry summer," she said. "And that someone climbed it once when he was afraid."

I started to tell her trees couldn't remember things like that.

Instead, I rested my own hand against the trunk.

I don’t remember when I began thinking of her outside those encounters. I only remember adjusting my schedule without quite meaning to.

Once, without considering it, I handed her a wooden pencil. It was chewed at one end. She turned it over in her hand for a long time, running a thumb along the grain.

“Is this finished?” she asked.

I said I thought so, and then explained the bite marks.

She asked if she could keep it.

Weeks later I saw it resting alone in a glass case in her quarters.

Later, she told me she had waited nearly three hundred years for a tree she remembered to finish dying. She didn’t explain why. I didn’t ask.

Years later, after we'd stopped pretending our schedules overlapped by coincidence, I showed her the ring. Just a set of bands with a thin sliver of sequoia, placed carefully into the setting as if it were something that could be damaged by merely looking at it.

I didn’t say much. I took more time than I needed.

Eventually, she said yes.

On Joyce, wood is rarer than diamonds.

Patrick Carella writes fiction and creative nonfiction about family, memory, advertising, obsession, and the strange dignity of American life. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Gargoyle, Hobart, BULL, JMWW, Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature, The Hooghly Review, Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, Fabula Argentea, The Gorko Gazette, Ink Bleeds Press, and Lore Today, among others. A former advertising creative director with four decades in the business, he is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. He lives in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, with his wife and their pit bulls, who remain unimpressed by literary publication. Find Patrick online at https://www.linkedin.com/in/pat-carella-7490a040

Kansaska (pt. 1 of 2) By Will Kohudic

Emma Jane Curtis walked the unpaved Main Street toward the center of the tiny town. The afternoon sun threw her shadow across vacant porches and empty windows. The noise of fleeing trucks had faded into the rustle of wind through brittle grass. It was all Billy's fault. He'd ruined everything. If only he'd come to her, first. Emma Jane was determined to make it right.

Kansas, 1946

When dawn came cloudy, with a sky the color of a green beer bottle, everybody hunkered underground: the family in the farmhouse root cellar, the migrant workers in the old outhouse pits.

Everybody but Billy Sanchez.

Too old at sixteen to heed his mama, he denned up in the crawlspace under the bunkhouse with the cats and dogs and chickens to watch the storm.

The tornado came with a howl like a steam train and an aroma of fresh-dug potatoes. Its vast gray funnel churned into the far cornfield, shredding crops and throwing a hail of dirt. Then, just as suddenly as it had struck, the funnel collapsed, its fury stilled. A mile-high bolt of blue-white lightning hovered out there, pulsing and thinning down to a shimmering crack in the sky.

Afraid he'd never get another chance to see such a marvel, Billy ran flat-out toward it. By the time he got close, the lightning had faded into a billowing veil of white vapor stretching from the ground to the clouds, two tractors wide. On the other side of the mist, Billy glimpsed a tall mountain. "Ain't no mountains in Kansas," he whispered, breath coursing through his lungs. "But by golly, I'm gonna be the first to climb it."

Billy stood in a churned mess of soil and cornstalks. One step through the mist had him pushing through waist-high meadow grass. He stopped and stared all around. The sunlit air felt cooler, fresher on the other side. A wide, green valley stretched before him, surrounded by high mountains. Behind, the prairie remained visible only through the veil he'd just crossed.

A steep slope rose ahead, beckoning his restless heart. He legged it partway up then armed it further, clinging to stubby pines and narrow-leafed shrubs like he'd never seen in Kansas, until he reached the rocky summit, thirsty and sweaty and sticky with pine sap.

Snow-peaked mountains dominated the horizon, soaring above a lush valley bathed in afternoon sun. There was no sign of farms or towns or roads. And no water besides the river that coursed through the heart of the valley far below. Billy's only landmark was the tall, wavering thread of mist that rose from the foot of the slope.

The sun would set in a couple hours. He suddenly realized the climb must have taken half the day. Thirst dragged him homeward, slipping and sliding until he plunged back into the cornfield through the misty veil.

Dusk found him curled under the water windmill, sucking life from the rusty tap, pine needles in his hair.

Footsteps approached. His mama cried, "*Pobrecito*!" and folded him in her arms.

The landowner, Mr. Carver, strolled up behind her. "Sleepin' in the cornfield again, were ya? Hard chores comin' tomorrow, boy."

***

Emma Jane handed Mrs. Carver a plate stacked with sweets, then started tidying the kitchen. Mrs. Carver wore her best print dress and had done her long, dark hair up in side rolls like she did for church, though it was only Thursday. Knowing better than to ask, Emma Jane watched through the open window while she worked at the sink.

Mr. Carver sat on the front porch, looking out over what used to be his north cornfield. Emma Jane couldn't see his face, but it wasn't hard to imagine his sour expression. In the month since a tornado had ripped open the mysterious portal, nicknamed 'The Avenue' by the eggheads who'd come to study it, an Army shack and a round-roofed science hut had sprung up out there. Government cars came and went like ants all day long.

What they called a 'scientific opportunity,' Mr. Carver called an acre of corn he'd never take to market. "Here come the robbers, right on schedule," he said.

A black car approached the house, rounded snout and white-sided tires gleaming through a lazy column of dust. Its doors sprang open like locust wings and four men in dark suits and ties emerged.

The lead man lifted his felt hat. "Mister Carver? I'm Agent Preston from the Bureau of Land Management—"

"I know who y'are," Carver said. "No need to say goodbye, just pack up your sheds and get gone."

"Well, sir, it's not that simple. The government needs this property for scientific research, you see? That means your whole farm, understand. Now, I'm authorized to offer you the fair market value of your property."

Mr. Carver sat forward, gaping, then launched to his feet. "Fair value! What's the fair value of three generations of blood and toil?" His lanky arms sprang out as if to encompass the horizon. "Of keeping this land producing through the Depression? Of losing our oldest son on Okinawa? What does your Bureau think the 'fair value' of all that might be?" He threw his straw hat to the unpainted floorboards, slicked back his salt-and-pepper hair and rolled up his sleeves.

Emma Jane drew a breath to call out, but just then, Mrs. Carver walked out the front door, chunky heels tapping the boards.

She put a hand softly on her husband's shoulder. He subsided, jaw clenched. She breezed past, plate in hand. "Would you gentlemen care for molasses cookies?" she asked coolly. "I say,

if you *need* something, you offer a favorable trade. Dear, do you remember that gorgeous piece of government land we admired back in California?"

Mr. Carver turned to his wife. He held a hand to his chin, and Emma Jane caught a hint of a smile on his lips.

Emma Jane wondered what would become of the migrant workers, including itinerant mechanics and carpenters like her and her father, if the Carvers sold. She left the counter messy and ran to find Dad.

***

"Sleep now, *Mijo*," Papa Sanchez said and snuffed the candle. "The truck comes early."

Billy tossed under his scratchy blanket. The Carvers had sold their land and the Bureau didn't need migrant workers. Papa had made a deal to get work for them at a company farm down near Lebanon.

Once they got on that truck, Billy knew he'd never get another chance to follow his dreams into those strange mountains. He'd forever be surrounded with boys whose dreams stopped at smoking crappy hand-rolled cigarettes by the irrigation ditch and sneaking kisses behind the Mass tent.

The day he'd spent on the other side of The Avenue, climbing and sweating and striving to see what no other human being had ever seen, had opened a door in his heart. He'd found a place none of his peers could appreciate; a place that left him with a longing they could never understand. A whole wild land that called to him on every passing breeze.

With Papa snoring, Billy crept out into the night. Behind the bunkhouse, where the men drinking and talking by the campfire couldn't see, he pulled out the sack he'd hidden behind a loose board. He could go a long way on bread, hard candies and a jug of water. All he had to do was sneak across the cornfield and into the Army camp that surrounded The Avenue.

The buzz of grasshoppers masked his passage through the cornfield. He blundered in the dark, the plants' razor-edged leaves rasping his shirt and curly hair. Closer to the Army camp fence, floodlights helped him find his way.

He picked up a rock. One guard lounged at the gate, which was only a red-striped wooden bar that kept cars out. Billy knew if he could slip past, he could outrun the guard. He crept to the weedy verge of the newly-graveled road and threw the rock at the fence on the other side of the guardhouse. It clattered against the chain links and the guard turned.

Billy leapt up and ran past the bar, sack bouncing, gravel crunching.

The guard wheeled. "Hey, get back here!" he yelled, and gave chase. That guard never had to run down a chicken for his dinner. He blew his silver whistle, but too late.

Billy raced to the camp's center where The Avenue stretched ghostly white into the starry heights of the sky, glimmering in the floodlights and…spitting water?

Billy plunged through into a heavy downpour. *A real gully-washer*, Mr. Carver would've said.

He ran up the mountain in the wet dark until a head-on collision with a tree finally stopped him. He lay in the mud, gasping, then panting, then laughing. He'd done it. He was free.

***

In the midsummer afternoon heat, Emma Jane walked to the workers' bunkhouse with a basket of sweet corn and fried chicken livers; enough for her and her dad and the Sanchezes. They were the last farm workers still living on the Carvers' old property.

Dad had served as a Seabee in the Pacific, until he'd mustered out to care for Emma Jane after Mom died in childbirth. Now, the Army had hired him to build farmhouses and town buildings and an Army base in the new country across The Avenue.

"What d'ya say, Emma J?" Dad asked. "Any gossip from the brass?"

Emma Jane cooked for the Army officers in the Carvers' old farmhouse, and they talked around her like she was deaf. She'd already overheard that they'd found good soil across The Avenue, and the government planned a settlement to keep the country fed in the event the Soviets developed the A-Bomb. They'd bring in a dozen farm families to start, then expand to cultivate the valley's whole 6,000 square miles.

Emma Jane portioned out food from the basket for herself and Dad. "Today they decided to call the settlement 'Kansaska' because The Avenue is on the Kansas-Nebraska border." She squared her shoulders like a soldier and imitated the colonels' voices.

"*H*-why not 'Nebransas'?" she said in Col. Mather's East Texas twang.

"'Cause that sounds *retahded*," she replied in Col. McAvery's Boston accent.

"How about something nice, like 'Fairhaven'?"

"Well, if everyone dies somehow, that'd be a wicked poor choice, wouldn't it?"

Dad laughed and slapped his knee. "Em, you could be in Vaudeville. Go bring the Sanchezes the rest of this food before it gets cold."

Emma Jane took her basket to the far end of the bunkhouse. Carefree, as though their families and half a platoon hadn't spent three days searching for him, Billy sat on the porch making figures out of dry corn leaves. Emma Jane didn't know how he could even sit, after suffering his dad's belt and his mom's *chancla*.

Billy was a year older than her, but a lot of the time, he acted half his age. He grinned and held up a figure that looked like a stump with two long branches. "Hello friend," he said, and made an odd croaking in his throat.

Emma Jane sat the basket of food on the splintery planks and crossed her arms, caught between feeling sorry for Billy and worrying about his unpredictable behavior. She took a deep

breath. “I hope we can be friends, since we’re all going to work together on the other side of The Avenue. You’re lucky the soldiers didn’t lock you up. Take this to your family, okay?”

Kansaska (pt. 2 of 2) By Will Kohudic

Through the Veil

It was evening in the valley when Billy finished nailing his last stud. Working together, the soldiers and the first families to arrive through The Avenue had already framed and roofed eight houses and a dry goods store. Mr. Curtis said, “Good work today, Billy. Why don’t you go catch some fish for supper while us old men finish up?”

Billy beamed. He liked building houses with Mr. Curtis much more than planting corn and soybeans.

Mr. Curtis said to his daughter, “Emma Jane, gimme that hammer and go with him, learn something about fishing.”

Billy tried not to scowl. He knew Emma Jane didn’t care for him. He also thought she was awfully stuck on herself for someone who lived in an army tent and wore overalls older than his. Still, she was better company than the farmers’ kids who’d come through from home. He grabbed two poles and led the way up the mountain.

A few hundred feet above the settlement, just before the slope turned steep, a rocky bowl held a spring-fed pool shaded by fat-needled pines. Billy treasured this quiet spot, its aroma of evergreen and wet rock, and had been reluctant to bring anyone there. In the corner of his eye, he watched Emma Jane smile and breathe the place in. Maybe, just maybe, she got it, too.

Billy showed Emma Jane how to find grubs, pierce them with the steel hook, and cast. “The smooth blue fish are good eating. Throw back the brown-striped spiny ones that make a noise.”

“What kind of noise?”

Billy thought for a second, then decided to make a different noise in his throat. The one like a tree bending in the wind. Twice softly, third time loud.

“That’s no fish noise,” Emma Jane scoffed.

Billy smiled. He couldn’t wait to see her expression when she found out how right she was.

He’d just landed his second blue when leaves rustled. Emma Jane turned, shrieked and almost fell into the pond.

Behind them stood a broad tree trunk, seven feet tall and smooth on top with two skinny, leafless branches. It hadn’t been there a moment ago. Its bark was like birch, white strips peeling from dark pith. Its top tilted and it made creaking sounds: one soft, two loud.

Billy held a butterscotch drop on his outstretched palm, like you would give a horse a treat. The tree trunk stretched out a branch. It split into twigs that grasped the candy like fingers.

A hollow space opened in the top half of the trunk and it shoved the candy in. Slurping and crunching followed, then it shuffled into the forest with a single, two-tone creak.

"Billy? What was that?" Emma Jane asked, pale, her mouth hanging open.

Billy relished her discomfort. It reminded him of how he felt around the new families. Still, Emma Jane was as close as he had to an ally. "I call them Crickracks. They have their own language, and they like candy."

***

Emma Jane had two things in common with Billy.

One, the farmers treated them like outcasts. Those folks had land and new homes. Swell for them, even if their letters to Outside had to pass through Army censors.

Two, the Crickracks. Their secret. Not that anybody would believe them if they said anything.

They fished the pool more as summer cooled into autumn, and saw the Crickracks every time. Emma Jane learned to say their words better than Billy. "Hello," "friend," "thank you," and soft sighs that were their names.

Billy and Emma Jane brought candies, and fruit when they could. The Crickracks loved grapes in particular. One day, they found the severed head of a burrowgoblin lying beside the pool. A nasty ambush predator that could kill a grown man. Even dead, its armored hair spikes and beady eyes and vicious horns nearly set them running. Emma Jane was sure the Crickracks had left it as a sign of friendship, but she wondered if maybe they were showing off their strength, too.

A few days later, they were returning to town on the forest path when Mrs. Sanchez ran to Emma Jane. Tears streaked her face. A fuel tank had exploded at the Army camp. Her dad had been helping build an airfield, and the construction crew ate lunch by the avgas depot. He'd never had a chance.

Emma Jane spent two days curled around Dad's blanket in the vast, cold hollow of their tent, weeping every drop of water from her body. She had no answer for polite knocks, and plates of food went untouched by the entry flap.

Colonel McAvery's aide came in. Said how sorry they all were, and the Army would bury Dad in the Leavenworth National Cemetery, full honors. Said they'd find her a family for her to live with Outside where she could finish school.

School. Then marry some dirt farmer. She had no family to speak of Outside. No prospects. She could cook, fish, and frame a house. Nobody wanted a woman carpenter with the war over.

She had nothing to her name beyond Dad's back pay and benefits. And the flour sack dress Mom had stitched when she was ten and added onto the hem when she turned thirteen. She wore it with Mom's old leather shoes.

Emma Jane washed up, put on her dress, said goodbye to Dad at the Army camp, then ran all the way up to the pool. If they came looking for her there, she resolved to keep running and live with the Crickracks.

They couldn't make her leave here, the place she belonged, and the only kindness she had left.

***

Billy didn't see much of Emma Jane after the Knudsen family took her in. The Knudsens had lost a daughter to polio and a son to the Normandy beaches, and were happy to offer her a place in their home when she refused to leave Kansaska. They kept her busy, too. Billy's heart felt dry, missing their shared secret of fishing and talking with the Crickracks, so he tried going with the farm boys to the river in the lowlands.

John Burton was about Billy's age and would sometimes trade lunches with him when they worked in the fields. Thinking that meant he was a friend, Billy invited him to come up the mountain and meet the Crickracks.

John yelled it out to the others and they laughed. "Holy Mackerel, talkin' trees, what a knucklehead!" They laughed at Billy until he fled.

After that, Billy stayed away from the others, even in the fields. The harvest was almost done, anyway. He hated those boys even worse than he'd hated the other migrant kids. These ones had land and houses, and they still just got more mean and stupid.

Walking home from the field alone, Billy noticed Mr. Evans playing his fiddle on his front porch.

"Gettin' ready for the harvest dance," Mr. Evans said. Billy was only half-listening to him. He only had ears for the fiddle.

"Can you show me how to play?" Billy asked.

Mr. Evans smiled and nodded, and explained the basics of finger placement and bowing techniques. Each day after that, Billy stopped by for a short lesson. Mr. Evans seemed happy to have a student, though he wasn't fond of the outrageous noises Billy enjoyed most.

When the harvest was finished, the settlers held the dance on Picnic Hill; a grassy meadow just below the mountain forest line. Stars shone in the night sky and moonshine flowed on the ground.

Mr. Evans and a few others made music between two bonfires, and the settlers gathered. Billy sat at the edge of the firelight. He didn't want to dance with the prissy farm girls. He only had eyes and ears for the fiddle.

Halfway around the bonfires, Billy noticed Emma Jane sitting with the Knudsens, ignoring the dancing and music, staring up at the starry sky. Any minute now, he'd give her something to pay attention to. Something to knit her tattered soul together. He just knew she'd love it.

When the musicians took a break, Billy ran up and grabbed Mr. Evans' fiddle. By the light of the raging fires, he held his fingers the way he'd learned. He sawed with the bow until he found his sound, and set the fiddle screeching.

"Hello, friends," he played. "Hello and welcome."

Catcalls and boos welled up from the crowd.

"You're hurting our ears," Edna Hutchison yelled.

"C'mon, play us a real wetback watz, Sanchez," John Burton called out. Gales of drunken laughter followed.

Billy grinned wide. He carefully set down the fiddle and walked out of the firelight toward the forest. He knew the Crickracks would be close, drawn by the light and laughter. He wanted them to come out, let the settlers meet them and see how friendly they were. He'd finally show these farmers who knew this land and who was a knucklehead.

Twigs snapped up the hill and a high-pitched scream carried from the edge of the woods. The crowd hushed and everyone turned to see what the fuss was about.

Billy stopped halfway between the bonfires and the treeline. Why would somebody be screaming?

Young Henry Dodd and Hannah Mitchell burst out of the woods like the forest was on fire. Hannah held one hand to the neckline of her dress like she was afraid it would fall off. Henry yelled, "There's monsters in the woods, coming to kill us!"

Dark shapes taller than a man shuffled out of the treeline. The first settlers to see them took up Hannah's screams and fled toward the bonfires. Billy's heart sank. "Stop! They're not monsters!" Nobody listened.

The Crickracks advanced, holding out their limbs and creaking greetings.

More voices took up the call of "Monsters!"

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. "Stop," Billy croaked in the Crickracks' language, "go back!" His creaks and groans went unheard in the chaos.

Mr. Jenkins stalked forward, double-barreled shotgun gleaming in the firelight. "Burrowgoblins, by garsh. I'm ready for 'em."

Billy raced toward him, his dream twisting into a nightmare. "No, they're not burrowgoblins, can't you see? They're friendly!"

The gun thundered once, twice. The nearest Crickrack stopped, its white bark shredded.

Before Jenkins could reload, the Crickrack shuffled close and roped him with its limbs. He uttered a high-pitched, strangled cry as the Crickrack twisted his body in half.

People screamed. Some ran toward town, others pulled flaming brands from the bonfires.

Billy stood between them and the Crickracks, begging them to stop. Before him, a line of settlers advanced, silhouetted in the bonfire light. Behind, the Crickracks pushed through the meadow, ships tossed in the waves of their rolling gait. Neither group would listen to him. He drew breath to scream, but a blow to his back knocked him flat in the grass.

Emma Jane stood over him, her face a bitter mask in the firelight. “Why didn’t you tell me first? You’ve destroyed everything!”

***

Emma Jane hid in the Knudsens’ barn loft, determined to wait until the soldiers and settlers were all gone. She wasn’t going in their trucks. This valley was her home, like no place had been before.

Her tears and blood were part of the soil. Blood from her monthlies; from knuckles when a hammer slipped; from bare feet on sharp stones; from Hannah Mitchell punching her because she thought Henry Dodd was sweet on her. He hadn’t been, just wanted something and wasn’t picky about where he looked for it. Emma Jane had accepted the nosebleed in the same spirit as the hard knee she’d given Henry.

The Army trucks drove away, kicking up the dust of Kansaska’s Main Street.

A chill autumn breeze swept into the loft, and Emma Jane stood to greet it. She climbed down the wooden ladder with one hand full and walked out into the sunlight.

Nothing stirred in the farmyard or on the road. She trudged toward the town center between the empty houses she’d helped build.

Why hadn’t Billy told her that he was going to lure the Crickracks to the party? They weren’t ready. Nobody had been ready. She knew that and would have told him so. Why did it all have to happen the way it did?

When that night was over, five men and women had lain dead on the hill. Emma Jane sighed, wanting to cry, but that well had dried up since losing Dad.

What if the soldiers hadn’t charged into the woods the next morning? A day of gunfire and explosions, then a night of terror when the Crickracks invaded the settlement.

Wind sighed in the rust-colored grass.

What if Mrs. Knudsen hadn’t heard her yelling at Billy by the bonfires and told everyone they were in cahoots?

Well, then she wouldn’t have run off to hide and she might be on a truck, headed some place she’d never belong.

The door of the mercantile stood open. Most of its contents were gone, but the barrel of hard candy sat full. Emma Jane grabbed the rim, shoved with her hips, and rolled it out onto the porch.

She picked up the fiddle that she'd brought from the barn. She'd never played a lick before, but if Billy could figure it out, she could, too. She plucked strings, experimented with the bow. It sounded awful, but it didn't matter.

"Candy," she scratched out. "Friends, candy."

Footsteps crunched nearby. Human footsteps. Billy Sanchez rounded the corner, hands in pockets, smiling.

She shouldn't have been surprised. The one other soul who could truly lay claim to this valley, to the world this side of The Avenue. But he didn't understand people. Didn't understand that they all belonged here. Or could have, if they'd had time. If he'd been patient. If they'd worked together.

Her anger rose, but before she could give it voice, a black shape settled on the tin porch roof with a croak. A Kansas crow. A stray from the world she'd left behind. Emma Jane wondered if it wanted to go home.

Will Kohudic is a former barista and web developer turned trade magazine editor. He writes for creative expression and because he loves to read and finds joy in the connections we make through the written word.

Klara's Secret by Bill Whitcomb

She had come to the Grand Cathedral in Linz to confess. The priest welcomed her and made the sign of the cross.

Klara began, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been a very long time since my last confession. These are my sins…I see demonic visions. For these and all the sins of my past life, I am truly sorry."

Klara closed her eyes. She was afraid that if she looked, she would see the priest staring at her, either in condemnation or disbelief.

"Do you see demons?"

"No, Herr Pfarrer, at least I don't think so, but I see death…so much death.

It began during my fourth pregnancy. I walked into the pantry and found the body of a strangely dressed man on the floor. He was wearing…well, I wasn't sure what he was wearing other than it was all black and there were a lot of straps and buckles. He was holding a mechanism in his right hand, but I didn't really see it. My attention was completely held by the man's bright blue hair, sticking up in sharp, hard-looking tufts, but covered in blood. I thought this was the most astonishing thing I had seen in my life. A large stoneware crock had somehow fallen from a high shelf and crushed the side of his skull, just above his right ear. I turned and fled through the kitchen into the hall, screaming for someone to help.

When I returned to the pantry, there was no body, no blood. There was only the fallen crock laying on its side on the floor, a bit of flour spilling out. When Alois returned home, he shouted at me. He said that I was weak, that I was stupid. I could feel Alois Junior and Angela looking at me and I felt ashamed. I swore that I would never speak of it or anything like it ever again."

"Did something like that happen again?"

"Yes, Herr Pfarrer. I began to see dead people every day, sometimes many in the same day, sometimes many at the same time. I worried each time I needed to enter a quiet part of the house.

The people varied in every way imaginable. Some were men, some were women. Some young, some old. Some were obviously together, others, found together, could not have been more different. Once, after hearing a crash in the attic, I found…people…I'm not sure how many, whose bodies were interpenetrating one another's flesh."

"Do you mean…sexually?"

Klara gasped.

"No, Herr Pfarrer. Parts of their bodies had merged or were driven through one another. I was terrified. I had never heard of such a thing. I could not imagine how it could happen.

The strangest was the mechanical man. He seemed to have just exploded from within. When I found him, his parts were strewn all over the floor, but his face was frozen in surprise. I cannot stop seeing it. He was like a broken stopwatch that had somehow died in pain.

Sometimes, I saw them die. The family was attending services at Stadtpfarre Leonding St. Michael. After the service, people moved into the church garden. I had stayed behind to tie little Adi's shoes that had come untied. Kneeling next to the shoe, I looked up and saw a figure aiming something at us, perhaps a rifle. I only saw the figure for an instant before it was covered in a shower of dust and ceramic roofing tiles. I grabbed Adi and rushed to the rest of the family. By that time, the clatter had attracted the attention of other parishioners. As usual, there was no body beneath the rubble. There was nobody.

Once, as I came out of the Barmherzige Brüder apotheke in Linz one morning, an elderly man, wearing the most bizarre combination of clothing rushed up to me. He wore a double-breasted evening waistcoat, but with a bowler, and embroidered ruby breeches, like something from the last century. He loomed over me at the doorway and began shouting in very poor German about how I must send Adi to a different school. I couldn't get around him. When he saw that I was looked confused, he said something very quickly in Alemannic, which I didn't understand. Then he gasped, clutched at his chest and collapsed. I went back into the apotheke for help, but after so many strange experiences, I opened the door again to be sure and he had already disappeared.

Perhaps the worst was the strange accident at the Friers-Linz Wurstwerks. I was in the city running errands with Adi and Paula. I saw a painted advertisement on the side of the nearby factory wall showing Baurenwurst being served to a pair of happy, rosy-cheeked children. Just as we started to cross the street, there was a dull concussion and the ground shook. It looked like the walls and roof of the building expanded outward before it all came crashing and tumbling down, creating a rain of small fragments, but I thought I saw dozens, even hundreds, of arm, legs, heads, sometimes still attached to torsos, flying through the cloud of dust and debris.

Of course, afterwards, there was nothing. The Tages-Post wrote that it was an unlikely accident caused by accumulating gases in a cold storage room with insufficient ice, but that part of the factory was closed for the day and no one was injured."

Klara began to cry softly, sniffled, and wiped her eyes.

"How could such things be how be? How could such visions not be sent by the devil?"

Klara looked up. The priest's eyes were kindly.

"These things you see, have they caused you to commit sinful acts?"

"No, Herr Pfarrer."

"After you have seen the visions, do you desire to act in sinful ways?"

"No, Herr Pfarrer."

"Then renounce your sins, my child."

Klara took a deep breath. "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen."

"Then, even if these visions have been sent to tempt you, you are not tempted.
The priest extended his hand towards her.

"I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
Klara made the sign of the cross. "Amen."

"Klara, perhaps you have heard people speak of Doctor Freud in Vienna. He has found that sometimes, disturbing visions come from forgotten pain, sometimes things that happened during childhood, but always things too terrible to remember. I know that Alois could be…difficult."

"I…I do not know, Herr Pfarrer."

"The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace."

"Thanks be to God." Klara, stood up, moving unsteadily, and walked towards the front of the cathedral. When she had gone, I went into the Tabernacle where my Chronokaláthi was hidden, so that I, too, could go in peace.

According to prevalent theory, Klara shouldn't have been able to see any of us. The Time Bureau's best guess was, in the first incident, she was able to see the body because, other than being dead, it didn't look anomalous to her and, when she tried to tell others, she wasn't believed.

When she swore never to speak of it again, that opened her to being able to see other travellers but protected her from the sorts of fates that killed them. She never told anyone that would make a difference, and confessing to me didn't change that.

It had taken me some months to convince Klara to tell me about the things she'd seen. I didn't have to come back, to hear her confession, but it made her feel better. She didn't deserve any of this. It wouldn't change anything, just like all those idiots and dreamers going through so much to come back here and die. Now that she had told me about her "visions", she would see no more of them. Oh, the idiots would still be there, but she would no longer find them.

Time travel is possible, but you can't change anything. Time travel is, relatively speaking, quite difficult and complex, and every effort has been made to suppress and control the technology, but "in the fullness of time" as we like say in the Time Bureau, many people are able to travel through time. It didn't matter if the technology was swept from the earth at any given moment. The scientific concepts couldn't be destroyed.

We never made any secret of it, though. Yes, you can travel backwards in time and return to your starting point, but you change nothing, Hardly anyone got the technology, and most of those understood enough not to try anything silly, but inevitably…again, in the fullness of time…some people thought that they had discovered some special method to circumvent the laws of nature. Others just thought that the Time Bureau was a bunch of miserable bastards who only wanted to protect their own corrupt self-serving timeline. We are a bunch of miserable bastards, for the most part, but we're really just trying to minimize the chaos and keep an eye on things. Mostly, we help schedule visits for people making historical documentaries and we brood a lot.

However much we might wish differently, if someone goes back and tries to change something, something will stop them. Perhaps, as the cliché goes, they try to shoot their own grandfather. At first, there will just be a series of relatively probable coincidences. A bird obscures the target. The gun jams. Someone unseen closes the window blinds. Over and over, something happens at a critical moment that prevents the change. For those that try long enough, try hard enough, and plan cleverly enough, the coincidences become increasingly unlikely, until finally something occurs that stops them permanently.

There are an infinite number of pivotal moments in human history. Every critical event had an infinite number of events leading up to it. Some of the travellers plot to kill Klara, Alois, or other ancestors. Most of them try to kill Adi. Some try to buy his paintings or change his life in other ways. No matter how carefully they plan, though, no matter what outlandish technologies or occult procedures they may employ, they will never, ever be able to change what Adolph Hitler does.

It all makes me feel tired. Still, I tell myself every day, thank God I'm not assigned to the Jesus beat!

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symbolism and ritual practices such as The Magician's Companion and The Magician's Reflection.

Other works include writing for The Big Book of Vice (Paradox Press, 1999), a cartoon history of vice in America and Selections from the Dream Manual (a collaborative effort with the artist Michael Skrtic).

The Black Crown by DJ Tyrer

A chill wind wailed over the drear moors, causing Maskalin Vaz to wrap his rough woollen cloak tightly about himself. The dwarf Druntha followed closely in his wake, using the roguish fellow's body to shelter him from the wind. The hulking brute Glazd, clad in a tarnished suit of mail, followed behind, bearing a sack with their supplies, and finally, Westiz Na brought up the rear; she was as tightly encloaked as Maskalin Vaz.

"How much further?" she called over the wailing wind.

"Not far," replied their leader. "In fact," he added, "I think that mound over there is the one we seek."

"You said *that* about the last three," said Druntha, with a grumpy sigh.

"Yes, well, they clearly *were* burial mounds, weren't they? They just didn't match the description when we got to them. But, I have a good feeling about this one…"

The mound was atop a ridge and had two towering pillars of roughly-hewn stone at one end, clearly designating a long-lost entrance.

Maskalin Vaz paused and nodded. "Yes, this is the one. This is the tomb of Balaska Vlam."

The ancient king or chieftain who was buried beneath the great pile of earth and rock was reputed to have defeated the semi-human Wyrmfolk, the offspring, it was said, of liaisons between serpent demons from the lowest circles of the Netherhells and human women. With the magic of his fabled Black Crown, said to be mounted with a dozen black diamonds of inestimable value, he had then bent the beaten semi-humans to his will, until death had taken him and, freed, they had fled into the hollows of the earth, never to be seen again.

At least, that was the story, and he and his companions hoped the burial-mound truly did hold items of great value, whether magical or mundane.

Maskalin Vaz turned to Glazd and said, "Start digging."

The huge man nodded and produced a shovel from his sack and began to hack at the mound's side.

After a short while, there was a sudden collapse of soil and a narrow gap was revealed leading into the dark hollow at the centre of the ancient tomb.

"Ready?" Maskalin Vaz asked Druntha, as he took a tiny glowstone from his jacket and handed it to him to light his way. As the smallest of their company, it was up to Druntha to risk the dangers of the mound's interior alone.

Druntha nodded and began to ease himself through the ragged gap.

"Be watchful for curse-traps," Maskalin Vaz told him as he disappeared inside," and beware tomb haunts and bound demons."

He had purchased the dwarf a number of protective charms, several of which were quite possibly efficacious.

Warily, watching both the opening in the side of the mound and the grey moors about them, they waited. And, waited.

"He's dead," spat Westiz Na.

"If he is," said Maskalin Vaz, "then it shall be your turn next – you are the slimmest of us." He gestured to Glazd. "He'll never fit."

Just at that moment, Druntha reappeared in a flurry of curses and clutching several dark objects to his chest.

"Aha! He lives."

"There *was* a haunt," he grouched, "and only one of those damned amulets worked!"

Maskalin Vaz chuckled. "But, work it did, and here you are alive and intact."

"Just!"

"And, what do you have there, in your hands?" Maskalin Vaz asked.

"Tat. Just tat." Druntha chucked some rusted circles of iron that might, once, have been coins down onto the grey grass at his feet, followed by a rusted blade, which Maskalin Vaz retrieved as a curiosity.

"The ancient tribes," he said, "valued iron more than gold, for it was a rare thing then." He looked at what Druntha still held in his hands. "Is that the crown?"

"I guess so. It was on the dead guy's head. Looks like tat, though."

It did. It was made of iron and had rusted from being ages beneath the damp ground, and even the fabled black diamonds looked more like lumps of coal than valuable gems. Still, if it held the magic it was said to, there were those who would pay well for it, regardless of its state.

He was just about to toss aside the corroded blade, a thing with no value, and take the crown, when Westiz Na made a sudden and unexpected movement. She seized the crown from Druntha and, in the same instant, cast off her human seeming, to reveal an upper body and arms composed of a multitude of writhing serpents.

Glazd raised his shovel to swing it, but the thing that had been Westiz Na turned and spat venom at him. He collapsed dead before her with a cry, face blistered and red.

The Wyrmthing held the crown aloft in triumph.

"Never again shall my people be bound, will and soul, to a human. No, I shall lead my people to revenge upon humanity! And, you shall be the first to die, Maskalin Vaz…"

Without thinking, he stabbed the Wyrmthing with the rusted blade that he held. Although crumbling and blunt, it pierced the serpentine flesh like butter and it howled in pain as the blade drove in deep. Then, the blade crumbled into dust and, a moment later, the writhing mass of serpents did likewise. The crown fell to the ground and shattered, even the diamonds breaking apart into ragged shards. A moment later, the dust of blade and Wyrmthing were blown away by the wailing wind and only some of the larger pieces of the broken crown were left.

"Balaska Vlam's blade must have been cursed to slay the Wyrmfolk," said Druntha.

"Possibly," said Maskalin Vaz, hardly hearing him, for he was looking sadly at what was left of the shattered crown, both its magic and its monetary value reduced to flakes of rust and crumbling coal-like chunks of what had once been jewels.

He looked at Druntha. "So, did you notice if there was anything else of value in there?"

End

DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Tales of the Black Arts (Hazardous Press), The Dragon's Hoard 2 (WolfSinger), The Mighty Sons of Hercules: Volume II (Cirsova Publishing), and The Black Beacon Book of Pirates (Black Beacon Books), and issues of Black Cat Weekly, Broadswords and Blasters, BFS Horizons, Journ-E, Swords and Sorcery Magazine, and Tales from the Magician's Skull, and in addition, has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor). Find DJ online at https://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/

Go Fish Is a Game of Honor by Mark Ifanson

It was Blob's turn to ask. "Got any Jacks?"

Jerry studied his cards. He had two Jacks, including the one he received from Blob two turns prior. Blob must've drawn another Jack from the pile of face-down cards between them. That had to be it, right?

Or...maybe they fabricated the card when Jerry wasn't looking.

"Blob, did you just counterfeit a Jack?"

"What, me? Heavens, no! Jer, how could you suggest such a thing?"

"Liar."

"Well, check for yourself, dude."

Jerry counted all the cards. Fifty-two. No funny extras fabricated from Blob's Shapeshifter flesh.

"Okay, Blob. Sorry I said you're cheating. So, you asked for what? Jacks?"

"Yeah, Jacks."

"I've got two. As you darn well know." Jerry frowned as he handed Blob the cards.

Blob was certainly an odd nickname, and a human might find it offensive, but Jerry knew Blob didn't mind. Actually, they encouraged it. As a Shapeshifter, they could be, well, whoever—or whatever—they wanted to be. When they expended the energy needed to assume human form, they usually presented as either Robert, a retired but still devilishly handsome astro-pilot, or Roberta, a hot media influencer with billions of loyal followers. "Blob" rhymed (more or less) with their long list of previous nicknames in the Rob/Bob/Robbi/Bobbi lineage. And when they rested in their default low energy state, they did resemble a blob. They owned it.

Blob took Jerry's cards, organized them in their hand, and laid down a completed set of four Jacks.

Four Jacks? How could that be? They would've had to pull Jacks in their last two draws. Very unlikely, but not impossible, right? That had to be it! No way Blob held back cards when *Jerry* asked for Jacks. No, not Blob. Go Fish is a game of honor.

Jerry squinted as he studied Blob's form—as if doing so might help him discern the Shapeshifter's true intent—and reflected on their current situation. It was just the two of them, sitting on metal chairs around a small metal table in the crowded control room of a spaceship transfer station located between the mouths of two wormholes, parsecs from the nearest inhabited planet. The walls around them teemed with displays sporting endless rows of red, amber, and green lights, switches, knobs, and video screens. Everything was as it should be.

A voice broke through the static emanating from a speaker on the wall behind Blob.

"*Requesting clearance to proceed with—"* And then, just more static.

Jerry asked Blob, "Hey, can you do your thing?"

"Sure, Jer. Without using my visual sensors."

Blob effortlessly sprouted an arm with a hand sporting prominent knuckles, made a fist, reached behind their chair, and gave the speaker a solid thump that rattled the entire wall and stirred up a surprising amount of dust. Housekeeping was not a priority.

The voice on the speaker became clearer.

"*I repeat, Cagle Transfer, this is the Neowise, requesting clearance to pass to the next hole.*"

Jerry toggled his mic. “Roger that, *Neowise*. I see you’re coming from Trappist 4b. How’s the weather there? Did you catch that Ultimate Sports playoff game before you left? Looked like the visitors took quite a pounding!”

“Ah-h, yes, Cagle Transfer, it was, um, a lot of fun. Is that you, Jerry?”

“Sure is! Is this Doug? How’s the family?

“Hey there, Jerry. We’re all fine, thanks for asking. Look, I’d love to stay and chat, but we’re on a tight schedule. Do we have clearance to proceed?”

“Okay, sure, Roger that, *Neowise*. We have your flight plan on file and you’re good to go. Catch you on the flip-flop! Safe travels, Star Man.”

Blob briefly manifested two oversized human-looking eyes and rolled them ironically while asking in a patronizing tone: “Really? ‘How’s the family?’ ‘Safe travels, Star Man?’ Maybe Jer-Bear’s just a little bored?”

“Yeah, as hard as it may be for you to fathom, I’m bored,” said Jerry, leaning back a bit in his chair. “That’s only the third vessel we’ve seen this year. Traffic’s way down since they built that express wormhole. No one seems to want to take the scenic route anymore.”

“I’m bored as hell too, Jer. But at least we’ve got each other.”

“Sorry, but being stuck in a wormhole local transfer station playing Go Fish with a Shapeshifter isn’t what I trained for.”

“Maybe someday you’ll tell me why you’re really here, dude.”

“Yeah, maybe someday. But don’t count on it.”

***

It was Jerry’s turn now. “Got any Queens?”

Blob glanced at their cards. “Nope. Go fish.”

Jerry drew a card and made a disappointed sigh as the new card matched nothing in his hand.

Blob’s next words were: “Got any Queens?”

Jerry suddenly looked up from his cards, again squinting in a still unsuccessful attempt to decipher Shapeshifter behavior. “What? I just asked you if you had any Queens and you told me to go fish.”

Blob remained unflustered by the accusation. “No, I didn’t. You must be mistaken.”

Jerry stiffened in his chair, his voice increasing in pitch and volume. “Yes, you did. This time I know you’re cheating!”

Blob smiled, if that’s what you could call it. Although they were speaking through a mouth-like orifice, they didn’t have a face as such at the moment. “No, Jer, I’m not cheating. I never cheat. I don’t need to.”

“Hey Blob, I just asked if you had any Queens and you said ‘Go fish!’ ”

“Jer, do you realize you’re repeating yourself?”

“Darn it, I know you’re cheating.” Jerry was shouting now, his face flushing bright red. “And you’re so shamelessly transparent about it.”

Blob paused, as if seriously considering Jerry’s allegation, and then said, “Jer, look me in the eye.”

“Which eye? I mean, you’re manifesting several at the moment.”

“How about the two slightly glowing eyes near the top of what you might interpret as my head.”

Jerry looked into Blob's glowing upper eyes. Two beautiful, pulsing kaleidoscopes of color: blue as sapphire, then emerald green, then yellow as the sun. Such stunning eyes. He could stare into them all day.

"Repeat after me, Jer. *Blob is not cheating*."

"Blob is not cheating."

"Again."

"Blob is not cheating."

"Right Jer, I'm not cheating."

Jerry, now quite relaxed, continued to gaze into Blob's gorgeous, glowing eyes. "Of course not, Blob. I was just kidding around. You're not the cheating type."

"Right, Jer."

And then Blob asked, "Got any Queens?"

"Yes," said Jerry. "Yes, I do. Two, in fact. Here, please take them, they're yours now."

Blob took the two Queens from Jerry, added two from their own hand, and laid down another completed set of four cards. That was their seventh four-of-a-kind, to Jerry's two.

"Well, Jer, even if you sweep the remaining sets, you'll only have six to my seven. Concede?"

Jerry laughed softly. "Okay, Blob, the game's yours. How the heck do you keep on winning like that?"

Blob slowly manifested a huge glowing smile that spanned their entire body, a visage which would probably disturb an inexperienced onlooker but, as Jerry had come to know, was perfectly normal for a Shapeshifter. "Just lucky, I suppose."

#END#

Mark Ifanson writes in various genres. His speculative fiction has found a home — or will soon be residing — at Altered Reality, Bewildering Stories, Fabula Argentea, Maudlin House, Roi Fainéant Press, Sci Phi Journal, and other literary neighborhoods. You can check out more of his work at https://www.chillsubs.com/profile/markifanson.

The Horseman by Lee Andrew Forman

The horseman's shadowed eyes stared forward beneath the rim of a tattered Stetson. His steed blazed through the night. Isolated by the vast prairie, things which hide in the dark watched his every move. But his guns held firm to his belt, fully loaded. His quick hands, both ready and able.

Although he could not see the path, he knew it well. Not by a painted memory or a tale told over a hard drink, but by a map of dreams scrawled within his heart. He was drawn to that place by a pounding desire to hunt, but his prey remained a blur behind inner vision. He knew not its form or purpose, only its dangers.

One too many folk had been ravaged, and as a traveler, he knew his presence in the nearby town would be more than suspect. His grim expression could not go unnoticed among a people quiet with fear and mourning. He was to make haste in dispatching whatever hungry thing lay sly in the wilderness.

A sudden moment, both quick as lightning and long as eternity, threw him off his horse with the cries of his mount in terror. By the time he hit the ground and drew his guns, nothing more than dust in the air remained where his companion had fallen. But its screams of agony, the pain of being eaten alive—a foul thing for any man, woman, or child to hear—trained his sights through the dark with precision. When vision failed, he shot by ear.

A low grunt confirmed a hit. The sound of tearing flesh stopped. Raspy breath of something not human, the only thing which kept silence at bay.

The horseman held both guns steady, fingers ready to squeeze.

Hard pounding against the earth readied his shot, two bullets fired straight, no hit.

A thump landed behind him; foul breath huffed against his neck. He cocked both arms back and fired two more shots. A guttural howl sounded, something wet and hot splattered his backside. The horseman rolled forward and turned toward his enemy.

Despite its grotesque appearance, its extremity of difference from man or animal, the horseman didn't flinch. To him the bleeding thing was just another beast to be slain. It huffed heavy breath, visible in the cold air. The waving motion of a multitude of spiked tentacles quickened and slowed. Its maw opened and shut, black liquid dripped from its teeth. Its bottom, nothing more than a blob of raw flesh, pulsated as it stretched and wrinkled.

The horseman stared at its face with no eyes, waited for it to move. If it fled, he'd chase; if it attacked, he'd retaliate. He could navigate a fight with evil like a swindler at a game of cards.

It came toward him. He waited until its spiked tentacles raised in a poise to kill from above with their sharp ends. The horseman rolled to the side and fired two more shots. One into the side of its head, one into the pulsating flesh of its lower end. Both injuries spit blood, the one and only thing he and the creature had in common.

The horseman reloaded his guns while the creature sung agony into the night. It twitched and swung its loose appendages in the air before falling on its side. It breathed still, but slow, labored. The horseman approached without guilt and fired another shot into its head.

The horseman then removed his duster and threw his hat onto the grass. The rest of his clothes ripped and fell away from the expansion of his flesh. His entire body enlarged until it became nothing like man or animal. Somewhere along his middle, a gaping circle of teeth opened and gorged on its prey.

Lee Andrew Forman is an author, editor, publisher, and photographer from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Lee has published three books to date, The Bury Box, Zero Perspective, and Fragments of a Damned Mind, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He was a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a regular contributor to The Lift, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals. Lee is also an administrator and member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, where you can find a new piece of fiction each week. Find Lee online at www.leeandrewforman.com

The Shinono Tale by R. C. Capasso

Elstar always asked what borrowers wanted, even if she already knew.

No one likes thinking that a telepath is at that moment reading their mind. And since Elstar received her knowledge unwillingly—the last thing she wanted to do was pry—she actively cultivated the image of privacy, presenting a calm and unquestioning face even when the library user asked for the most contradictory volumes.

Besides, the question usually opened the way for interesting discussions about books, life experiences, existence in deep space and the longings it creates. Some felt that assignment to a starship forced connections, like them or not, but she believed community could be cultivated through positive interactions.

So, even if someone actually wanted to read a bodice ripper, Elstar guided them to the volumes on hydroponics, as they had asked. Or if they secretly longed for a novel featuring space pirates—a disturbing desire on the part of the captain, but surely it was mere escapism—she pointed out the latest issue of the *Journal on InterSpecies Ethics*, on which he always put a hold. After all, desires are not the only measure of a person; their aspirations count, too. And who better than a librarian should foster the desire to grow beyond one's current state?

So, whenever Cornoc visited the library, she offered him his requested histories of the Laconn planetary wars or the latest biography of a Laconnian general and listened as he carefully explained how he was related to all the great commanders of his species. The current Laconnian tyrant was his uncle.

She couldn't have actually given Cornoc what he wanted, anyhow, because the desire was so deeply buried that she only received the slightest impressions. All she ever felt consistently was "soft." Maybe furry. The sensation was vague and gone in an instant, like an elusive fragrance. She refused to pursue it.

When the captain announced that they would be transporting wounded Stoll prisoners to a "facility" on Laconn, Cornoc followed her out of the briefing room and asked if he could have *The Complete Battles of Stoll* to read in his quarters.

She had an instant sensation of something warm and furry pressed to her side. "*The Complete Battles*. All right. But it is a reference item. It typically doesn't circulate."

Cornoc, who was a security officer and should have been Security Chief but said he preferred the discipline of obedience, blinked at her. "I will return it in pristine condition."

"Of course you will." She led the way to the library, only wondering slightly about moisture from the officer's fingers. Cornoc seemed to be perspiring rather more than usual, and the furry shape pressed against her insistently. But as she prepared to slip the multi-volume set into a carrier, Cornoc slid on a pair of thick, impermeable gloves and pressed all the books to his armored chest.

"Thank you." He stomped off.

Elstar stepped around to her desk and sat. As a matter of ethics she always rejected any telepathic impressions from her mind, especially in connection with library users. But this sensation was so...tender, was the word. Such longing, such an ache. And it had to do with a book, for certain. Pages the color of the milky Laconn lily. Illustrations sketched as if in ink, quick, suggestive. Asking the reader to complete them. The whisper of words she couldn't understand.

She would never have asked Cornoc which book he truly desired. But she would have loved to read it herself.

###

When the Stoll prisoners were transported onto the ship, Elstar asked permission to visit them and see if any would like some reading matter. The captain agreed, and she rolled a cartload of various lightweight choices to Sick Bay. The library contained few examples of Stoll literature, given the book burnings during the repeated occupations by Laconn, but she had ordered a few from antique shops on other planets and found other distracting choices that could be easily translated by scanner into written or oral text. Things that might bring comfort or distraction, nothing heavy.

Cornoc stood as guard outside the hospital wing. "Officer Elstar." He nodded.

"Hello, Officer Cornoc. Are you enjoying *The Complete Battles of Stoll*?"

His face contracted for a moment. "I have read all the volumes. Do you have anything on the reign of Cornoc Baie?"

Elstar fought the urge to take a step back. It wasn't just the name of the most recent and most ...impactful... of the occupiers of Stoll that set her off balance. It was some sort of violent intestinal conflict inside her shipmate and library user, Cornoc. Was this ruthless leader another one of his relatives? The name suggested a clan allegiance, at the very least. Given the dates, he might be a grandfather or great uncle. But what a legacy, to have such violence in your family tree! Yet Security Officer Cornoc wore his authority carefully; there had never been a single incidence of abuse of power during his service.

"Um...I have the latest biography."

"I will come to the library to fetch it when my shift ends."

And she could see it now: a small figure, with the crest and mane of a young Stoll, sitting on a stone wall beside a short-snouted, long tailed mammal of some sort who pressed against him. The warmth in her side reached across her body, trying to touch the tightness in her chest.

"Shino..." The word slipped out of her in a whisper.

Cornoc flung himself back against the wall. "What did you say?"

Elstar pressed a hand against her face. "I'm sorry. I was going to sneeze. I'd better get inside."

Strangely, the telepathic wave of distress sweeping across the prisoners in Sick Bay was easier to manage than whatever was roiling inside the security officer. Was it the presence of Stoll prisoners that upset him so much? Did they stir up clan loyalties or a conflicted Laconnian patriotism? She gulped and made herself smile as she pushed the cart toward the first bed.

###

"I haven't read much. Not in years." The Stoll officer, tall for his species, dipped his head. Half his crest had been blown away, and his mane had been completely shaved to allow the surgeon to work. "I used to read all the time as a child, but then I had to leave school. Military training." He gestured toward his broken body.

"What did you like to read?"

"Oh, things about space exploration. Books that painted it as full of adventure. Wonderful meetings with alien species. Ironic that my people wrote such stuff, isn't it?"

She had the strongest, strangest image of a young being trotting down a path in a field of waving, purple plants. Not a Stoll. The markings of a Laconn.

"You grew up in a peaceful area, to have such ideals, Hainu?" She liked the sound of his name, written on the panel above his bed.

"No. But during a peaceful period. Only a couple of years, when I look back. But in my mind, they stretched out. The occupiers were there, but not so violent at first. I even had a friend among them, a Laconn boy called Chi."

The image of the young Laconn among the purple plants grew stronger, the face clearer. She could have sworn she knew those eyes.

"His father Cornoc led the occupying force, but the general was always busy, so Chi could sneak out and meet me. We played together. The only young ones for miles. We were actually friends. We climbed trees, explored, and called ourselves a club. Kept a few books up in a nest we made."

"*The Shinono Tale*."

He leveled clear eyes on her. "I understand that some of your people have the gift of receiving what is unspoken."

"Forgive me. It all came out." The cover illustration of the Stoll boy and the Shinono, the small mammal pressed against his side.

"'Close beside him, so he would not be alone.'" Hainu smiled. "Those are the last words of the book. My favorite. And Chi's favorite, too. Until the soldiers found it and burned it. That was the end of the summer, the end of Chi and me. It had something to do with the discovery of a rebellion, a secret group plotting against the Laconn. Chi's father, the general, took steps, and everything ended."

Elstar stared into her cart. "Perhaps you would like a book on mammals across the galaxy."

Hainu lowered his eyes and nodded.

###

She had to call upon every bookseller, antiques shop and collector in the quadrant before she found a battered hard copy. *The Shinono Tale*. A minor classic of the Stoll people, valued above all for the illustrations and the simple story of love. She used a sizable portion of her acquisitions budget to obtain it.

She broke all her own rules and took the book to Cornoc. He greeted her at the door of his quarters, eyes dark and a roaring inside him that almost knocked her over. When his eyes landed on the child's book, she gripped the doorframe.

He took it in both hands and turned slowly into the cabin. A soft light shown on a chair in the corner, the one curved spot in the bare, metal room.

He lowered himself to sit, pressing almost sideways, so that the chair's cushion touched his side.

She slid away, feeling her chest open and clear.

###

When she next went to Sick Bay with new books, she found Cornoc inside. Of course, now she thought of him by his given name, Chi, though she would never speak it. His weapon stood propped on the wall behind him, and he sat on the edge of his old friend's bed. His side pressed against Hainu, close beside him, so he would not be alone.

The End

A lifelong reader, R. C. Capasso writes a variety of genres, from ghost and horror stories to science fiction, steampunk and even the occasional romance. Stories have appeared in Bewildering Stories, Zooscape, Teleport Magazine, Freedom Fiction Journal, Fiction on the Web, The Last Girl's Club, The Lorelei Signal and parABnormal Magazine. Works have also been published in online and print anthologies including Iron Faerie's Flights of Fantasy, Red Cape's A to Z Horror series, The Librarian Reshelved (Air and Nothingness Press), Home Sweet

Horror for Black Ink Fiction and Gypsum Sound Tales' Thuggish Itch and Colp Underground. Find R.C. online at facebook: ruth.capasso

Spirited Conversation by Mary Jo Rabe

As she stepped out of her aging but still functional, black Packard onto the loose gravel, it occurred to Charlotte that she really should plan things better instead of just giving in to her gut feeling. Deciding her previously beloved landscaping business was failing, spontaneously jumping off her grumbling garden tractor in St. Donatus, and driving to the Dubuque Arboretum and Botanical Gardens wasn't completely thought through.

Her sturdy, gray, work boots kept her from slipping on the parking lot's loose gravel, producing loud, cracking noises as the little rocks slid away. Maybe she also should have changed clothes or at least shoes before she took off for Dubuque. On the other hand, although her appearance wasn't perhaps professional, it was that of a genuine garden expert.

Charlotte knew a little about the arboretum, with its fifty-six acres of sixty different gardens including one garden with an amazing ninety varieties of roses. However, she had never been there. So far, she had only ever gone to Dubuque when she felt the desire to hike up and down the cliffs along the Mississippi River at the Dubuque Eagle Point Park.

She walked to the entrance to the visitors' center, a renovated farm shed. "Could I speak to Christopher Keel?" she asked. Charlotte had done some minimal research, and so she knew the name of the director.

The woman behind the desk asked if Charlotte had an appointment, but when she heard Charlotte's name, she said she would ask if Mr. Keel was available.

Less than a minute later, a chubby, middle-aged man with a few stray hairs combed across his otherwise bald head emerged from some door or other, walked over to where Charlotte was standing, and shook her hand.

"Charlotte Huss?" he asked. "Your reputation precedes you. Your one-woman lawn and landscaping business is famous in Jackson and Dubuque counties. Visitors here often praise you as a gardening genius. How can I help you?"

"To be honest, I'm job hunting," Charlotte said.

Mr. Keel looked sad. "Let's go to my office," he said and walked briskly down the hall. Charlotte followed him.

His office turned out to be a narrow room containing an ancient office chair behind a dented metal desk and two folding chairs in front.

"Sorry I can't offer more comfort," Mr. Keel said. "As you probably know, our arboretum is financed mostly by donations. We don't spend money on non-essentials. Please have a seat."

Charlotte nodded and sat down carefully. "I'm guessing that most of the work here is done by volunteers," she said. "But you must also have paid staff positions."

"Yes," Mr. Keel said. "We have over three hundred volunteers, all enthusiastic and hard-working. And they need qualified supervisors to make sure that the right work is done and that the work is done right. You would be perfect for us, but donations have been down for some time now. We can't fill the few paid positions we have. Still, I haven't given up hope that things will improve one of these days. Give us your official application so that we can make you an offer as soon as we can afford you."

"Thank you," Charlotte said. "It seems like people aren't as generous with their money as they used to be. Some have money problems, but lately my experience has been that many just don't want to support local businesses, for example mine."

"Things have changed," Mr. Keel agreed. "Eastern Iowa was always the most forward-looking, liberal patch of land in Iowa. And Dubuque is a city with the reputation of welcoming everyone. But now the atmosphere is different, and the city also has financial problems. Sometimes I think people have lost a sense of civic responsibility."

"I don't know if I can agree about eastern Iowa being liberal," Charlotte said. "My experiences with the conservative farmers around St. Donatus have been very different. But I have noticed that many people have gotten less tolerant and less reasonable. My recent, unpleasant experiences with customers were what possessed me to come here and ask about a job."

"I wish things were different," Mr. Keel said. "And I'm sorry I can't be more optimistic about your employment chances here."

"Thank you for talking to me," Charlotte said. "And you will get my official job application. I would like to work here. I love my landscaping business. But now, people who used to request my landscaping complain a lot, not just about the cost but about things I have no control over. Some say they will no longer contract with me because I don't go to their church and don't have the bumper stickers on my car that they approve of."

Mr. Keel sighed and shook his head. So, Charlotte stood up and left.

With this minimal consolation from Mr. Keel, Charlotte walked back to her car. She grabbed her thermos bottle of iced tea and clenched it with her green-stained, stubby fingers. What there was of the lukewarm tea tasted good enough; there just wasn't enough.

In the hopes that this trip wouldn't prove to be a total loss, she drove to the Dubuque Eagle Point Park up on the cliffs next to the Mississippi River. Charlotte always went there for serious hiking whenever she felt discouraged. These hikes gave her new energy. When she first started, she didn't have much endurance on the park's Riverfront Walk, and she returned to sit down and catch her breath at the Riverfront Pavilion after only a few miles. She slowly extended her hikes. The more she hiked, the better she felt, happier, more optimistic, even if there really was no reason for it.

She loved the viewing towers where she had a panoramic view of Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. There was something about watching the mighty Mississippi that encouraged her and put her in a good mood.

Today, when she stood alone in a viewing tower, an odd cloud of fog suddenly surrounded her. Gradually she made out faces floating around in the fog. "What on earth?" she asked.

"You can finally see us," a high-pitched, squeaky voice at her eye level peeped.

"I told you it was just a matter of time and patience," a deep, bass voice at her feet grumbled. "She had to realize that she needed our help."

Charlotte decided she wasn't insane or dreaming, although the evidence perhaps wasn't conclusive. "Uh," she said. "I'm Charlotte Huss. Would it be rude of me to ask who all of you are?"

"We know who you are," a voice at waist level chirped. "We have been waiting for you to see us."

"Okay," Charlotte said as she tried to count the faces in the fog. "Can I help you?"

The deep voice at her feet said, "We were always able to influence you over the years, and you reacted, without being consciously aware of us. Now, we need you to advise us. People around here don't pay attention to us anymore, and so we can't help them."

"Right," Charlotte said doubtfully. "You help people?"

"We have created an atmosphere of joy, optimism, and good will around Dubuque for over two hundred and fifty years, but in the past years our influence has been fading. People are pessimistic and discouraged. Some of them even vote for bad people who tell them lies and make them angry."

"That's true," Charlotte said. "But why do you think it's because you don't have as much influence anymore?"

"We see what is going on, and we remember how it used to be."

"But who are you?" Charlotte asked.

"We are spirits who came with the immigrants and joined forces with the natural spirits we found here in the woods, in the caves, in the rivers and streams. The leprechauns and fairies we accompanied came with the Irish immigrants who settled in the south part of Dubuque. The wood sprites and witches came with the German immigrants who settled in the north section of Dubuque," a quavering voice said.

"Even if people here didn't acknowledge us, some people saw us or our representations, and many people felt our presence and reacted to our influence. For example, we projected encouraging thoughts to you whenever you came to the park, and you responded. We could influence people for the better. But now people ignore what we try to tell them," a tenor voice said.

"Now, no one believes in what they call mythical creatures anymore," a soprano voice said.

"People don't believe in anything anymore," an alto voice said.

"Whoa," Charlotte interrupted. "That isn't true. There are plenty of people who are willing to believe things; you just have to approach them correctly."

The fog of faces trembled. "We've tried," an alto voice said. "But nothing works."

"Hmm," Charlotte said. "Let me think this through. People think wood sprites and leprechauns are superstitious remnants of another time, figments of imagination. Do you still try to reach them through such apparitions?"

"Yes," the bass voice at her feet said. "That's how we have appeared for hundreds of years."

"But that is no longer working," Charlotte said. "Anyway, you aren't the fairies or witches. You are their spirits, the essence that just chose these other figures as avatars, as representations. Were you the forces that made me feel good when I hiked here?"

"Yes," one voice said. "When you started high school, we encouraged you to go out for basketball."

"I remember," Charlotte said. "Everyone said I was crazy, at five foot three thinking I could make the team, even in Iowa's half-court, three-on-three, girls' basketball. After I wandered around this park here, though, I felt like I could try. It turned out that I was fast and could run around the guards and make baskets. I even made honorable mention All State in my senior year. So, it was you that helped me."

"You paid attention to what we told you," a voice said.

"And when I discovered that I hated being a hairdresser because I couldn't stand the chatter or the customers' unrealistic expectations, and my boyfriend said I should go to the local junior college and study landscaping?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes, we encouraged you to make the change and also influenced your decision to go into business for yourself, offering garden and landscaping services," the voice said.

"You were right to persuade me," Charlotte said. "I might not have dared to take any of these risks without your making me think I could succeed. I guess I owe you."

"Well," a new tenor voice admitted. "You are one of our successes, but we don't seem to reach most people anymore."

"Hmm," Charlotte said. "I think I felt your encouragement through nature, through the trees in this park and the strength of the river. Maybe people need some kind of representation, something substantial they can associate with the power you have. Leprechauns and witches just won't cut it anymore. You need new symbols, new ways to get people's attention."

"And what would they be?" a sad little voice asked.

"I wonder," Charlotte said. "Give me a minute. I would like to help you, especially now that I realize how much you have helped me." She went out of the tower and sat on the ground, continuing to look out at the river. The fog maintained a respectful distance, probably not wanting to disturb her.

Charlotte breathed in the pleasant smell of the trees and bushes, watched the river, and listened to the warbling birds and crickets. Then she looked up at the still blue twilight sky slowly turning to dusk.

"I have it," she said, and the fog moved closer. "You have to take the natural, existing world as your avatars, your familiars, your symbols. Spread out and communicate through the feelings people get from the trees, river, and cliffs all around Dubuque."

The fog shook a little.

"And don't be afraid to go beyond planetary limits." Charlotte continued. "Let your influence come from observations beyond the Earth, from planets or comets or gravitational waves or cosmic ray bursts. It's your encouragement that's important, not where people think they are getting their sense of awe and transcendence from."

"I don't know," the first tenor voice said. "This is completely new to us. What if it doesn't work?"

Charlotte shook her head impatiently. "Then you won't be any worse off than you are now. Take the chance. Use the wonders of nature to impress and influence people, to give them the feeling that they are a part of something wonderful, that their possibilities are unlimited."

The soprano voice said, "I have a feeling you could be right. We can do this. We only needed a nudge for the direction to go in. Thank you."

"Actually," the bass voice said. "How can we thank you? I'm assuming the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow doesn't do it anymore."

Charlotte smiled. "Just do a good job, and once you have the city of Dubuque back on track, expand and take on other places. It's a big planet, and every place could use the encouragement you can deliver."

The fog disappeared, and Charlotte felt almost euphoric.

She drove home, feeling significantly more optimistic than before. Even her aging Packard seemed to have more get-up-and-go. She couldn't wait to see the change in people's attitudes around Dubuque and all of eastern Iowa.

Maybe she should keep her business and volunteer at the arboretum, after all.

Mary Jo Rabe writes science fiction, modern fantasy, historical fiction, and crime or mystery stories, generally displaying a preference for what she defines as happy endings. Ideas for her fiction come from the magnificent, expanding universe, the rural environment of eastern Iowa where she grew up, the beautiful Michigan State University campus where she got her first degree, and the Black Forest area of Germany with its center in Freiburg where she worked as a

librarian for 41 years before retiring to Titisee-Neustadt. News about her published stories is posted regularly on her blog: https://maryjorabe.wordpress.com/ Connect on facebook at https://www.facebook.com/rabemj