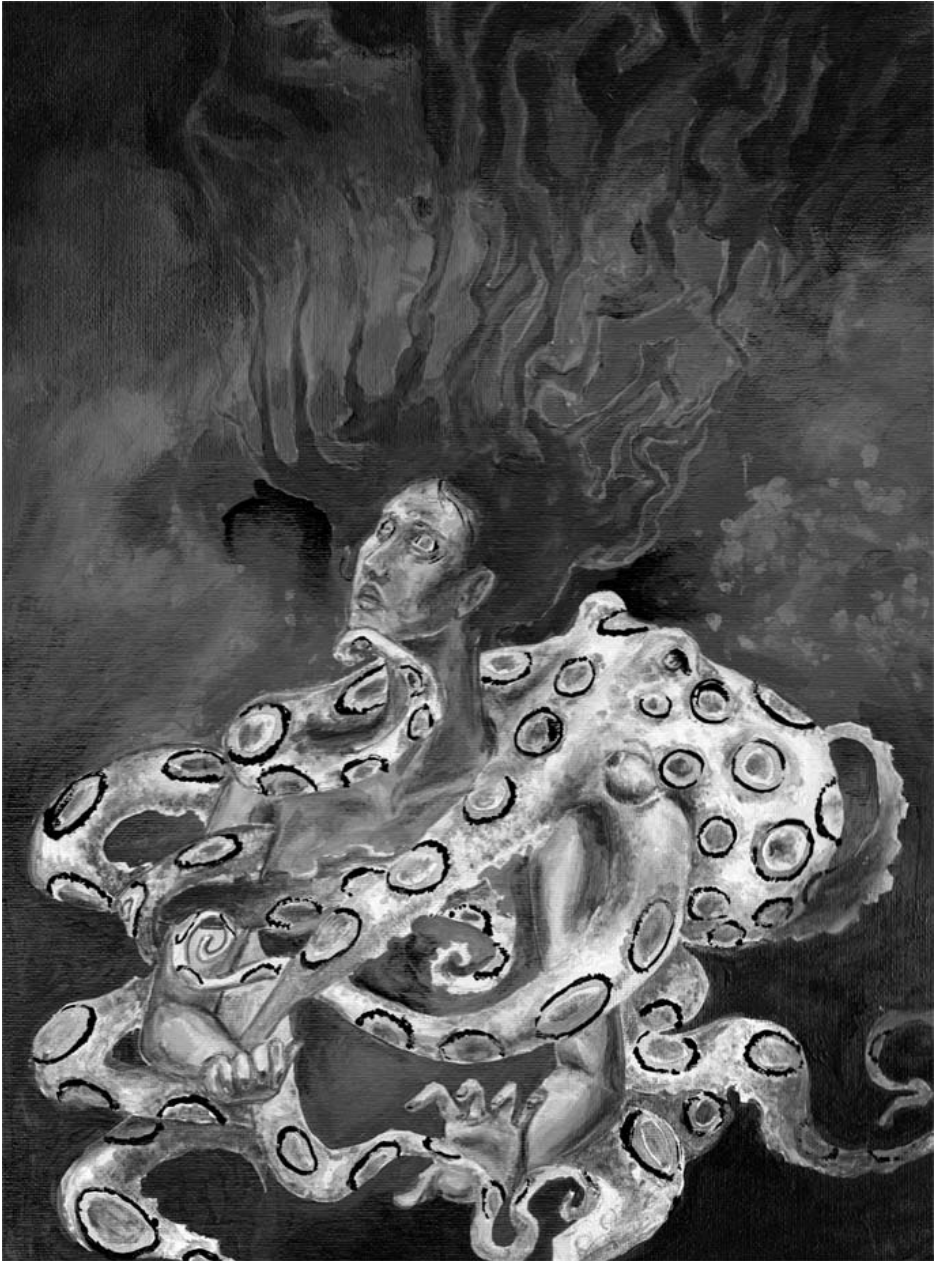


KALLEIDOTROPE

No.9 July 2010, \$5



C.J. Bahnsen • Jenny Blackford • Daniel Braum • William Doreski • Cort Ellyn
Phil Estes • John Grey • Inna Hansen • Jason Heller • Alec Kowalczyk
Jonathan David Lim • Jay Lowrey • Marshall Payne • Janet E. Sever • Rachel Swirsky
Anna Sykora • Genevieve Valentine • Grant Wilson

KALEIDOTROPE

∞ Issue 9 July 2010 ∞

"This is the story of the road that goes to my house and what ghosts there do remain"
— The Decemberists, "July, July!"

FICTION

<i>A Punny Thing Happened on the Way to the Tavern</i>	Rachel Swirsky	2
<i>So Many Years Ago</i>	Jay Lowrey	6
<i>Emperor of Mist</i>	Daniel Braum	12
<i>Like a Cannonball</i>	Jason Heller	22
<i>Take Four</i>	Genevieve Valentine	26
<i>Danny's Magical Toe Jam</i>	Marshall Payne	28
<i>Labyrinth</i>	Janet E. Sever	39
<i>Fire Eater</i>	Cort Ellyn	44
<i>Adam</i>	Jenny Blackford	55

POETRY

Two Poems	John Grey	5
<i>If My Easy Saver Account Was a Robot Mom...</i>	Phil Estes	11
<i>Dates With Poetry</i>	Jonathan David Lim	25
<i>Siberian Geese</i>	Anna Sykora	27
<i>Last Call</i>	Alec Kowalczyk	33
<i>Star Spores</i>	William Doreski	43

ARTWORK

Inna Hansen—Cover
Grant Wilson—*Fluffy Clouds*, page 25, and *Keeper of the Key*, page 58

NONFICTION

<i>John Dickson: The Sound Behind the Most Dangerous Night on TV</i>	C.J. Bahnsen	34
Horoscopes		38
Contributors		60

A Punny Thing Happened on the Way to the Tavern

by Rachel Swirsky

Melva and Calder hid behind an oak as they watched Lady Olwyn's latest hero enter the Royal Weasel. The run-down tavern was the last stop on the king's road before Wyrms' Wood, a well-known watering hole for those whose bravery and brawn outstripped their brains.

Melva turned to Calder. She wore the motley of her position as Lady Olwyn's jester. The bells on her uniform jangled. "Ready?" she asked.

Calder smiled up at Melva with the innocent, boyish face that concealed his devious mind and nimble fingers. As one of Lady Olwyn's kitchen boys, Calwyn perpetually wore rags, stains, and a guileless expression, even as he sharpened his skills by filching onions out from under the cooks' noses.

Though Melva and Calder occupied very different ranks in Lady Olwyn's household, the two had become friends when Melva caught Calder trying to steal a cleverly crafted fake gold necklace from her costume trunk. Melva's anger melted rapidly after the thief offered to make it up to her by sharing a bottle of wine he'd "relocated" from Lady Olwyn's cellar. They passed the night drinking together, bonding over their shared love for other peoples' money.

It was quick work for them to hatch a scheme to indulge their hobby. For years, Melva had been lamenting the gold that hemorrhaged out of Lady Olwyn's pockets as she hired a constant stream of burly young fools to slay the dragon in Wyrms' Wood. Lady Olwyn offered the heroes a purse of gold when they agreed to take the job, with the promise of more when they succeeded. Invariably, the daring but dense youths got snapped up and swallowed down, their purses added to the dragon's hoard.

Melva and Calder weren't strong enough to save the lads from the dragon, but since teaming up, they'd managed to liberate a lot of Lady Olwyn's misspent gold.

"Let's get going," said Calder, slipping out from behind the massive tree trunk. Melva waited a moment before following, giving Calder enough

space so that it would appear he'd arrived alone.

Inside, the tavern reeked of sawdust and stale alcohol. Customers hunkered over grimy tables lit by candle stubs. Two lanky sailors regarded each other over empty bottles of wine; beside them, a down-and-out merchant wept over his ledgers. A nondescript old woman swore as Melva trod on her foot.

Lady Olwyn's hero stood posed in the exact center of the tavern, one foot up on his chair, as if he were gloating over a kill. A red cloak swirled around his shoulders, and Melva noticed that his tunic had been cut just low enough to display his ample chest hair. As the hero eased himself into his seat, Melva shot Calder a smug look. The agile thief returned a wink, and then slipped invisibly into the crowd.

Melva approached the hero. "Can I buy you a drink?" she asked, laying her hand on his beefy arm.

The hero eyed her, distaste crossing his brutish, handsome features. Melva knew herself to be gawky, her face ravaged with pox scars and her teeth crooked as any liar's. She looked even more peculiar dressed in yellow and purple trimmed with bells.

"You some kind of jester?" he asked. Even for a hero, he didn't seem like the most articulate sword in the magical armory.

"Well observed. I'm Melva. And you?"

The hero grunted. "Finnoverr."

Melva shook Finnoverr's hand, forcing herself to smile despite his crushing grip. "What'll you be having then?"

"Mead."

"All right."

Melva waved to catch the barmaid's attention. Enid scurried over, smile eager and mischievous; she skimmed a percentage of any profits Melva and Calder made off her customers.

"A mead for my friend," said Melva with a wink. Enid giggled and headed back to the bar.

"So, what's your story?" Melva asked Finnoverr. "Off on some big quest?"

"Ayup." The hero gazed into the distance, seeming regretful. He was probably having second

thoughts about going after the dragon

“You seem down,” said Melva. “Let me tell you a joke.”

Finnoverr began mumbling some excuse, but Melva would have none of it

“Come now. It’s my trade. You could use some cheering up.

Finnoverr looked no happier about the prospect of some jester’s jocularly, but Melva paid him no heed. Though she dabbled in con artistry, Melva’s primary trade remained her wit. She knew that she could captivate any road-weary sword-for-hire, however jaded he might be. She took a deep breath and began.

“Once there was a farmer who owned only two animals: a donkey, and a dog that a passing traveler had sold him that winter with a promise it was magic. And the dog was magic—it had magic allergies that made it sneeze and cough and snuffle more than an elephant with a head cold. And worse, sometimes the dog would sneeze in instead of out, and suck up all kinds of things. Tools, crops, dinner plates. He was sneezing the farmer out of house and home.

“But things were even worse for this farmer than you know. Because this farmer had a wife, too. A real shrew, always nagging him to make more money. ‘Work harder! Plant more seeds! Harvest more crops!’

“The farmer was a good, loyal man who loved his wife, so every day he set out to please her. He called the magical, sniffing dog to his side and drove the donkey into the fields.”

Finnoverr was hooked, interest gleaming in his cobalt eyes. Enid returned with his drink and Finnoverr set it aside without even pausing to sip.

“Now, it so happened,” continued Melva, “that this farmer’s property spanned a creek. One day, as he drove the donkey across the footbridge, he heard a rumbling, grumbling voice. A troll lumbered out. ‘Who walks across my bridge?’ bellowed the troll. ‘I demand payment.’

“The farmer staggered back. ‘I don’t understand. There were never any trolls here before.’”

“‘The troll commission has decided to expand into rural markets,’ the troll explained. ‘Now pay up!’”

Melva paused. The two sailors had ceased trading tales of the sea so they could listen to her story. The merchant set down his ledgers and sat with one hand

cupped behind his good ear. Finnoverr, sitting in the spittle-specked center of Melva’s spellbinding storytelling, stared with enraptured, unblinking concentration.

Melva continued, “The farmer said, ‘I’ve nothing to give you.’

“The troll appraised the farmer’s livestock. The magical dog coughed up a green lump. ‘That meat looks sick,’ said the troll. ‘But I hate the taste of donkey. I’ll take the dog.’

“At the precise moment that the troll reached down to seize his payment, the enchanted canine sneezed one of his inward sneezes—a sneeze so powerful that it whipped up a ferocious whirlwind that sucked the troll, limbs flailing, straight up the dog’s nose. The dog’s eyes bugged out with shock. It tried to bark, but the troll’s voice came out instead. ‘You won’t get away with this! The troll commission will send lawyers!’

“Not about to question his good fortune, the farmer grabbed the magic dog—which was much heavier now—and drove the donkey toward home. He stopped in the field, shouting at the donkey to get to work. Only our farmer. . . well, after all the pressure of being assaulted by a troll and seeing it sneezed up by his good-for-nothing magical hound. . . well, he’d gone a bit insane. He stumbled around in circles, shouting orders at the dog and trying to pick up his donkey.

“His wife heard the commotion from inside the house. Not wanting to miss a chance to harangue her husband, she rushed outside. When she saw him, she put her hand to her forehead. ‘By the goddess,’ she said, ‘I knew I married me a worthless man, but this is the end. He can’t tell his ass from a troll in the hound.’”

Melva leaned back, grin widening. The sailors chuckled. Enid giggled behind her hand, more amused by the coming heist than the joke.

Finnoverr’s brow furrowed as he mulled over the punch line. While the hero was distracted with the heady business of thinking, Calder meandered over, slipped his hand into the hero’s pouch, and palmed Lady Olwyn’s gold. Melva watched the thief from the corner of her eye, careful not to give away the game.

Finnoverr sipped thoughtfully. He swished the liquid around in his mouth, savored it, and prepared to swallow—and then at last, understanding lit in his

eyes. He sprayed mead all over the table as his mouth stretched into a horrible rictus.

“That is not funny!” he shouted, slamming down his mug.

He wrenched to his feet, grabbing for his purse so he could slap down a coin and leave the tavern, but instead of finding gold, his fingers touched only empty leather. He pounded his meaty fists against the table. “Where...is...my...money!” he roared.

Finnoverr whirled on the crowd and drew his sword, brandishing it wildly. Enid screamed. The sailors and the merchant pressed themselves against the walls, trying to get out of danger’s way. Calder edged toward the door, struggling to look unobtrusive.

Finnoverr whipped around to face the old woman whose foot Melva had tripped over earlier. “Penradoon!” he shouted. “Catch those thieves!”

The old woman sat in the same place as she had earlier, wearing the same clothes, sipping the same drink, but now she looked anything but nondescript. She wore her gray hair in tiny braids. Her slitted green eyes had an exotic Southern cast, and her whole body shimmered like smoke before a fire.

She arched an eyebrow. “Must I? You’re the one who struck up conversation with a confidence trickster. Oh, very well.”

Penradoon raised her hands. Pale green light glowed across her fingers. Melva felt lightheaded as her feet lifted off the ground. She and Calder rose into the air, emerald halos surrounding their bodies.

“Now retrieve my gold,” Finnoverr said to Penradoon.

The old woman gestured with her right hand, and the gold coins flew out of Calder’s cloak, each piece alight with magic. Finnoverr grabbed the coins out of midair, counting with some difficulty to make sure he had them all. When, with many pauses and grunts, he had finally counted to thirteen, he stood back with his red cloak billowing around his shoulders and waved his finger at Melva like a scolding mother.

“A fool and her money,” he said, “are soon parted.”

He laughed with apparently enormous amusement.

Melva rolled her eyes. “You should know better

than to count your pickins before they’re snatched.”

“We should leave you up there forever,” said Finnoverr, wagging his finger in Melva’s face. He turned, swirling his cloak behind him, and spoke to Penradoon. “Deal with them. I’ll be outside.”

After Finnoverr had made his way out of the tavern, roughly pushing aside the merchant and sailors, Penradoon clapped her hands and released Melva and Calder from her spell. They crashed to the ground, sore but unhurt.

“Thanks,” said Melva, rubbing her bruised rear. “I wasn’t sure you’d let us down.”

“I have better things to do with my magic than discomfit brigands, however inept. Here. Take this.” Penradoon reached into her cloak, and a pouch full of coins appeared in her palm, emanating a shower of emerald sparks. She pulled out a silver coin and offered it to the jester.

“What’s this for?” asked Melva, reaching for the silver.

Penradoon snatched it just out of reach. “Don’t think this is for your story. Your story was an assault on humor.” Her lips twitched with a smile as she placed the coin in Melva’s outstretched palm. “But the expression on Finn’s face when he figured it out? That was comedy.”



Nothing much happened to Melva and Calder. Lady Olwyn couldn’t let people think her servants had been stealing gold out from under her nose, so she spread the rumor that she’d put them up to it as a test of the heroes’ mettle.

Finnoverr and Penradoon slew the dragon in Wyrms’ Wood. They received more purses of gold than Finnoverr could count (twenty) and were celebrated about town for a few days before adventure called them to more dangerous climes. Melva earned many free drinks recounting her brush with the heroes. Mead in hand, she’d lean toward her audience, reveling in their eager gazes. At her tale’s end, she always added, “Sure, Finnoverr got the best of me. I admit that. But even with a dragon’s head hanging from his belt, he never got a lick smarter. Just goes to show—you can lead a man to slaughter, but you can’t make him think.” ❧

Two Poems

by John Grey

Harry's Tale

So sat down, the thing itself, at the end of Harry's bed,
so heavy, it tilted mattress, sheets and blankets,
so as Harry felt himself sliding down toward it,
no matter how hard he grabbed the pillow, bedstead.
He would never be anything but this Harry,
the man drawn helplessly, unwillingly, in the worst of all directions.

And so spoke the thing in low, slow, drone,
I am your dead father, live enemy, gaping bed-sore,
growing tumor, fear of night, fear of dreams,
fear of waking at such an unconscious hour
to nothing but wind tinkling in the key of dirge
and a great looming shape like a giant hissing boil on the shadow's skin.

And so did I find Harry in the morning,
not snug under sheets but coiled up at the bottom of the bed,
trembling like shook pudding, flesh transparent as his sweat,
muttering something about intruders, visitors, retribution.
So that was Harry, the last time that I saw him.
So that was Harry, the thing at the end of Harry's bed.

Meteor's Métier

Stars shine for anyone
but meteors always seek their own.
This clump of dead rock
didn't crash down in a busy city,
not even in suburbia
where I'm tucked into a chair,
peering through a telescope,
eyes cast like dazzling fishing flies
into the rhinestone sea of night.

A meteor's brutal descent would only ever
end violently on a lifeless floor of desert,
one nothing driving a deep hole in another
with withering force.

Scientists eschew wonder.

They're pokers, priers, not lovers.

They're here to codify and romance be damned.

How much iron? How much nickel?
Any signs of heat abrasion?
Not the wonders this rock zoomed through
to get here.
They classify. I marvel.
So it's a chondrite, not an achondrite.
In my town, it's a heart.

So Many Years Ago

by Jay Lowrey

“Who’s yer team?”

“Webs,” Sam answered as the cashier swiped his card. Deft, the old man hit the appropriate key as he handed the card back, and Sam’s Mandatory Yearly Sports fee was processed.

“Good banking,” the old man said, looking past Sam to the next person in line.

Holy casino, Sam thought as he walked back down the queue; why can’t we just send this stuff ourselves? He would never have said this aloud, of course; neither would any of the hundreds of people standing in lines waiting to be processed, most of them wearing T-shirts or caps bearing their team’s logo. A middle-aged man wearing a Webs cap like Sam’s raised his hand, and Sam gave him five. A pretty red-haired woman a few spots down the line noticed him staring at her Cimarron Cells T-shirt. Though basketball was not Sam’s sport, he knew his history; the Cells had relocated to L.A. from Cimarron more than forty years ago, before Sam had been born.

“Like the bounce?” the woman asked.

Sam moved his eyes, tugged the bill of his cap, and kept walking.

Not only was this MYS Day, it was also the last weekend of the month, and Sam had not yet made his contribution. The familiar weariness sank into him as he realized it had to be the Royale today or Gupty’s tomorrow. Gupty’s had the better Sunday brunch buffet, but the Royale offered decent odds. Besides, he was already here. Might as well get it over with and sleep in tomorrow.

Judging by the crowd, Sam wasn’t the only one with this idea. As soon as he walked through the automatic doors, the murmur of conversations flooded his ears. So many people were here, talking, that the *linglingling* of the slots was just an undercurrent slipping along beneath the voices. A man with a raised hand walked toward Sam, who glanced at the man’s Webs T-shirt and exchanged high fives with him. Sam saw several people exchange high fives as he made his way to the changer, who was sporting a Webs cap.

“Hey hey, whaddya say,” the changer greeted

Sam, giving him an enthusiastic five.

“Same ol’, Sam replied, handing the man his card.

“Whaddya gonna do,” the man commiserated, scanning and returning the card. “How much?”

“Minimum,” Sam answered and took the coins.

“Happy gaming,” the changer said as Sam turned and headed to the slots.

He walked almost a quarter of a mile before finding an empty machine. He had planned to just stand and get it over with, but the new stool in front of the machine gave him pause. It was the newest stool he had ever scored, the newest he had ever seen save for the time at the Pally when they had replaced one four spots down from where he had been. Some of the gamers had stopped and watched as the old stool had been unclipped from the chain and the new one clipped in. Sam had heard the plastic cover being removed.

Three uniforms, old o-linemen 67, 68, and 69, had escorted the two drones replacing the stool; they had glared at the gawkers as the gamer in line reverently took her seat. Some of the gawkers had looks of undisguised envy. Sure enough, after a few presses the machine lit up and the lingsings changed to whoops as the woman bounced up and down and shrieked.

“I won! I won!” She had grabbed her winnings and beckoned the nearest uniform. She had remained on the stool until the burly man reached her. He had brandished his snub-beamer as he escorted her to the pay cage.

A new stool had to be a good omen.

Eight minutes later Sam slid off the stool, all his contributions paid for the month and no winnings. He adjusted his cap and walked to the front of the casino, exchanging five with the changer, whose enthusiasm had disappeared as fast as Sam’s money. Sam stepped into the restroom and washed and dried his hands. He decided he was hungry and walked to the food court. He got his food and found an empty table away from the garbage chutes. After a couple of bites he looked up to see the red-haired beauty wearing the Cells shirt staring at him. She was alone, two tables away. Her thumb hovered above

the forward key of her book. Sam tugged the bill of his cap and looked down at his food as he took another bite. He felt her watching him and wondered if she was psycho. So many people were.

When he looked up, she was still watching him. She didn't seem agitated, or angry, or anything bad; the beginnings of a rather pleasant smile were in her gray eyes and the corners of her mouth. She turned off her book, put it on the tray beside her food, and walked to Sam's table. A surge of fear went through Sam as she stood in front of him.

"Need some company?" she asked.

"OK," he replied, afraid to say no.

The smile came out then, and she sat down.

"Eating alone is the pits."

Sam tugged the bill of his cap. She didn't appear to be crazy, but wasn't that the most dangerous kind. She was pretty, though, and her shirt didn't fit in all the right places.

Just like before, she noticed. "So, do you like the shirt or are you just staring at my tits?"

He tried to play it smooth, tugging the bill of his cap.

"Don't worry, sweetie, I like the attention," she reassured him. "But not all women do. Honestly, do you think we can't see your eyes popping out of your head?"

Sam tried a bemused smile and tugged his cap again.

"By the way, my name's Roni," she said. "And I'm not crazy—just a little forward."

"Sam."

"So, Sam, are you a procrastinator too?"

"I'll tell you later."

Roni smiled. "You have pretty eyes. Do you believe in fate?"

Sam snorted. "In this world?"

"A cynic." She glanced at her book; he tugged his cap. What the hell was he doing?

"Thanks for the company," he mumbled, rising from his seat. "I've gotta go."

He heard nothing as he tossed his left-overs, left the food court, and walked out of the casino, not the murmur of voices, not the slots, not anything. A kid about eighteen wearing a Webs shirt held up his hand as Sam walked through the sliding doors, but Sam didn't respond.

"Whoaaaaa..." The kid turned and watched Sam join the crowds riding the sidewalk.

He never thought he would see her again; for awhile, he didn't. Work and life kept him busy, or at least occupied. His job as a monitor (electronic voyeur he accused himself now and then) left him with a thin but permanent sheen of psychic filth. He ached for simpler times.

He read and watched a lot of history. He was watching Channel Thousand's Century Review a few days before New Year's when his TV went out for the first time since he had gotten his apartment. The in-wall picture fizzled, faded, and disappeared. He turned on his book and waited.

Twenty-one minutes and thirty-eight seconds later the tech arrived, clipped red hair beneath her cap. She wasn't a chatter and Sam was grateful. He had begun a classic by John Grisham and didn't want to be interrupted. Though shorter and lighter than Roni's, the red hair gave him pause. After she left, he turned off his book and the repaired TV. He sat and stared at the still and silent wall.

New Year's Eve prompted him to get out. One of his favorite bands, the Dump Trash Babies, an all-lesbian punk group, was at Nguyen's. He let the sidewalk carry him three buildings down the street. People were everywhere, in the streets and the shops. Few wore anything sports related; Sam allowed himself a private smile.

He joined a crowd going into the double buildings where the clubs were, looking east to see his own high-rise as he stepped off the sidewalk. He could barely make it out, distant and bereft of neon. It had been over a year since he had been this far from home.

The music began pulsing through the elevator at about the forty-fifth floor. The partygoers became more animated. The atmosphere was—what did they say in the old days?—electric.

The Dump Trash Babies were unorthodox, even for a retro band. The guitarists were laying down a twin lead Sam recognized. They paused and the two bassists began their plodding lead-in to the chorus along with the two drummers. Sam could not have timed his entry into the club any better.

"My girlfriend's tits are bigger than mine!"

Everyone shouted the refrain, and scores of women

grabbed their breasts and pointed them at the stage. Sam was glad he had come.

He had arrived too late to get a seat, though more than two hours remained till midnight. He nursed his drink and nodded whenever he saw someone he knew. At ten-thirty he thought of his book, but he didn't want to go home. He remembered he would not have to give a single high-five tonight; he listened to the music, finished his drink, and checked the time again. Suddenly his eyes were covered by two hands, and he heard a voice that matched their softness and coolness.

"Sammmm..."

He remained still till he was released and turned to see the dark eyes of Sohni Patel.

"Been here long?" she asked.

"I go everywhere long," he replied. "And wide."

Sohni was already smiling, so her expression didn't change much. Her dreadlock-sporting companion, whom Sam vaguely recalled meeting before, sipped his drink.

"We're thinking about moving to Sanchez's," Sohni told Sam. "Want to join?"

He looked around. There were more people than earlier. The dance floor was jammed, all the tables and booths were taken, and the bar was three deep. What the hell.

They left Nguyen's and walked down the broad corridor to Sanchez's. Riley didn't speak. His silence reminded Sam that he had met him before; Sohni had brought him by Sam's station at work a few months earlier. Sam had long known a monitor's station in life did not induce openness in people, but Riley had seemed especially reticent. Sam had liked him immediately.

The corridor was crowded but not as packed as the clubs. Almost as wide as any room in the twin buildings, it allowed thousands of people room to mill. Sam ran his hand through his hair. That would make a cool band name: Room to Mill, with their new smash "Crowded Lives." Speaking of bands:

"Who's playing?" he asked Sohni.

"Bird Flu Plan. Totally retro. Drums and everything. You'll love 'em."

A bottleneck at the entrance of Sanchez's gave Sam pause, but there were fewer patrons and the band would not start till midnight so it was quieter

than Nguyen's. He was grateful.

He looked around. All the tables were filled, but there was standing room at the bar. They went. The nearest uniform swept them with his eyes as they propped against the end of the bar. Two minutes later they had their drinks. Sam and Sohni scanned the crowd; Riley faced the bar and said nothing. The buzz Sam had felt before was here too. The old allusion to electricity came to him again as he watched people talk and drink and laugh. Two men at an interior table seemed to be arguing. He checked the time at 11:04.

Sohni twisted toward him and brushed a strand of dark hair behind her ear. Sam had thought her pretty since the day they had met. Not a bad figure, either; her bodysuit fit her well. She was not at ease, though; Sam sensed she wanted to talk. 11:07.

"See anyone you know?" she asked.

He looked at her and she smiled. More people were streaming in, and the noise made him adjust his voice.

"Do I?"

She gazed at him over her drink and brushed another strand of hair. "Us lot."

Sam took a drink and looked back into the crowd. He had to concentrate to make out individuals; the crowd seemed to be one giant organism, the people single cells. One of those cells broke away from the cytoplasm to stand in front of him. He did not realize he was drunk until he had to focus to remember her. He reached to tug his cap bill and, finding he was not wearing a cap, ran his fingers through his hair.

"Hello," Roni greeted him.

"Hey." He took a drink.

"Whatcha got?"

"Scotch smoothie." He raised his glass to take another drink and found it was empty. He checked the time. 11:13. She was with someone, and she looked damned fine in her suit.

"This is Habelito."

Sam nodded. "Sohni. Riley."

"Pleasure," Sohni intoned. 11:14.

"Where've you been?" Roni asked.

Sam knew what she meant but replied,

"Nguyen's."

She played along. "Who's playing?"

“DTB.”

“Ah yes, with their fixation on large mammaries. I’ll bet you had to be dragged.”

Sohni smiled. Sam turned to the bar and ordered another smoothie. When he turned back, the crowd seemed larger. The place was definitely noisier, and not just because there were more people; the people were louder. He took a sip. 11:17.

Sam finished his drink at 11:21 and decided not to have anymore. He wanted to be lucid for the show. He glanced at Sohn, who was munching a waterflake. He noticed people tugging at cap bills that were not there, checking the clocks. One woman, perhaps fifty in age, swung like a metronome between her companion and the time. Sam felt claustrophobic. 11:27.

The noise became almost tangible. There were pockets of shouting, and someone threw a punch two tables into the interior. Sohn’s eyes widened and she smiled; Sam remembered why he had stopped wanting her. Riley grabbed her hand and moved toward the exit. Roni clutched Sam’s arm.

“My place,” she said and he followed. Habelito had disappeared into the crowd.

Sohn and Riley were at the door and Sam and Roni several feet behind when the club exploded into violence. Sam watched Sohn and Riley run down the corridor. Roni urged him in the opposite direction.

“This way,” she said and tugged on his arm. A man punched another in the face less than a yard from her.

The elevator offered a respite, but the streets were just as incendiary as the clubs. The buildings seemed to loom over fighters and fleers alike, as if scrutinizing faces and memorizing features. Sam realized for the first time in years how close together everything was. Back in the old days, people could duck into alleys. He heard the crzack of a snub-beam and turned to see a man fall in the street.

Roni pulled him into the building next door and he immediately calmed. He had never been inside such a place.

The lobby alone could have held twenty apartments the size of his. The air was soft. He saw the tree and stopped walking.

An oak (though Sam could not have identified it as such) at least thirty feet tall was planted in the

middle of the lobby. It must have been some atavistic pull that made him yearn for ancient forests because it was only the second tree he had ever seen; his parents had taken him to the arboretum when he was a kid. He turned to Roni. She was staring at the tree too, but she was not calm. He followed her line of sight to the top of the oak.

A man was in the top of the tree, trying to break off branches.

“Hey!” Roni yelled. The man continued his assault on the oak.

“Hey!” Roni screamed, louder this time, and the air was no longer soft. The man kept bending and tugging, trying to ply the living green fibers from each other.

Roni sprinted to the decorative stone wall surrounding the base of the tree. She put her hands on the trunk and yelled up, “Stop that! Stop! Get down from there!”

The man did stop, and he looked down at her. Sam saw that he was just a kid, twenty-five at most, probably still in college. Even his rage seemed childish.

“Yeah, I’ll come down, bitch,” he snarled and began to do so.

An explosion loud enough to be heard through the sealed doors of the lobby paused his descent, and Sam whisked Roni to the elevator. After the doors closed, Roni put her index fingertip to the panel and said, “Two hundred ten.” The elevator began its smooth upward slide.

“Two hundred ten,” Roni repeated, this time in answer to Sam’s expression of wonder. “Yes, I’m one of those.” Her eyes belied the neutrality of their color; with her hair hanging down either side of her face, they looked like rough-cut diamonds framed by flames. Neither Sam nor Roni spoke until the elevator stopped. The doors slid open to Roni’s living room. Like the rumors of the CEO’s heart, Sam had heard of places such as this but had never believed. He looked across a roomful of the most expensive furniture he had ever seen in a private dwelling to see a clock. 11:46. If his memory was accurate, only nineteen minutes had passed since he had been in the club wondering just how far verbal frottage could go before it simply became chafing.

“Not quite New Year’s,” Roni said. “Would you

like a drink?”

“No thanks.”

“I’m getting some water,” she said as she walked into the kitchen. “You sure?”

Since she just meant water, Sam realized he was thirsty. “Water, OK, sure.” He sounded strange to himself. He made his way around the large couch to watch Roni.

She seemed to be having trouble with the dispenser. Being of the caste of bottle buyers, he had never seen a private building in-wall flow. He walked into the kitchen. Roni was pressing her finger to the touchpad and frowning. The presses became jabs, but no water came.

“I have a few flakes in the fridge,” she offered.

Sam nodded. When was the last time biometrics had failed? Roni gave him a waterflake and led him back to the living room. “Let’s see what the heads say.”

He glanced at the clock. 11:49.

She sat closer to him than she had to, and a surge of gratitude quenched any misgivings he might have had, but he realized he was very tired. She turned on the TV.

A perfect-looking blonde anchorwoman who had long ago set her features into a neutral expression stared at them as she spoke.

“...in effect till seven a.m. The violence occurred in pockets and was quickly contained. There have been no reports of injury or property damage, but the CEO has ordered all citizens to remain in their buildings while our police make sure the city is safe. Once again, this curfew is in effect till seven a.m.”

Roni turned the channel to a music scene. Sam glanced at the clock. 11:51.

“You’re into retro,” she stated. “I have a few things you might be interested in.” She rose and he followed her into a smaller room just off the living room.

Books! She had shelves of actual paper-and-ink books; some of the more valuable ones had laminated covers. He saw that his reaction had pleased her.

“May I?”

“Sure,” she smiled and he took down a thick volume. Another pleasant surge went through him as he opened the cover; the light in the room seemed to brighten and then dim again. Roni’s happy expression faded as her head swiveled from ceiling to wall to wall.

Sam looked at the book. He remembered that the publication date would be on what was called the title page. “‘Copyright 2007.’ How did you come by all these?”

She turned to the shelves. “Some were passed down through the family; some I bought; a few are gifts.”

He felt the need for a shower as he asked “So your family’s rich?”

She turned and faced him. “My maternal great-grandmother’s maiden name was Huxwell.”

For a moment Sam didn’t register what she had said. “Hux...You’re a descendant of Alge Huxwell?!” She nodded and did not blink. A small laugh escaped from her lips.

“You want to hear a bit of scandalous family history?” she began. “When Alge won that first national Pick Eight, he bought himself a couple of girls, gave them each a thousand a week to live with him and do anything he wanted; when they weren’t fucking or cooking, you know what he had them doing? Reading. This was back when some books were still printed on paper, and he gave them each a library.”

She drew his attention to a single slim volume in a sealed case beside one of the shelves. He moved toward it and the lights went out. The darkness lasted only a few seconds, but when the light returned Sam and Roni looked at each other like spelunkers down to their last minute of battery life. Though they were both too young to have ever experienced a power outage, Sam suddenly felt old; at that moment he would have given twenty years of his life to be twenty years younger. He wondered what had become of the tree mugger as he looked at the book in the case.

“Facing the Music,” he murmured.

“1988,” Roni said.

“1988,” he sighed. “I wish it was like back then; it wish it was like 2088, when people were people and life was simple.”

He heard a snub-beam through the walls. Roni looked at him, with only a small amount of fear in her eyes. “Guess what time it is.”

She pressed the book he was holding to his chest and kissed him. “12:02. You can borrow this if you promise to return it. Happy New Year.”

“So far,” he said and returned her kiss. ☪

If My Easy Saver Account Was a Robot Mom and I Lived in the Future

by Phillip Estes

Robot mom is three tons of pink steel—
healthy tons, she carries herself well
on General Motors manufactured tank treads.
The money I borrow comes out of a slot in her stomach.

“I need cash robot mom,” I say.

“You need to hold onto your cash for rent,
so don’t spend it all in the same place.
I know you go to the bars. You can’t filter toxins easily like me.
I have no liver.”

“Yes, robot mom.”

She shoots sparks out of her mouth
when she talks. “And be nice to your sister.
I want to take her to St. George’s Episcopal Sunday—
there’s a nice lesbian there, Deanna.
She might like Deanna.”

“I have to go robot mom, but I’ll be good to her.”

“Wear protection if you pick up a girl,
they’re flesh, not latex and vinyl.
You can’t clean them out with a hose.
Pay cash for Trojans and High Gravity-Steel Reserve.”

“I will robot mom.”

“I don’t want to see STOP-N-GO GETTYSBURG ROAD
on your statement again, so pay in cash.
Keep the girl close to you too—
don’t let her sit alone in the car.
She could steal your iPod, or, worse, get carjacked.”

“I have a tape deck in my car, robot mom, so don’t worry.”

“I know hon, but I’m programmed to worry—
Just the way God made me.
Keep your money close to me, not on skin.
I yield 7.45% interest every quarter.
Your year-to-date dividend is \$29.91 so far.”

Emperor of Mist

by Daniel Braum

*"Countless Japans. Countless pasts.
Countless paths, in universal balance."
- The Council of Infinite Japans*

Japan 187. 1857.

Although it was spring, sick yellow-green leaves withered on skeletal branches of the cherry blossoms lining the bend of river outside the royal palace. Admiral Perry's black ironclad warships lurked in the harbor, juggernaut avatars of the United States ready to knock down the doors of isolation. In the heart of the palace Emperor Shimotori lay in an endless slumber. Life still beat in his chest, but his spirit had fled, and with it Japan's prosperity.

In the mountains high above the nearby town of Sumida, footbridges of wood and rope connected rocky peaks to a monastery nestled in the clouds. The bridge rattled as Kaito walked across on his way to his second meditation of the new day. The wind swished his simple white monk's robe and blew his long stringy hair. He did not notice, his mind already one step in the invisible world he had stumbled upon in his deep meditations.

All of us and everything around us has a spirit invisibly overlapping the physical world, he thought, silently practicing how he would tell his fellow monks. The nether connects them all.

Kaito looked down at the hot air balloons, drifting like bloated bees, laden with cargo to cross the rapids of Sumida River. A pair of dirigibles buzzed toward the shore, no doubt loaded with goods for the people of the islands Shikoku and Kyushu. Kites danced on the wind above a once green, now browning, field. Red and yellow dragons, orange and black tigers, and *kirin* with long golden manes all pulled on their strings like tethered, earthbound spirits straining to reach higher.

A lone yellow balloon floated above the kites. Kaito could just make out the royal insignia adorning its bamboo passenger basket.

The footbridge bounced gently. Tenho, one of Kaito's fellow monks, was walking across from the

other side. He stopped when he reached Kaito.

"Looks like we'll have visitors today," Tenho said. His neatly tied ponytail and clean face reminded Kaito that he had not groomed himself today.

"Musoyama from Kyoto, again." Kaito guessed, eyeing the royal balloon. His calloused hand absently smoothed his robe.

"His frequent visits remind us we have failed our Emperor," Tenho said urgently, his placid expression gone. "The spirit of Japan is failing. If only all of us could believe and worship as you."

"Worship isn't going to make that ship in the harbor go away," Kaito said.

Nor is it going to heal the Emperor and our spirit, he thought. Anxious to return to his meditations, he wished Tenho good morning and continued across the bridge to his favorite place, a small temple built into a rocky peak. The morning mist that liked to collect in the crag hadn't burnt off yet. Wisps of white cloud still shrouded the curved terraced roofs of the simple wooden structure.

Kaito bowed, entered through the open arch and sat in the center of the large, square room. Full windows spanning almost ceiling to floor framed rough contours of familiar mountain peaks just visible through the smoky white.

Thoughts of the other monks doing their chores filled his mind. He inhaled deeply and muttered the focusing mantra, beginning his meditation. "Gone, gone. In me and through me. Through me and out of me. Gone, gone."

He continued breathing slowly and deeply until the rise and fall of his chest slipped into a comfortable rhythm. His heart slowed and thoughts faded until the only image left was the mist.

Kaito closed his eyes. For a few heartbeats he sat in darkness. Then all began to take on shape and focus again as his spirit left his body. First the walls of the small square room appeared, then the peaks and bridges outside, all an almost transparent silver and faintly shimmering.

Kaito felt himself grow lighter. He lifted his arms and watched as the silver shadows, his spirit

overlapping them, lifted away. Then he was floating and looking down at himself.

With just a thought, he moved away from his body, across the room, and through the wooden walls. Outside, shimmering silver trees and stones overlapped their tangible counterparts.

The glow should be brighter, Kaito thought, recognizing the lack of luster as a sign of sickness. Though he had nothing to compare with, he knew it was true; everything was sick with the Emperor.

Kaito examined his ghostly-ethereal self. He noticed a spider-web-thin filament trailing from the center of his back to the temple. The cord shimmered like a branch on one of the silvery trees. He smiled, knowing the cord connected him to his earthly body, resting cross-legged and eyes closed back in the temple. As he moved, it extended effortlessly. As long as the cord was intact he could find his way back.

Kaito floated across the ravine, (the footbridge he had crossed earlier next to him), past Tenho and other monks who were unaware of his ethereal presence. Kaito could see their spirits, silver shadows hugging them close.

I am such a shadow, now, he thought.

The wind gusted. Silver swirls like glittering smoke, moved among the cedars and pines, then rolled into a playful coil in front of Kaito.

The wind. A spirit of the wind.

Kaito grabbed at a sparkling tendril but it rushed away. He followed with a speed not possible in his earthly body.

The silver wisps raced down the mountain, stopping momentarily at the yellow balloon floating toward the monastery to toss it about. As Kaito flew past, Musoyama pulled the steering strings and adjusted the ballast, attempting to steady the delicate craft.

Kaito followed the wind down the mountain to the field below, where it slowed near the children flying their kites. For an instant one little girl looked over, as if she could see them, then returned to steering. The wind spirit raced up the string she held, to the tiger-demon face of her kite, and danced with the frame of paper and soft wood. While the wind twirled Kaito was able to move in close and grab one of its silvery tails.

The spirit ceased its dance and broke into a steep

dive trying to pull free, but Kaito held on. The spirit clung to the demon face as if it were its own, leading Kaito on a mad ride from tree to tree trying to shake him.

Failing to throw Kaito, it ceased its speedy tour of the trees and wound itself into a tight spiral, forming a vortex of silver.

The vortex spun faster, sucking Kaito in instead of throwing him. He felt himself growing thin, and the space in front of him rippled and then separated like slats of a fence. Purple light spilled out as if the nether were laid upon yet another world hidden behind. Kaito held on tight, as the wind slipped between the slats, dragging him into a great ocean of indigo mist.

He found himself floating, his hands open; the wind spirit free and streaking away to a distant point of light, its silvery tails trailing.

Kaito checked his silver cord. It was still there, snaking to a different point of light, which he figured must be home, where his body was. The wind had taken him to a world between worlds. The way was so simple, but he would have never thought of it alone.

Uncountable points of light crowded on the horizon like the Milky Way in the night sky.

Is each a world like mine?

Kaito focused on the brightest point; the one the wind spirit had streaked to. And then, with only a thought, he was racing there.

Kaito slowed as he approached the light. Pressure surrounded his body as he pressed up against the slats, the border of another world. Like the wind had done, he slipped in between them. With a flash he found himself in a field just outside a town remarkably like Sumida.

Just like back home, children played with kites on the wind. He saw the swirling wind spirit—or another identical to it, he couldn't tell—darting mockingly from the kites to the trees.

I'm in another world. Another Japan just like home. But, different.

Vibrant pink cherry blossoms exploded from branches laden with healthy green leaves. Even the silvery spirit shadows seemed to thrum with vitality.

A golden glow poured over the horizon, spraying light in all directions, touching the spirits of all things.

The Emperor. It is the soul of the Emperor. In this world

he is alive and strong.

The wind unraveled from the trees bathing in the light. It beckoned him with diaphanous tendrils and surrounded his wrist, like a ghostly lover taking his hand. It lifted him and together they flew.

“Where are you taking me?” Kaito cried, but he received no reply, only the whisper of breezes through palms as they neared the majestic and unmistakable swell of Mount Fuji.

A squad of drummers clad only in white loin clothes beat a steady rhythm at its base.

The full moon ceremony, Kaito thought. White-faced *butoh* dancers, dressed as samurai, mingled up and down the rows of men. Their harsh angular movements mimicked the swordplay of the disappearing warrior class of an age almost gone.

The wind carried him from the mountain to a sprawling city crowded with people and full of factories retching smoke and tall, monolithic buildings reaching higher into the heavens than he ever had seen. The wind spiraled him down the belching smokestack of one of the soot-coated factories. Inside, blank-faced workers assembled iron cannons and fins on pieces of machines with giant wings and cockpits that resembled beaks.

The wind escaped through a steam vent and whisked him out of the city across the gulf of Japan to China. Japanese soldiers were everywhere, even in the small rural towns. The Japanese flag hung over the capital buildings in Beijing.

They picked up speed and winked across the continent to the great cities of Europe Kaito had read about in books. The spirit slowed long enough for Kaito to see the Japanese flag flapping over the exotic capitols and masses of people, non-Japanese people huddled in the streets.

“Why are you showing me this?” Kaito asked.

The wind answered by speeding them away, even faster; leaving the coastal shipyards crammed with steaming black iron-clads behind in a blur.

They crossed the great cold ocean to America, home of Admiral Perry. Scores of dirigible-shaped balloons floated over a great coastal city anchored to the tops of tall buildings—Manhattan or Boston, Kaito couldn’t tell. Fleets of dirigibles, bearing the red rising Sun, weaved around them, dropping gunpowder bombs. Occasionally a dirigible collided

with a balloon and the two disappeared in a ball of flame.

This Japan has almost taken over the world, Kaito thought.

The wind gusted in smooth spirals, as if happy with Kaito’s realization. It carried him straight up, above the clouds and rode high currents back to the field of kite-flying children where he had arrived.

One baby in a carriage stopped its wailing. Ignoring its doting mother, the child looked at him and the wind with fascination.

I must go, he thought. *Perhaps somehow this world can save our own.*

The infant’s tiny spirit lifted out of its tiny body and floated toward Kaito.

“Go away, young one,” Kaito said, motioning the infant away. “This is your world. I am leaving.”

The child laughed and came closer, its silver cord accidentally becoming entwined in Kaito’s.

In the field below, the child’s mother screamed. The baby had stopped breathing.

“Go, young one. Go back. My world is not for you,” Kaito said.

He grabbed the child’s spirit and placed it back in its body. The infant’s eyes snapped open and the mother cried in relief.

The child wanted to come with me. Could I take someone against their will? Like their Emperor? His Japan prospers and the rest of the world suffers. They squander their good fortune. My home, my Japan, could do so much good with an Emperor this strong.

Kaito then followed his silver cord out of the strange Japan, back through the purple nether, and to his waiting body.

“Kaito. Kaito, wake up,” a voice called.

Kaito opened his eyes. Musoyama stood over him.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “I was calling you.”

“I am fine,” Kaito said. “More than fine.”

“Good, good,” Musoyama said. “I have returned seeking guidance.”

“I know. I saw you,” Kaito said, to Musoyama’s surprise. “I have been gifted with inspiration. If the regent is willing to listen I may be able to help. Today may be a great day for peace.”



Tired sunlight crept in through the tall windows of the Emperor's chambers and mingled with the dusty air and shadows. Outside, Musoyama's balloon pulled on the ropes tethering it to one of the many terraces of the royal palace. After traveling in the nether Kaito had found the journey to Edo by balloon slow.

The regent, Dejima, in his Western suit and top hat, looked out of place next to the lush red tapestries and carved wooden statues. He stood over the frail bag of skin and old bones draped over the bed, Emperor Shimotori, lifeless as the fine silk pajamas that loosely clothed him.

"I trust you, Musoyama," Dejima said abruptly and without ceremony. "But what could be so urgent and of need of such secrecy?"

Perhaps he has spent too much time with the Westerners, Kaito thought.

"I bring you Kaito Torubu from the Noriko Monastery."

Kaito bowed.

"Another monk," Dejima scoffed. "You spend more time at the monasteries than at the palace. What does he offer that I have not heard before?"

"He has a plan to return the Emperor to us."

Dejima turned abruptly and froze, regarding Kaito again as if for the first time.

Kaito bowed, this time more deeply. "The plan I offer will not only return prosperity to Japan, but will right a great cosmic injustice," he said.

"Cosmic injustice? Madness!" Dejima said.

"Madness or genius. How will you decide if you do not listen?" Musoyama asked.

"Tell me then. But quickly," Dejima said, anger growing in his eyes.

Kaito cleared his throat nervously. "In my meditations I have found there are many worlds, just like ours, only slightly different. I have discovered one where the Emperor is strong. I can bring his spirit here, into our Emperor's body, and restore him and all of Japan to health."

Dejima stared. Kaito did not know if he would laugh or yell. He hoped he could fulfill his promise. Dejima only had to let him try.

"I told you. Madness," Dejima said, though this time the enthusiasm in his voice was gone.

"It is madness to do nothing," Musoyama said. "We are weak and the *gaijin* wolves are knocking at our door."

"This is the opportunity we need," said Kaito. "Think of what good things we could do with this strength. The Japan I visited had conquered the world. We could build a world of peace."

Dejima took off his hat. Without it, he looked the part of just another official appeasing the Westerners, desperate for hope. "Can it really be done?"

"We all know there are spirits in all things," Musoyama said. "Why should it be that we can not enter their realm?"

Dejima's eyes glazed over. He seemed to ponder calculations on the wall only he could see.

"I asked for this audience because I fear we are on the path to become just like the Japan Kaito has seen," said Musoyama. "A nation of soldiers and terrible machines of war. Already we have changed so much just to catch up to this new world. I ask you, why? Is this what Emperor Shimotori would want?"

Dejima traced his finger above the comatose Emperor. "We could bring the Emperor to the monastery in secret. If you fail, no one has to know," he said.

"If we succeed?" Musoyama asked.

"Then it will be a day never forgotten."

Dejima rang the gongs and bells along the wall, summoning servants who came running. As the reverberations faded, Kaito thought he could see the sound disappearing into the world between worlds.



Two days later, the setting sun cast red light through the spacious open windows of Kaito's meditation temple. The Emperor's balloon, the Fujiyama, floated above.

Inside, Emperor Shimotori lay on a simple bed of piled bamboo mats. Kaito, Musoyama, and a dozen other monks sat cross-legged in a circle around him. Royal guards waited outside. Long shadows, stretched distorted shapes of their angled black-plated armor, crisscrossed Dejima who stood over the sleeping ruler.

"I would like this plan more if soldiers were

coming with you,” Dejima said.

“I understand,” Kaito said. “But not one has been focused enough to learn how.”

Tenho entered through the arch, bringing the scent of sandalwood from the great bunches of incense he had lit outside. The entire monastery, dozens of monks, had gathered outside and on the little footbridge.

“All is ready,” Tenho said.

The monks began to chant. The smell of clean burning wood, and a hint of cardamom wafted in. One monk loosed kites with thousand foot strings into the mountain winds.

Kaito wanted to utter one last reminder, but everyone knew what do to. He and the twelve monks with him, the most focused of them all, would enter the world between worlds. The rest would remain behind, to focus on the royal balloon, bringing it into being in the nether. Dejima had insisted on this part of the plan. The Emperor should arrive in our world in a royal vehicle, he had said.

Dejima bowed to the Emperor and left the room.

The only respect I have ever seen him show, Kaito thought.

He looked at the Emperor’s body.

My Emperor, where have you gone? he thought, as if his silent prayer could reach out and find his lost leader. *How have I failed you? Have we not worked hard enough or worshipped strong enough? Your people are peaceful and noble, yet still our nation, our way of life, is dying. Though you may be gone, your Japan will not be a footnote in history. Not at least while another, undeserving and war-like, flourishes. Not without trying, my Emperor.*

Kaito bowed, turned to the monks, and rang a small bell. “We begin,” he said.

Kaito uttered the traveling prayer and the mantra with the rest of the monks. “Gone, gone. In me and through me. Through me and out of me. Gone, gone, gone.”

The thoughts took especially long to clear from Kaito’s mind. There were many worries today. But soon he was looking down at his body. One by one, the silver shadows of each monk rose from their bodies to join him.

Kaito then guided the monks through the trick the wind spirit had showed him to enter the world

between worlds. Together they focused as they had practiced, and slipped into the purple mist.

Undulating amethyst waves greeted them.

Countless lights sparkled like a distant galaxy bulging on the horizon, each dot an alternate world. Wind spirits streaked through the space between, silver comets lighting the indigo void with the glow of their passage. Clouds of mist shrouded large sections of the clusters of worlds.

The Fujiyama silently materialized next to Kaito, an ethereal echo of its tangible form. A sparking yellow corona winked into existence around the now almost opaque airship, an indication of the intense focus and concentration of the army of monks back in the waking world dreaming it into being.

Its form is limited only by their imagination, Kaito thought. He pictured a great airship in the shape of a giant white heron, slender neck outstretched and gracefully gliding through the otherworldly mist. For an instant the Fujiyama shimmered white and he thought he saw the veiny texture of feathers run through the balloon. He quickly banished the image of the bird from his mind. *This form is familiar and will be easier for all to focus on,* he thought.

Kaito and the monks floated to the Fujiyama. As soon as all were inside, it moved on Kaito’s command, the passengers’ silver cords trailing behind like kite strings. As they picked up speed, wind spirits unwound from the depths and playfully wrapped around the airship, tossing and shaking it like a child’s toy before returning to their cross-world travels.

A sprawling cloud crept up on the horizon, obscuring their destination. Kaito slowed the balloon.

An amoebic shape jetted past. Kaito turned in time to see a gelatinous tentacle snake away. Another shape rushed past and this time Kaito caught a glance of a giant jellyfish propelling away.

Then hundreds of shapes engulfed the Fujiyama. Hordes of jellyfish, schools of hammer-head sharks, and other aquatic but unrecognizable things, all swam past, the Fujiyama a tiny blob in their midst.

Ghosts of the ocean, Kaito thought.

The creatures paid no mind to the airship as they passed.

“I thought the nether was empty,” Tenho said. “Only nothingness.”

"It seems this void is traveled by many," Kaito said, glancing at the last fish of a wriggling school that must have had a million. He smiled as they picked up a bit of speed, navigating around stragglers catching up with the bulk of the receding cloud.

"Kaito! Look!" Tenho called.

At first Kaito thought he was pointing to a lone sea turtle, flapping its way toward the departing fish, but then he noticed a ragged person among the last of them floating like flotsam. Kaito wondered if she was the shade of some poor drowned soul on some world.

Her amethyst color blended with the nether as she floated, her hair waving hypnotically.

She surprised him by abruptly turning, a harsh unnatural motion, and moving straight for them.

"Hello there," Kaito called.

"Do you have any steak?" the woman called back, a distressed expression on her bruised face, as if she had swallowed seawater. "I'd like an apple. Have you seen my daughter?"

A ghost. A hungry ghost, Kaito thought.

"Shall we go out and help her? She appears lost," Tenho said.

"We should stay away from her," he said. "She is not like us. She is a ghost."

And one who will eat your soul, he thought, remembering the warnings from his grandmother to always leave offerings for his ancestors.

"Give me that," the woman muttered, now very close. "Can I have that apple?"

She paced in a circle; interacting with unseen players in a reality Kaito was not privy to.

"Kaito, she is lost. How can we not help her?" Tenho floated out of the airship. "Hello," he said.

The woman calmly turned, then a big greedy smile came over her face and she reached for him.

"Steak! Apples! I want to breathe air!" she screamed.

Tenho tried to push her away, but her hands were all over him, reaching for his silver cord.

The woman grabbed the cord, then spun around Tenho, ripping his cord from his back. She snaked away with it like a spiderling on a thread.

All was still. Tenho floated in the nether, confused.

His body jolted, then he shook. He gagged, retching up nothing. His silver sheen dimmed to a lackluster gray with only a glimmer of sparkle left. A purple stain on his forehead grew like a bruise above his grimacing face.

Tenho cried, "No!" and flew away in the direction of the ghost woman, leaving behind a palpable silence.

"Where is he?" one of the eleven monks asked.

"She ate his soul," another muttered.

A lone octopus jetted by. Its expanding and contracting motions seemed obscene.

"We must go on," Kaito said, though the words stung him. "For the Emperor."

Whispers rose from the silence and grew to a murmur. Another cloud was approaching.

More sea ghosts? Kaito wondered.

As the cloud neared Kaito could see it was not a myriad of sea creatures but shambling humans, absent-eyed and mad like the woman who had absconded with Tenho's cord.

Kaito could hear parts of phrases in the cacophony. "Where is my bird? Who has the candy? Why is my brother not here?"

"We should fly out of here," a monk said.

"No. Not yet," Kaito replied, wanting to take a last look for Tenho.

A blur of shapes materialized from the mist swooping between the Fujiyama and the mob from all angles. Armored warriors on horseback swarmed into positions in front of the nearing Lost Ones. Kaito saw no silver cords trailing.

Samurai, he thought. These samurai were nothing like the sad figures who wandered the streets back home looking for work or their next meal. These were the samurai of his childhood, before all the changes in Japan.

One of the samurai galloped to Kaito and pointed his sword at Kaito's neck. The warrior's skin, where it showed, was purplish like the lost ones. A curved helmet hung over his eyes, keeping most of his face hidden. Kaito found himself staring into the horned, almost cross-eyed demon face adorning it.

"Wait," Kaito cried.

The samurai pulled his blade back an inch. "You're no Lost One," he said. "Who are you?"

"A monk. On a vital task for our Emperor."

“We will defend you,” he said. “Move close together.”

“To whom do we owe this kindness?” Kaito asked.

Before he received an answer a Lost One charged him. It wore a ragged, drab, green uniform and babbled in a language Kaito did not understand. It pointed a weapon at them. Kaito recognized the bayonet knife point well, and believed it to be a gunpowder gun, like the Americans wore, only bigger.

The samurai swiped at the Lost One with his sword, a series of smooth effortless strokes.

The ghostly soldier dissipated into a cloud of gray dust after the blade passed through.

The samurai swung his sword again, blurring the intricate etchings along it. “The strokes form the character for *banish*,” he said. “It scatters them.”

Kaito glanced at the etching along the now still sword. It showed an Emperor with his back turned on a line of Samurai.

“Konane Hoshita, at your service,” the samurai said, holding the sword above his head, readying for the approaching soldiers. “You can also tell riddles which will send them searching for answers. But it’s not as good against the ones who’ve totally lost their wits.”

Lost Ones encircled them, all moaning, clutching at nothing and mumbling strange questions. The samurai and the attackers orbited around Kaito and crew, in a melee of hooves, blades and clouds, of gray dust.

“I liked the fish better,” Kaito joked, despite the hordes that just kept coming.

“They’re going to overwhelm them,” a monk said.

It is true, Kaito thought. We can’t just sit here.

“What is the true source of rain, clouds or the rivers?” Kaito yelled.

One of the shambling attackers froze, then burst into a cloud of dust as a samurai blade cut through it.

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear, does it make a sound?” Kaito said and tried to remember more.

Several voices punctuated the murmur of the horde. “What is it? Do you know? No, do you? No, I’ll go ask papa-san. Where are you?”

“Koans. Riddles,” Kaito called out to his monks. “Utter all the koans you can think of.” The monks obeyed.

“What is a lotus blossom before emerging from a seed?”

“Is an idea only an echo or the essence of the thing itself?”

“Where do you go after reaching the top of a thousand-foot pole?”

Blades cut through the confused ghosts like willows.

Konane stood up in his saddle, a cloud of dust dissipating around him; he raised his sword and cut through the last remaining Lost One.

“Where does this task take you?” Konane asked, the dust of the ghosts joining the purple mist.

“There,” Kaito said, pointing to the brightest light.

“Why?” Konane asked suspiciously.

“Honor,” Kaito said. “The fate of the Emperor.”

Konane’s brow furrowed. “There are other dangers here besides the Lost. We will escort you, but we will go no further.”

The samurai rode in a wedge, with the Fujiyama in the center. With no obstructions the wedge took on an unfathomable speed and within a few blinks they were up against the almost familiar slats marking the edge of the world.

Konane and the samurai bowed in unison.

“We will wait here with your balloon,” Konane said. “I hope we have been of service.”

“Thank you,” Kaito said.

Konane nodded. “If we have served you well, perhaps you will find a way to repay us.”

Not knowing what he could give to the ghosts, Kaito said, “I agree.”

Konane watched as the monks slipped out of the nether and into the other world.

The green field filled with children and kites greeted them as they arrived.

It has been so long since they have seen such health, Kaito thought.

A silver wind spirit unwound from the trees. It flitted almost sentiently as if it recognized him, then swirled away toward Edo, robbing Kaito of his moment of well being.

Golden light spilling from the royal palace bathed Kaito and the monks. They silently floated through the walls, past unaware guards, through mahogany double doors, carved with a magnificent rendering of the sun, into the Emperor's chamber. His body lay asleep in the bed, while his spirit acted out the actions of a dream in a lonely and private pantomime.

My Emperor, Kaito thought, and bowed reflexively, even though his mind told him that this was not the Emperor he knew. *Perhaps they are all part of the same spirit, the same universal ghost driving all the worlds.*

"Emperor Shimotori, come with us," Kaito said, realizing his musings would have to wait.

The Emperor's silver shadow stopped in its tracks and turned to look. "I am feeding the koi. How did you find your way into my garden?"

"It is urgent. We are here to take you."

"But I am due at the ceremony at Mount Fuji."

Upon the Emperor's last word, the spirits of three guards materialized in the room. The wind spirit from the field whipped about one who wore Kaito's own face.

"The wind told me ghosts were about tonight," Kaito's counterpart said.

In this world I am a warrior, Kaito said, glancing at the insignia marking his counterpart's shoulders.

The guards stepped closer.

"Leave here, wandering spirits," Kaito's counterpart commanded. "You are not welcome." He drew his sword and slashed patterns similar to Konane's. "Now be gone, all of you."

Kaito placed his left hand over his right fist, peace over war, and bowed.

He swung his arms in the opening techniques of his fighting forms. He knew them as well as any master, though he had never fought in combat.

The other monks bowed as Kaito did and stood ready. Kaito's counterpart's eyes darted back and forth to his opponents outnumbering him.

Kaito took a forceful step toward the Emperor. "Go away, or I will eat your soul myself," Kaito said, summing the darkest tone he could muster.

The two guards shifted nervously.

"Go, back to the waking world," Kaito's counterpart commanded them. "Tell Master Likaido there are evil spirits in the Emperor's chambers."

The guards disappeared with a look of fear and relief.

"Defend me," Kaito said to the monks, seizing the opportunity of the moment and racing to the Emperor's spirit.

Kaito's counterpart rushed him, but the monks threw themselves in his way.

"Come with us, Emperor," Kaito said to the Emperor's spirit still acting out dreams above its sleeping body.

"What is happening" the Emperor muttered, looking at Kaito's counterpart fighting his way toward them.

"No need to worry. You are dreaming, remember?"

"Ah, yes," the Emperor said, his pride poorly masking his confusion.

"Stay close," Kaito said, taking the Emperor's wrist. "It will seem as if you are adrift on a great ocean, then we will show you to your new koi pond and gardens."

"What of my inspection of the troops?"

"There are many fine soldiers waiting to meet you. The most honorable you have ever seen."

The Emperor smiled.

Kaito stepped behind the Emperor and with one swift move wrapped the Emperor's silver cord around his own wrist and pulled, envisioning it separating from the old body. The Emperor's body in the waking world shuddered, as the cord severed, then was still.

The Emperor's silver sheen began to fade, just as Tenho's had. Kaito moved the now unfettered cord away from the body and tied the loose edge around his wrist. The Emperor's cord melded with his.

Kaito felt a siphoning, then a surge of energy.

"Hurry, Kaito," one of the monks said, dodging a blow.

"For Japan," Kaito said, then slipped into the world between worlds, pulling the Emperor with him.

In the nether, Kaito and the Emperor glowed like tiny stars.

"Are you my soldiers?" the Emperor asked upon seeing the samurai guarding the Fujiyama.

“We are warriors of the void,” Konane answered. “Our bodies, our land, and our Emperor are long gone.”

A red blur sped from the bright dot of light, the world they had just departed from.

The blur quickly neared, revealing itself to be a giant dragon-shaped craft. It trailed yellow sparks as it shot through the mist.

The rest of the monks winked into existence. “Hurry, your counterpart has mobilized their defenses.”

Clouds of Lost Ones appeared, their whispers filling the void.

“They are drawn to you,” Konane said.

“Inside,” Kaito yelled, scrambling for the balloon.

The dragon-craft twisted its red ribbon of a body, stretching and bending its perfectly fitted metallic scales. Its leonine head roared, drowning the Lost One’s scratchy demands for the Emperor.

Kaito felt power surge through him from his bond with the Emperor. He lifted his hand and willed the Emperor to do the same, like a marionette.

“What are you doing?” the Emperor protested.

“You are dreaming, remember?” Kaito answered. “This is the part of the dream where you win a great battle.”

“A great battle, yes,” the Emperor said, then hummed softly as Kaito’s will took over.

Kaito focused and let the Emperor’s strength fill him. Golden rays poured from them. Kaito commanded the Emperor to speak.

“I bring you answers,” the Emperor said, following Kaito’s will. “There will be feasts and homecomings and great joy. Only this dragon stands in your way.”

As the Emperor’s voice echoed into the void, the whispers grew to a frenzied pitch. Hordes of ghosts converged on the dragon-ship.

“Destroy it,” Kaito commanded.

The dragon whipped like a great eel, scattering Lost Ones by the hundreds with each thrash of its tail.

It roared again. Each slash of its claws threw up clouds of gray dust as they cut rampaging Lost Ones. The hungry ghosts held onto the dragon by their teeth. They battered it with fists and kicks. With each

blow, the ship’s yellow corona flickered, and it became less substantial.

Kaito looked away and raced for home with the Emperor.

He slipped through the slatted boundary of his world, winking into the nether inside the monastery temple. Moonlight glimmered through the windows, joining the glow of twelve giant candles, one behind the body of each monk; Tenho’s noticeably absent.

Dejima stood next to the Emperor, while a single royal guard stood over each monk, their swords drawn.

Probably on guard after what happened to Tenho, Kaito thought. It is good to see Dejima overseeing this personally.

Kaito placed the Emperor’s spirit where it overlapped Shimotori’s body.

“What are you doing?” the Emperor asked.

“You are waking now. All that has come before was a dream. A great glorious dream.”

The Emperor smiled.

Kaito unwrapped the silver cord from his wrist. As he placed it on the Emperor’s body he felt the strength and power leave him.

The Emperor’s old body jerked and coughed as the new spirit entered. Kaito noticed the candle flames glowing brighter, and the moonlight gleaming off the guards’ swords, where it had not before.

It is done, Kaito thought.

His fellow monks arrived in the temple and, upon seeing the Emperor’s convulsions of life, cheered.

“Come,” Kaito said. “Let us say the homecoming mantra and return together.”

Kaito’s body jolted. The monk next to him spasmed.

Dejima stood with his arm raised. He swung it down and the royal guards sent their weapons through all of their helpless bodies. The feeling that he had swallowed icy cold river water grew in Kaito’s belly and in his feet. The cold spread to his groin and knees as Kaito watched his hands fade to a dull gray, and the silver cords of his fellow monks wither like stems of leaves in fall.

Dejima raised and lowered his arm again, muttering invocations.

“What has happened can never be known,”

Dejima said, looking around the room as if searching

for hidden foes. “You know this to be true. You were prepared for this sacrifice.”

Dejima carried the Emperor outside the temple into the arms of waiting guards. He returned and helped the guards inside pile the monks’ bodies onto the bed the Emperor had lain upon. When all were heaped into the pile, the guards formed a circle around it.

“You have served your Emperor well,” Dejima said. “Now honor requires one more act.”

Dejima lifted his sword. When he brought it down the guards fell on their weapons in ritual suicide. For an instant Kaito thought he saw their spirits pass into the nether.

“Go,” Dejima said, and though he was a world away, Kaito could feel his voice resonating. “Go away. Be gone, spirits. There is nothing for you here.”

Dejima poured oil on the heap of bodies and lit it with a bundle of incense. A black cloud of smoke erupted with a puff.

How can this be? Kaito thought, somehow choking on the smoke.

The flames leapt from the bodies greedily spreading to the wooden floor of the temple. Now completely numb, his spirit moved of its own accord away from the fire.

Outside, Kaito’s favorite temple lit the sky, joining the other burning buildings of the monastery. Kaito heard the spirits of his fellow monks cry out as they too were slain. He watched the familiar landscape burn as his spirit returned to the purple void against his will. The last sight before the nether took him completely was of the buds on the cherry blossoms awakening into brilliant pink and orange displays of health among the terrible flames.



The smoke from the burning temple crossed over and mingled with the purple mist of the world between worlds. A golden glow emanated from Kaito’s bruised purple hands, wrapping him in a faint corona.

“There he is,” a scratchy whisper called.

“Where? There! There,” more answered.

Lost Ones shambled to Kaito, dragging almost insubstantial pieces of the ruined dragon-craft.

Kaito did not move or struggle as the Lost Ones laid the pieces before him, bowed, and reached for him.

Take me. Eat my soul. There is nothing left, he thought.

“Here. The dragon here,” a Lost One mumbled, and then bowed. “My Emperor,” it added.

“What?” Kaito said.

“Dragon here. My Emperor,” the ghost repeated with force. The words spread among the Lost Ones. The nether echoed with the whispers. “Dragon here, my Emperor.”

Kaito grabbed a piece of the dragon-craft and twisted it. The last wisps of its form disappeared. The Lost Ones cheered.

The hordes of ghosts parted, revealing Konane Hoshita and the samurai.

“We have aided your task. Now we return with our request,” Konane said, riding to Kaito.

Kaito let him approach. He let him raise his hand in the air. The golden corona around him pulsed. The Lost Ones bowed.

“There is power of the sun, the power of the Emperor left in you,” Konane said.

Kaito met his eyes in acknowledgement.

“Take your place at our head, as our Emperor. Emperor of all of this,” Konane said, holding out his hand to the great void and dots of light, of the infinite worlds on the horizon.

Emperor of Mist, Kaito thought.

“It is so,” Kaito spoke.

The thought registered on all present, and then spread from spirit to spirit. Kaito’s corona glowed brighter. Soon a golden glow spilled from him, the indigo void an almost pleasing shade of amethyst for miles around.

I shall travel from world to world, to every world, a different kind of hungry ghost, Kaito thought. *I will petition every honorable Emperor to ensure the void is never crossed this way, for this purpose again.*

“My Emperor. My Emperor,” the Lost Ones chanted.

Konane unsheathed his sword and laid it at Kaito’s feet. ❧

Like a Cannonball

by Jason Heller

I was in a pissy mood and whining about a girl or the boss or something the day Mike showed me he could fly.

“You,” he said, rolling up the sleeves of his plaid cowboy shirt to reveal two forearms full of tattoos, “are a heartless heathen.” He picked an LP off his bookshelf, slid the vinyl out, and put it on the turntable. Then, his face twitching a little, he lowered the needle. The speakers hissed like tin foil crinkling. A voice drifted out.

Van Morrison’s voice.

“What the hell is this hippie crap?” I scoffed, draining my can of beer. “You really listen to this guy? I thought you were more of a Sonic Youth kinda guy. What about the noise, the punk rock?”

Mike pressed his lips together—not quite a smirk, not quite a grimace. I hated that look. Smug bastard. Sometimes it was tough being his best friend.

“There’s more out there than noise, Kev. You just don’t know how to appreciate beauty. And punk? It comes in all kinds of packages.” He murmured something else I couldn’t make out and closed his eyes. Then, without warning, he floated off the hardwood floor and shot across the room. A huge boom rattled the his one-room apartment.

A second later something tapped at his window. I looked out.

It was Mike, hovering there, just outside.

Did I mention Mike lived on the fourth floor? Fucking Mike. What a freak. Always showing off.

Van Morrison, of course, kept snoozing away on the stereo. “Straight to your heart,” he sang through a waltz of chiming guitars and scratchy static, “like a cannonball.”



Yeah, Mike was sort of a witch. A music witch, I guess. I’m not sure what he called himself exactly, but he basically listened to songs and turned them into...well, all kinds of stuff. Not that he had that much control over it. Once he and I were playing

some Black Sabbath records, and, swear to god, he sprouted horns and his skin started smoking. Another time we were at a Mudhoney show, and I had to smuggle him out of the emergency exit when gallons of purple sludge started gushing out of his mouth.

Lately, though, Mike had been getting soft. I mean, Van Morrison? The only person I knew who listened to Van Morrison was my mom—that is, when she was taking a break from Eric Clapton and Linda Ronstadt.

Fucking Mike. With that guy, irony knew no bounds.



“*Astral Weeks*,” Mike whispered to me the day after the cannonball incident. Too broke to do anything else—the record store we worked at paid for shit—we were back in his apartment drinking beer and arguing about music. “*That’s* the album right there. *Astral Weeks*. He didn’t even bother hiding it, did he?” Mike took *Tupelo Honey*, the album with the cannonball song, off his turntable and pulled out another Morrison one. The cover was all leafy and psychedelic-looking.

“Mike, as your coworker, drinking buddy, and musical conscience, I have to tell you: you’re turning into a pretentious asshole.”

He flashed a grin underneath his dark eyes and greasy hair. Then he did a weird thing: He took my hand. “Relax, Kev,” he said. “Trust me.”

He put the record on. A sound swelled out of the speakers, something so quiet and peaceful and sad it paralyzed me. Mike started mumbling like he did sometimes when he was about to make his magic.

My hand still in his, the song wrapped itself around us like a garden growing in a time-lapse movie. Tendrils threaded themselves around my head and into my chest.

I held my breath. Mike swayed.

Nothing happened.



Later we trudged through a swift, sudden rainstorm and found the cheapest cup of coffee we could find, a diner over in the Greek part of town. We sat at the counter and drip-dried. Mike was shivering.

“I don’t get it,” he said, his head hanging over his steaming cup. “We should’ve...gone somewhere. We should’ve left our bodies, visited this place called the Spheres I can kind of vaguely remember. In the Spheres, you would’ve heard that album—hell, *any* music—the way it’s supposed to be heard. Not as these flawed reflections that somehow worm their way to Earth, the ones that happen to leech onto the brain of a John Cage or a Bob Dylan or an Ian Curtis. I’m talking about the *Spheres*, Kev. The fucking *source*.”

He dumped some half-and-half in his mug and stared at the white spirals swirling in the black coffee.

“Damn it” he said. “It’s been two years now. Two years since I woke up here, barely remembering who or what I am. Two years working at that shitty record store with you, trying to immerse myself in as much music as possible. Hoping it’d all come back. Goofing around, making half-assed magic. Drinking. Waiting.”

Up to that day, I’d been more than happy to let Mike do his thing—whatever that thing was—own way. But now that he was trying to drag me into his world, literally, I couldn’t be just the dumb sidekick anymore.

“Look, Mike, I don’t know anything about these Spheres of yours. I’ve told you a million times, the less I know, the less insane I’ll feel. But I can tell you this: you need to grow some balls and do something about the situation. Fuck Van Morrison. Think Black Flag, man! ‘Rise above, we’re gonna rise above!’”

He looked at me like I was nuts. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“Okay, good,” I said, dumping a pocketful of change on the counter. “About damn time.”



I couldn’t breathe. I was laughing too damn hard. “Dude, what the hell is on your head?” I managed to

squeeze out between gasps. I’d just shown up at Mike’s apartment, and he was standing in the middle of his room with some kind of giant helmet on. It was totally thrown together, some ridiculous sculpture made out of coat hangers, Saran Wrap, and what appeared to be half-melted Pabst cans.

He scowled. “Look, I know this looks stupid. I don’t even know if I’m doing this right. But I’ve got to try, right? Look, bring those over here and help me hook them up.”

I caught my breath and hauled in the equipment he’d asked me to bring over. Ten turntables—beggd, borrowed, and in one case stolen from various friends and family members. Some were newish and in good shape; others were hunks of junk that had been sitting in basements for the past 30 years.

Within an hour we had everything strung together and running through Mike’s stereo. He’d had two turntables of his own to start with, so now there were twelve.

“Why twelve?” I asked him, my fingers numb from all that wiring. He shrugged. “Just a guess. But I’ve been at the library all week brushing up on *musica universalis*—that is, what little of it Pythagoras and Kepler managed to channel onto this plane. And twelve is the number that keeps coming up. Harmonics of the zodiac and all that.” Then, before I could ask any more questions, he pulled out a compass and a piece of chalk and started drawing lines on the floor.

When everything was ready to Mike’s satisfaction, we went around putting records on the turntables. He had them all arranged in a particular order: Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports* next to Ornette Coleman’s *Science Fiction* next to the *Xanadu* soundtrack. Made no sense to me. Mike said he was going on raw emotion, gut instinct. “Just like Black Flag,” he explained, his slapdash helmet bobbing solemnly as he nodded.

Then he stood in the middle of the room, his feet caught in a tangle of chalk lines that looked like a road maps or constellations or something. Along those lines Mike had sketched weird symbols, little pictures, bits of guitar tablature. He crossed his arms, lifted his face.

“Hit it,” he said.

I went around the room in the order Mike had

laid out, putting the needle down on each of the dozen records, one after the other. First it sounded like a couple car radios battling it out at a red light. Then, as more needles dropped, the confusion grew into a cacophony.

By the time I got to the last two turntables, the racket was almost unbearable. Pain shook my skull. I looked at Mike; He was still standing there like a marble statue. “Do it,” he yelled. “Now.”

I glanced down. Two left. Van Morrison and Black Flag. From outside in the hallway I heard people yelling. A second later someone started pounding on the door. I gritted my teeth and dropped the first needle, then the second. The two churned together: peace and war, green and black, daydreams and nightmares. They switched places, became interchangeable, then indistinguishable. The noise morphed into something shimmering, something visible, almost like a hymn in a cathedral.

Then a new sound joined in. It wasn’t music. It was ugly, boiling, nauseating, something that human ears were surely never equipped to process.

The space inside the apartment popped like a bubble.



When the dust cleared and my hearing started to return, Mike was gone. All that was left was a smell like leaky batteries and a scorch mark on the floor. I waited a few minutes to see if he’d reappear at the window like before, but no luck. There was nothing else I could do, so I cracked open the door, apologized to Mike’s neighbors, cleaned up the mess, and went home.

Mike and I were scheduled to open the record store the next morning. He never showed. He didn’t come into work the next day either. Or the next. Or the next.

After a month, our boss pulled his timecard. A month after that, I gave up on him, too.



One afternoon, about four years later, I walked into the back room of the record store to clock in for the second shift. There was a Post-it note

on my timecard: “Some guy name Mike came by. Says he’s back in town. Doesn’t have your new number. He’ll try again tomorrow.”

Christ! My slacker fucking coworkers. Too lazy to pick up a phone and call me. I ran out to the counter to yell at whoever took the message.

Sitting behind the counter, though, was Mike.

“Sorry, Kev,” he said, his body flickering in the store’s dusty, florescent light. “Didn’t mean to freak you out like that. I just came in yesterday on satellite radio, but it took me a couple days to figure out how to stabilize this form inside the fields. I have to tell you—despite my love of vinyl, I’m digging all this digital technology.”

I stared at him. Actually, I stared *through* him. I could read every word of the Sleater-Kinney poster that was hanging on the wall behind him.

“So,” he said, rising into the air with a staticky crackle, “you down for a beer after work?”



It’s been a long time since Mike last visited, but I don’t blame him. The guy’s busy. There’s a war going in the Spheres. Along with four of the other twelve music elementals—his siblings—he’d been ambushed and cast out of the Spheres a decade ago. One of his sisters had been trying to spread a new sound across all levels of reality, one based on planar discord or whatever Mike called it. She’d blown out most of his memory and made a huge mess of things. “In fact,” he told me, “that’s why music has been getting progressively lousier on Earth over the past few years.” Meanwhile Mike had been down here, in exile, trying to piece together who and what he was.

“Think Sonic Youth,” he explained to me one night as we sat around listening to Minutemen records and catching up on some beer drinking. “For instance, the noise breakdown in the middle of ‘Silver Rocket.’ Not the rest of the song, just the chaos. Now imagine amplifying that using every quantum object in the universe. I love noise as much as you do, but it only works when there’s structure and beauty mixed in with it, some balance, you know?”

I gave him a blank look. He laughed. “Anyway,” he said, “enough about me. What have you been doing while I’ve been away kicking ass?”

I grunted, scratched at my new beard. “Just mellowed out a bit, man. Staying in most nights. Reading books and stuff instead of getting my ears bashed in at shows. Been seeing the same girl for a year now, believe it or not. We’re getting a place together next month, even.”

“Huh,” Mike said, popping his beer can with his thumb. “So, if you’re doing so well now, why are you still working at the record store? You goddamn loser.”

I slugged him in the arm. Fucking Mike. Smug bastard. And now he was some kind of god or something. Always had to be cooler than everyone else in the room.

But at least he couldn’t give me shit about Van Morrison anymore. Since Mike had left me his entire record collection the day he disappeared, I’ve been listening to that old hippie almost every day. “Straight to your heart like a cannonball.” I get it now. Kind of punk, when you think about it. ☞



Dates With Poetry

by Jonathan David Lim

date number one
entirely free verse
staring into her lines i attempt to discover her
meaning
awkward silence
laughter
sighs
we are free to break form and convention.
Until she mentions
she doesn't kiss on the first date.

Date number two has a little more form
but maintains blank verse when we meet for lunch;
for coffee and turkey club sandwiches
and chips. I asked about her family:
her father is a sestina and her
mother is a villanelle. She hopes to
God her brother gets his act together.

Date number three and
we're starting to see
a pattern, a rhyme, and a reason.
The more time we spend
as more than just friends
is special and fun and exciting.

Date number four holds all of the magic
as we kiss and embrace in iambic;
a series of verses, the closer we get
to becoming an official couplet.

Date number five was, I'm sorry to say,
not the best date I have been on before.
When I went to kiss her, she turned away:
“I don't think we should go out anymore.”
At first I saw rainclouds, black cats and crows,
and I thought “This is it” for my love-life.
But now I see blue skies, green grass meadows,
and sunshine. I've met a sestina; I've
fallen again, in love and enraptured
by eyes of blue stanzas, hair of gold lines,
breasts of pure syntax, perfect and structured.
She's oh so lovely and oh so divine.

And should this love also fizzle and bomb
I'll have to remember: Third time's the charm.

Take Four

by Genevieve Valentine

“We’re losing the light!” Greg called, jogging from his trailer across the maze of RVs dotting the dusty flats outside the city.

Three PAs dropped what they were doing and jumped into golf carts, peeling out towards their places on the platforms that ringed the city wall. Greg wondered what the hell else they found to do when they were supposed to be at their places. They always started out so unreliable.

“Where are my stuntmen?” Greg snapped at a DA. The DA fell into step beside him and muttered something into a walkie-talkie.

“Platform Ten,” the DA said when the garbled reply came back. “They’re already on the wires, ready to go when you give the word.”

“Have they got the right throat-filters in? We need them mustard- *and* tear-gas-rated.”

“I’m sure they are, sir.”

“Well, if a stunt guy collapses in the middle of the scene, I’m sure you will be fired.”

The DA blanched and fell back, murmuring furiously into the walkie-talkie.

The cherry-picker lifted Greg up to the platform above the city gate. Matt, his Director of Photography, was already there, adjusting the camera crane so it had maximum swing. They’d only have one take of this city, and Matt knew how important it was not to miss anything.

“So I looked at the dailies for take three,” Greg said. “The light is great, but we need more intimate crowd shots, I think, and remember to stay away from the skyline—you swung wild a few times at the last place and now that skyline’s never going to match anything else we find.”

“Sorry,” said Matt.

“Coming up!” called the cherry-picker driver, and Marissa rose into view, her blonde hair pulled back in a bun under her wide-brim hat. When she saw Greg, she smiled.

“I talked to the government liaison,” she said, stepping onto the platform. “The payment went through; he signed the paper. We’re all set.”

Marissa was the only PA in the whole place

worth her salt.

“No babies left in here, right?”

She shook her head. “Not one.”

Thank God; the last time the cameras caught a mom cradling an infant in one of these takes he’d caught no end of shit for it.

Marissa’s walkie-talkie hissed to life in her hand. “They know the gate’s sealed,” came the word. “Watch for them.”

The city was more than two miles across, but mobs always moved faster than you thought they would, and Greg barely had time to order the second-unit to film the rising dust before the townspeople burst out of the main square in the center of the city and barreled towards the gate.

From the platform, Greg had the perfect view of the crowd rushing the wall, swarming over one another, faces tilted towards the cameras. Someone had already been smothered to death against the iron door; his eyes were already glazing over, and his head shook gently as the others jostled against him. Greg tapped Matt on the shoulder and pointed it out so Matt wouldn’t film it; Disastermovies.com was always waiting for Greg to make that kind of goof.

Some guy leapt into the crowd and pawed his way over the heads of the others, scrabbling for the wall.

Greg sighed and picked up the megaphone.

“Look,” he shouted, “let’s not panic like this. Nobody likes to see the whites of your eyes, all right? Keep it pretty!”

“I’ll pay double!” a man cried out. “Please! There’s been a mistake!”

“And don’t talk, for God’s sake!” Greg covered the mouthpiece and turned to Matt. “It’s always this ‘been a mistake’ shit. If they start talking, pan away—I don’t want to have to dub them all for the foreign releases.”

Matt nodded and leaned in towards the viewfinder, ready to roll.

Greg looked back at Marissa and said, “We’re a go.”

Marissa muttered into her walkie-talkie; around

the city wall came answering chirps as the PAs passed the word along.

From the two platforms nearest Greg, effects guys threw smoke bombs into the center of the riot. The crowd staggered backwards; some women screamed. It was boring. The beginnings of these setups always were.

Matt dutifully filmed the plumes of smoke curling between the buildings, avoiding any mob shots.

“Let’s move it,” Greg said.

“Tear gas,” Marissa ordered from behind him, and Greg smiled. The girl had a nose for the business. He’d take her on his next picture as a DA.

Canisters glittered, and the gas bloomed like silver flowers inside the gate.

“Take Four!” Greg called, and the echoing chirps bounced briefly off the stone walls before the sound of the crowd swallowed them up.

Amid the screams came the easy rumble of panic as the mob scattered, diving into the narrow streets, beginning—finally—to run through the city like Greg needed. The crew were waiting with pepper bombs and smoke bombs and (perched above the sewage pipes) riflemen, to pick off the ones who came too close; a bunch of people lumped together and clinging to a wall wasn’t good cinema.

This would be the best take yet, Greg could feel it already. The last city had been a dud—so poorly constructed that it crumbled after the third round of bombs. They’d negotiated for a break on this one, but still; Los Angeles never liked to hear that the pyrotechnics guys were getting paid overtime for another two weeks.

On Greg’s right, a laundry line was torn down by some invisible hand, and the sheet fluttered in the wind like a dancer. Gorgeous. Amazing. The papers made fun of him for the cost of his films, but dammit, they packed the theatres to see what he could do with a crowd scene, and he’d never heard complaints from governments over his methods.

Every country could use a little population control; might as well make something out of it. The cities he used became famous, after. Journalists kept telling him that it boosted tourism. People were weird.

In the city square, some people had fallen to their knees to avoid a cloud of gas, their arms wrapped

around their heads for protection. The light was perfect—distant orange sun gone smoky from the bombs—and Greg watched Matt signal down the line for more camera focus on the square.

A woman staggered into the square, her patchwork coat flapping in the wind, her arms upraised.

Greg grinned and muttered, “Beautiful!”, though over the din no one heard him, thank goodness. It was his job to not get carried away by the moment.

He leaned towards Matt with the clapper in hand and extended it into the shot.

“Drop them!” he called, and Marissa barked the order into her walkie-talkie. Around the city, like the marks on a clock, the sticks of dynamite sparked to life. Each of the ten stations had enough to raze half the city; Greg was a completist, and having paid for a city he could raze to the ground he wasn’t going to waste a brick.

On some count only the effects guys knew, the sticks of dynamite fluttered against the afternoon sun and sank past the skyline.

Greg leaned forward, peering into the horizon, to the platform where his stuntmen were waiting for their scene.

He called, “Action!” ☞

Siberian Geese

by Anna Sykora

His oars of impalpable motion,
His shoulders hunched under his head,
The man in the boat in the sunset
Was fishing or dreaming or dead.

He seemed to be calm or contented,
Floating around on his lake,
That circular hole in his forehead
Just a peculiar mistake.

Siberian geese didn’t move him,
Trumpeting shrill from the air.
How can we judge, from this distance?
Maybe we stranded him there.

Danny's Magical Toe Jam

by Marshall Payne

It seemed like Danny had been on the lam forever. Sleeping in dark alleyways, catnapping in the park, scrounging food wherever he could. Phantoria was a huge, bustling metropolplex with many avenues to elude detection, and by now Danny thought he had taken them all, thrice over.

The morning had started off peacefully enough. He'd used the last of his winning scratch-off ticket to purchase a pork pie from a yarmulked vendor. Oddly, his magical gift had played little or no part in this small instant-winner prize. His shoes and socks had been on for days and his muse, if you could call it that, had been exceedingly quiet. But now either the Magnificent Lions or the Preternatural Promenade Lords were hard on his heels. He didn't need the itching between his toes to tell him this.

Crouching behind a reeking dumpster, Danny watched the two men pass. Lions they obviously were, ostentatious in their golden threads and their shiny beards. Once they were gone, Danny worked his way out of the alcove and down an alleyway he'd apparently never ventured into in the past. But then he spotted one of the Prom Lord's avian reconnaissance drones buzzing overhead. Not knowing what else to do, he scurried up a convenient fire escape, hoping the laundry hanging above would provide suitable camouflage. Unfortunately it didn't. As the buzzing came closer, he ducked into a third-floor window gaping with invitation.

"Who's there?" a voice called. "Tell me who you are!"

Danny was about to leave the way he'd come, but the old woman planted on the sofa seemed harmless enough. Perhaps he could hide out here until the drone passed.

"I'm just..." he began, but paused when he realized the woman was blind. Her head was turned toward him, but her eyes didn't meet his. The cane in the corner of the one-room flat confirmed her affliction. "A young man who needs help," he finished.

"We all need help," the woman said with a sigh.

"Relax. You're welcome here. I don't get many visitors. Especially ones through the window." She let out a chuckle, then sniffed the air and crinkled her nose. "You appear in need of a bath, young man."

Though standing several feet away from her, he was amazed she could smell him. A gentle breeze was wafting through the room, but mostly he figured her lack of eyesight heightened her other senses.

"Yes, I suppose I do," he said.

"I imagine you're hungry as well," she said.

"Thirsty more than anything."

She nodded and rose to her feet, motioning to an armchair next to the sofa. "Have a seat," she said and moved toward the kitchen. For being a short, stubby woman, she moved with a practiced grace. Her age was indeterminable, though despite her gray hair she had a youthful mien about her. The wrinkles etching her face suggested mid- to late-sixties.

Soon she returned with a glass of iced tea and retook her spot on the sofa after he'd accepted it. He drank greedily, parched after his morning's tribulations.

"What's your name?" she asked. "They call me Matilda."

"Danny," he replied. He'd thought of using an alias, but felt no threat from this kindly woman.

"That's a nice name. Tell me, young man, how old are you?"

"Sixteen," he replied.

"I see. So, what are you out and about to these days, Danny? Why are you lurking around, popping in people's windows? The authorities after you?"

"If you're wondering if I've stolen something or committed some crime, the answer is no. I mean you no harm."

Again she nodded. "I know that, young man. I may be blind, but I'm a fine judge of people. Like I said, relax. Truth told, I'm a lonely old woman who could use the company." She looked aimlessly about the room as though she actually had sight, then turned back to him, her milky gaze somehow penetrating. "Do your parents know you're out and

about?”

He shrugged. “They don’t mind.” This old woman certainly asked a lot of questions. He didn’t want to tell her he had no parents. None that he could remember anyway. For as long as he could remember, he’d been on the run.

“How do you like your tea, Danny?” she asked.

He took another sip of it, savoring its odd taste. In a perfect world, the “muse” that lurked between his toes should’ve warned him of danger, but it had never been reliable, if effectual at all. Suddenly he felt lightheaded, giddy. He could barely set the glass down on the end table next to him before unconsciousness engulfed him with a dark swoop.



Danny awoke chained to a bed. It took him a moment to put it all together, where he was, what had happened. He was still in the one-room flat; he recognized the sofa, armchair, and the kitchen on the far side of the room. He was quite groggy and might have slept longer except for...He craned his neck up and saw that his shoes and socks were off and the old woman—Matilda, yes, that was her name—was scraping between his toes with a pallet knife.

“Ahh,” he moaned, and jerked his foot against the chain.

Matilda looked up. “Awake, I see,” she said.

“You’re... You’re not blind,” he struggled out.

“Oh, I’m very much blind,” the woman said. “Blind in the eyes, that is. My mind sees quite well. Which is how I knew you were coming. Been waiting for you, Daniel. Yes, that I have.”

A seer, he thought.

She separated two more of his toes and began scraping between them, collecting the jam and wiping it on the lip of a small porcelain bowl resting between his legs. So far, she had collected quite a bit, but it had been days since he’d washed his feet.

He heard a toilet flush and then footsteps coming toward him. Soon a large figure hove over him, looking down. “Daniel Aguro,” the man said. “Most excellent for you to find your way here. I commend you.” He laughed, but there was no warmth in it.

“What do you...” Danny began but couldn’t get

the rest out. His mouth was even more parched than before.

“What do we want from you?” the man said.

“That should be obvious.” He leaned over Danny’s feet. “Your mindsight failing you, Matty? You missed a bit.” He pointed.

“No I didn’t!” she snapped. “I can *see* just fine.”

The man was dressed in the gold threads of a Magnificent Lion, but he didn’t have the traditional waxed beard and flowing mane. He was bald like the Preternatural Promenade Lords, but his head lacked the intricate tattooing the Lords favored. His skull was deeply scarred, however, meaning he’d probably had the tattoos surgically removed.

“Are you a Lion or a Lord?” Danny asked.

The man glanced at him with a look of disdain as though being inconvenienced. “Neither,” he snapped. He let out a chuckle before offering, “I’m what you’d call a Leord. Some of us grew disenchanted with either order and started our own. We possess the strengths of both sects, the temerity of the Mag Lions and the sortilege of the Promenade Lords. I am Trego. Leader of our new order that will soon hold sway over all Phantoria. Which is where you come in, Daniel Aguro. We need your body product. Your toe jam.” He held his head up imperiously.

Danny sighed, but had to ask, “Please tell me, why is this stuff that grows between my toes so important to you?”

Trego furrowed his brow but said nothing. This was the reaction Danny had always gotten. In various encounters before with the two other orders, he’d asked the same question. Never was he given an answer. It was as though he were expected to know. Something that was always assumed—that his jam held mysterious puissance. Apparently it was a given.

“There,” Matilda said. “That’s the last of it. I’ll put his shoes back on so he can get to work on producing the next batch.”

“Wait,” Trego said, and pulled a long knife from his jacket pocket.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Sever his Achilles tendons,” he said, brandishing the blade. “It’ll insure he doesn’t escape.”

Fear gripped Danny as he stared at the light reflecting off the razor-sharp blade.

“No,” she said. “It could get infected and ruin

the jam.”

Trego pondered this for a moment, then put his knife away. Danny’s fear waned a bit, but still this was not good. He knew he was in deep shit.



In the days that followed, he was fed and given a bedpan to use. Embarrassing, as Matilda never left the room. True, she was blind but that didn’t curb his chagrin when he used it.

On the fourth day an exquisite young woman arrived to assist with his care. She was a half-haint. Lost somewhere between corporeality and the ethereal beyond, she shimmered at his bedside.

“Ah, Danny Aguro,” she said. “The toe jam boy.” Her voice held a spectral quality, and he wondered if the echoes he heard were only in his mind. “Can I get you anything?”

“Yes,” he said. “You can unlock these chains and let me be on my way.”

Matilda and Trego were in the kitchen in deep discussion and only turned to glare their annoyance.

The half-haint chuckled. “That’s not likely to happen. You’re Trego’s prize. His ticket to power. If you’ll just cooperate it’ll go down easier for you.”

Danny yanked both arms and caused the chains to snap against the bedposts. “How can I not help but cooperate?” he said. “So, who are you?”

“I’m Corona. I’m what you might call Trego’s mistress.”

“Is that really possible?” Danny asked. “I mean...”

“I *know* what you mean. Yes, it’s possible. When I’m in one of my more solid moods.” She chuckled.

A slender woman, Corona was clad in a black skirt and halter top. Her skin was a translucent glass, almost porcelain to the eye. Her face held a different texture, however, as her heavily applied makeup gave her an almost human look. Thick pancake and cherry-red lips offset her shoulder-length strands of...well, not really hair—more like fiber optic cables of fey brilliance. Her inch-long nails—acrylic fakes? Danny wondered—were purple hooks. Her eyes were her most striking feature, though. Swirling pools of kaleidoscopic glitter, they boggled the mind as to what creature resided beneath them. Yet, she was

stunningly beautiful.

From a bag she’d brought with her, she pulled a handheld blow-dryer, and after plugging it into a wall socket began heating his shoes with it. Though Danny was clad in only his boxers and a T-shirt, they made him wear thick socks and his heavy leather shoes. While living on the streets he’d never minded being shod for long periods of time, but lying here now, knowing what was expected of him, his feet felt hot, sweaty, and uncomfortable.

“Hopefully this will speed up the process,” Corona said with an ironic smile.

This went on for a couple of more days, Corona constantly at his bedside, until his shoes were removed for as long as it took to scrape off another harvesting of toe jam. From the look on Matilda and Trego’s faces, Danny could tell something was wrong, which reached a head a few hours later when Trego returned, clearly upset.

“So,” Trego said, “would you like to tell me how your magical agent is activated?”

Danny had been waiting for this. The three times in the past when he’d been captured—once by the Mag Lions and twice by the Prom Lords—it had come down to this. On his last abduction he’d convinced his captors that his toe jam was merely a tale of apocryphal urban legend, that he was probably the most *un*magical person in the world. Luckily he’d escaped before they could dispose of him as a worthless loose end. It had been a faction of the Prom Lords that time, and apparently they hadn’t spread the word of the impotency of his supposed enchantment. Danny knew now his best hope was to say nothing. Hell, sometimes he wondered himself if, when his toe jam “talked” to him, it wasn’t merely the left side of his brain talking to his right. All his life this crud growing between his toes had been the bane of his existence. It had never done him one iota of good.

“Tell us!” Matilda said.

Refusing to look any of them in the eye, Danny merely stared at a point in the distance above his feet.

“Very well,” Trego said. “There are ways to make you talk.” He looked at Matilda. “Matty, you’re coming with me.”

“Whatever for?” she asked.

“You’ll know which truth potion will work best

on the boy.”

“And leave him alone here with...” Matilda nodded toward the half-haint.

“We can trust Corona,” he said. “Can’t we, Corona?”

She furrowed her translucent brow. “Oh course.” Incredulous.

“I can’t read her, Trego,” Matilda said. “You, I can almost always see your intentions. The boy is an open book to me. But she’s like a mirror to my mindsight.”

“I said we can trust her, so let’s go!”

But no sooner had they left than Corona began freeing him. She didn’t have a key to the locks on his chains, but she did have a small hacksaw in her bag, which she used on the wooden bedpost.

“Where are we going?” Danny asked as he struggled on his clothes despite the chains.

“To a place of safety. Don’t worry, you can trust me.”

He didn’t of course, but what alternative did he have?



His plan of course was to flee and leave Corona in his dust as soon as they were out of the building. Corona being a half-haint, what chance did she have of stopping him? That plan flew out the window, however, as two men grabbed him as he exited out the back way. Quickly he was thrown in the rear of a waiting van and whisked away.

“Why am I not surprised?” Danny said to Corona, who had hopped in the back after him.

“Can’t blame a girl for opting for the highest bidder, can you?”

“And who might that be?”

She didn’t reply, merely offering him her fey smile.

Soon they arrived at an abandoned warehouse on the edge of the city. When the van’s rear doors were opened, he found himself facing a woolly leather-clad behemoth who, after noticing his chains, pulled Danny from the van with a yank of the links. It wasn’t all bad, as after a moment the man retrieved a huge pair of metal snips and removed the cumbersome bonds. Though Danny imagined they’d soon have their own shackles to fit him with.

“This way,” the man grumbled and Danny was led deeper into the warehouse, Corona shimmering at his side.

Around a turn, they entered the main area of the warehouse, a large high-ceilinged room with a host of rough-looking characters, men mostly, surrounding their leader on a makeshift throne.

“Ah, Corona,” the man said. “You’ve done well. And this must be the toe jam boy. Hello, Donald.” An advisor at his side whispered in his ear and he corrected himself, “Daniel, I mean.”

Danny couldn’t tell if these were Lions or Lords. The man on the throne wore the sleek leather favored by the Prom Lords, but he sported a shinny orange beard like the Mag Lions wore. Like the Lords, he had a plethora of tattoos, not only on his skull but on his face as well, intricate etchings that looked like printed circuit board patterns connecting the occasional mythological creature.

“I brought him as you asked, Koldus,” Corona said, “but I make no claim as to the authenticity of his magic.”

“Oh,” Koldus said, “is there a problem? Have you learned something?”

“Only that Trego and his people couldn’t unlock the secret of his magic,” the half-haint said.

“Hum,” Koldus said, resting a fist on his chin. “Probably because they weren’t as resourceful as we shall be.” He peered at Danny, his gaze dropping from his face to his feet. “Tell me, boy, are you going to cooperate and tell us all about this preternatural fungus that grows between your toes or are you going to need...persuasion?” He bared a sickly grin of decaying teeth.

Danny had played this game long enough to have developed a strategy of his own, however. “I’m hungry. The magic works best when I’m *not* hungry.” It was the best stall tactic he could think of.

Koldus nodded. “Then you shall be fed.”

“And may I ask when—” Corona began before Koldus cut her off.

“You’ll be compensated as we agreed upon.” To a man at his side, Koldus said, “Prepare a meal. I’m hungry as well. Our guests will dine at my table.” He turned back to Corona. “You will be staying as well, yes?” Again, the horrible smile.

At his side, Danny could hear Corona sigh. It

was apparent that this Koldus character had eyes for the half-haint, but Danny got the feeling his affections probably wouldn't be reciprocated. Not that Danny gave a rat's ass one way or the other. He had to figure a way out of this mess.

Soon Danny found himself wedged in between two of Koldus's lieutenants at a long metal table in the center of the warehouse. Koldus presided over the meal at the far end, Corona on his left. One of Koldus's men, the advisor who whispered in ears, asked, "So, Daniel, what can you tell us about Trego and his lousy Leords?"

Danny shrugged, slowly eating whatever the entrée on his plate might be. Wasn't chicken, perhaps pheasant or some other kind of game bird. "Not much to tell," he muttered.

"Oh, but I'm sure there is," said the advisor, whose name Danny had learned was Gofus. "Troop strength? Vehicle complement? You know, anything that you saw."

"Honestly," Danny said, "I didn't see much. Trego was the only one I ever saw. Except for the blind woman, Matilda, and..." He nodded toward Corona at the end of the table.

"You're not eating your asparagus," Koldus was saying to her.

She shrugged. "I've never liked asparagus," she said.

"Then here," Koldus replied, reaching for a platter of assorted vegetables. "We have sweet potatoes and carrots. Or how about some broccoli or avocados perhaps?"

"No thanks," she said. "I'm pretty much carnivorous. This pelican is good, though."

Ah, Danny thought. Not pheasant but pelican. He'd never tasted pelican before, but found it not unpleasant.

"But I insist, my dear," Koldus told the beautiful half-haint as he spooned a generous helping of all the vegetables onto her plate. Danny knew what Koldus was up to. Or thought he did. Supposedly broccoli, asparagus, avocados and the like were high in niacin, vitamin B₃. He'd heard that half-haints who wanted to increase their corporeality found that a niacin-rich diet solidified their metaphysical nature. It was clear what was on Koldus's mind, wanting to increase the density of Corona's bones so he could jump them.

Over the course of the meal Danny learned that Koldus and crew were, like Trego's Leords, an offshoot of disenchanting members of the Mag Lions and the Prom Lords. They called themselves the Gluttons for Punishment, though Danny got the distinct impression they weren't masochistic in the slightest and that *they* were the ones who meted out the punishment. But that remained to be seen when suddenly there was an explosion at the far end of the warehouse and Koldus and crew were quickly on their feet.

It all happened so fast that Danny barely had time to react himself. Varicolored smoke filled the building from hurled earsplitting sonic grenades and magical petards, and soon Trego and his men had gained a foothold.

"Well, well, well," Trego said to Koldus. "Thought you'd start your own little order, did you?"

"I certainly wasn't going to play second louie in your mangy outfit," Koldus told him with a growl.

"So you reckoned you'd steal my jam boy. *Hal!*"

"The strong take what they desire."

"They certainly do," Trego said. "Which is why I left the boy alone with your spy. Thought I didn't know? Corona was pleasant enough company, but she's...how should I put it, rather intangible in the sack. But no matter. I'll have my toe jam boy back and put an end to your short, lackluster reign to boot."

Now Danny understood. Trego never intended to cut his Achilles tendons. That was only meant to instill fear in him, to force him to cooperate. His feet were never in any danger. He had to be able to walk so he could escape and lead Trego here.

And then the fighting broke out. More petards were hurled and weapons were drawn. Danny noticed that Corona was slipping out a side way, so he followed. If there was one thing you could say about half-haints, they had survival skills.

Soon they came to a part of the warehouse where there was an exit, but unfortunately it was locked. Apparently Corona thought she could pass right through it, but found herself too corporeal and landed flat on her butt.

"Too much asparagus?" Danny asked as she pulled herself to her feet.

"Shut up!" she screamed, desperately trying to

open the door. She was solid enough to turn the handle, but that was about it. She looked around nervously, then said, "Listen, Danny. Maybe we can help each other."

"And why should I help *you*?" he asked.

"Because you want to get out of here too, don't you?"

She had a point. And a plan. There was a skylight above the door, more of a transom actually. With Danny's corporeality, he could help her move boxes so they could reach it, then break the glass, and escape. Which was what they did, and it came as no surprise to Danny that once they were on the outside his partnership with Corona quickly ended as she ghosted off into the distance. That was fine. He had his own distance to put between himself and these two feuding gangs.

He wasn't too far from the warehouse when a figure stepped out from behind a dumpster. It was Matilda. "Hello, Danny," she said.

"I knew you weren't blind," he said.

"Oh, I'm very much blind," she said holding up her cane. "I knew it was you as I recognized your scent." In her other hand she held a small detonation device, her thumb on the blast button.

"What? Why?" he asked.

"You were just a small part of the plan," she told him. "While I'm not a Mag Lion or a Prom Lord, both orders have engaged my services to put an end to these two splinter groups. Yes, I had some help with the placement of explosives, but most of this is my doing." She sighed. "Just listen to them. Going after it like a bunch of spoiled rotten children."

Danny wouldn't necessarily have called it that, but the commotion in the warehouse was certainly volatile. And then Matilda released her thumb and the warehouse went up in one tremendous blast.

Grabbing Matilda, Danny moved behind the dumpster to avoid any flying debris. After the blast had settled, Matilda said, "Why thank you, Danny. I didn't know you cared."

"Who says I do, just..."

"Tell you what. Why don't you come and stay with me? I'll take care of you. I knew all along there's no magic growing between your toes. And while everyone else seems to think so, I promise I won't sell you to the highest bidder."

"You won't, huh?" Danny chuckled. "Yeah, right." He turned and walked away, leaving Matilda standing there.

"Wait, Danny! Can't we work something out? Truly, I'm a lonely old woman who could use the company."

He was sure she could, but he had to make his own way in the world. Find his own path, as he always had. Which at that moment was the only thing he was certain of. That, and the familiar tingling between his toes, as once again that apocryphal crud, the bane of his existence, began to itch. He could live with it, he decided. ❧

Last Call

by Alec Kowalczyk

The barman attends to a patron on the right, checks the tubing—a kink in the line—taps it, and the flow of alcohol resumes.

All customers are connected to clear plastic tubing, coils of it disappearing over and behind the bar, the other end affixed to an intravenous implant burrowed into each customer's wrist.

A digital blip alerts him of another patron, and a shut-off valve is quarter-turned, the legal limit of alcohol having been consumed, blood alcohol assured not to exceed the governed percent. The barkeep disengages the flexible conduit, reminding the customer he will not be able to imbibe for the next six hour duration as controlled by law, adding as always to have a safe drive home.

Another patron occupies the just vacated barstool, and the barman swathes his wrist with rubbing alcohol, inquiring what the pleasure might be that evening.

John Dickson: The Sound Behind the Most Dangerous Night on TV

by C.J. Bahnsen

“It’s the crowning turd of my sci-fi career,” John Dickson says, shaking his head in mild disgust as he stares into a computer monitor, looking over his roster of film credits on the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com). “It’s ghastly.” He is referring to a forgettable sci-fi film known as *Hammerhead* (aka *Sharkman*), released for TV in 2005, about a wacky scientist who fuses human and shark DNA together (you can guess the rest), for which Dickson scored the music. *Hammerhead* was an 88-minute film with 82 minutes of music, because the producer wanted the score to be nonstop. This is often the case with sci-fi directors and/or producers who want their films scored with “wall-to-wall music.” You’d think that would make a composer happy, but Dickson balks at the idea. “If the music is constant, it becomes an air conditioner,” he explains. “It literally becomes room tone. I will fight directors to have some of the music taken out on sci-fi films.”

If you’ve ever tuned in to the Syfy channel on a Saturday night—billed as the “most dangerous night on television”—for the original movie, then you’ve no doubt heard a Dickson score. Whether he wanted to or

not, the composer has established a niche for himself putting the music to many of the low-budget

B-flicks premiered on Syfy, titles like *Attack of the Gryphon*, *Showdown at Area 51*, *Mammoth*, *Pterodactyl*, *Wraiths of Roanoke*, and *The Black Hole*.

It’s mid-January, pushing 80 degrees, damn warm even by Southern California standards in the dead of winter. Yolky sunlight falls through the open glass slider into Dickson’s music studio, a converted pool house behind his home on the west end of the valley in Sherman Oaks. Just beyond the studio’s threshold is a kidney-shaped pool set into a tranquil deck area, all of it privatized by hedges and trees. Although the studio still resembles a pool house from the outside, the interior is akin to being on the bridge of the Millennium Falcon. A master control panel, vast mixing board and multi-monitors are wedged inside the cell space, all of it centered around a mounted flat screen, Dickson’s portal into

strange new worlds. He will often spend more time in this studio than in the main house, leading a somewhat reclusive life while answering the demands of his work, two cats and a concert grand piano for companionship. I’m sitting beside him in a spare chair, getting ready for some sci-fi/horror samples. He closes the glass slider, draws the blinds, dimming



Photographs courtesy C.J. Bahnsen and John Dickson

the room to a theatrical mood, then jumps back in his throne and manipulates his mouse. The giant flat



screen explodes into wild greenery, ominous sounds rise, and we are transported deep within a Turkish forest infested with killer pterodactyls.

The film is, of course, *Pterodactyl*, also released in 2005, directed by Mark Lester, whose credits include *Commando*, *Firestarter*, and *Wraths of Roanoke*. And just now a comely damsel enters screen right, leggy in white shorts, all alone. She kneels beside a secluded lake and lotions water onto her arms, then begins removing her outer clothing. This is a scene in the film that allowed Dickson to get more artistic and create what he deems a “John Williams kind of moment.” The music settles, strings withdrawing gently, allowing the sensuality of the scene to bloom. But as the woman enters the peaceful lake, a dark strain of sinewy violins bleeds in, foreshadowing menace yet remaining delicate, giving space to the natural liquid sounds of our damsel swimming underwater. For a moment the film isn’t campy anymore, the music having grown poignant and searing in its emotive power.

“I got a kick out of creating a moment where it felt like a mature film, before we go to the flying

bug,” says Dickson, just as a pterodactyl plummets from the sky and snatches the woman from the water to shrill screams. The music waxes more urgent, driven by staccato orchestral thrusts, flipping back now to a hardened in-your-face thrill score.

Dickson always looks for opportunities to lend cinematic maturity to these made-for-television Syfy movies, a perpetual challenge since he often has to work under extremely tight deadlines that can stress his creative mojo. In some instances he is given as little as nine days to write an entire score, never even meeting or speaking with the director.

Each director that he does get to interact with wants something different from the music. “Lester loves action and he wanted a big orchestral score, top to bottom,” says the composer. He has much happier memories about *Pterodactyl*. It was the first of the sci-fi horrors where he was able to draw from his recently updated sound library that includes a more authentic palette of orchestral samples. He has to become a one-man orchestra because these sci-fi films operate on shoestring budgets that don’t allow him to hire live musicians. “I can get closer and closer to writing what I would write if I had unlimited resources and the London Symphony. I have better strings now, I have woodwinds I can stand to listen to, and I always play a lot of French horn, which helps.”

Sometimes a film is incomplete when it plops in Dickson’s lap, forcing him to write music to raw sound with little or no visuals; there’s nothing but a black screen with a chyron that reads something like, “alien ship flies by.” *Gryphon* came to him with a lot of CGI special effects missing, the monster represented by a guy standing toward camera holding up a Styrofoam head. And sometimes a film is mostly finished but so visually rotten, as with *Hammerhead*, that Dickson has to retreat into his imagination: “I’ll create my own world if what I’m working on sucks,” he says. “Once I grab the technical placements where everything goes, I’ll ignore the visuals and write to something better in my head. I’ll just pretend.”

Given, Dickson is not a fan of all of the sci-fi films he’s scored, but no matter how cheesy the story and special effects get, no matter how low the budget, he always delivers quality music, so good it makes these flicks seem better than they really are, and that’s why he keeps getting offers to “fix” them.

Dickson’s musical gift has always been there, ripening while he was growing up in a tiny East Texas town called Nacogdoches, getting whisked to classical piano competitions across the region, and winning them. His nurturing parents exposed him to all genres of music. Everything from Chopin and Puccini to Glen Campbell, the Beatles, and Dave Brubeck was on the household playlist, and little John was channeling melodic vibrations right out of the crib, spending hours and hours at the piano, reading music while other kids his age were still learning the alphabet. He formed his first band at age 13, studied French horn, jazz, and conducting as an undergrad at Stephen F. Austin University, then buzzed through the commercial music masters program at University of Miami.

Besides being a composer, he has been in demand as a session musician since first appearing on the LA scene in the early 90s, quickly gaining a rep as a badass pianist and French horn virtuoso. Add to that his exceptional gift as an arranger, noticed by the jazz icon Chick Corea who tapped Dickson to be his orchestrator for his jazz quintet, sextet, and orchestra works. Dickson has performed with Barbra Streisand, Elton John, Ray Charles, Johnny Mathis, and Billy Joel; and he has composed for the daytime soaps “All My Children” and “General Hospital”—a show on which he also played a recurring role as a lawyer/lounge pianist.



The sci-fi door first opened to Dickson in 2001 when he was asked to put music to *A Galaxy Far, Far Away*, a cultish no-budget documentary that explores the *Star*

Wars universe via obsessive geeks and groupies, some of them living their daily lives in costume, who chase *Star Wars* conventions and other related events across country. Because most of the film features talking heads, Dickson had to keep the score low-key and out of the way, but it was enough to draw the ear of then up-and-coming director Tim Cox who asked Dickson to score his first film. It was a sci-fi short called *The Man with No Eyes*, about an alien gunslinger who travels the Old West seeking vengeance.

The short feature marked the beginning of a lasting composer-director partnership, resulting in a slew of original TV movies that premiered (and continue to re-air) on the Syfy channel, including *Alien Lockdown*, *Larva*, and *Mammoth*, starring Tom Skerritt. For the latter film, a spoof about a frozen woolly mammoth in a museum that becomes reanimated by an alien entity and terrorizes a Louisiana town, Dickson went for a “tongue-n-cheek Mancini [as in Henry] thing.”

Picture this: two old fogies in a parked car along a deserted road. It’s night and our geriatric lovebirds are getting ready to lock lips, but first, the wrinkly woman interrupts the romantic momentum to remove her upper teeth and drop them in a glass of water on the dashboard. Now they get busy and we switch to an exterior shot of the car rocking, and over the car radio someone is crooning a Barry

Manilowesque ballad, part of which goes... *Late in the night / I feel you holding me tight against the wheel / once again our love takes shape inside my car... I was high when I wrote this song...* As the song plays on we cut to the glass of water on the dashboard and see the water vibrating, along with the dentures, signaling the mammoth’s heavy



footsteps approaching—Cox loves to satirize other well-known sci-fi films such as, in this case, *Jurassic Park*. The voice on the radio belongs to Dickson, who wrote and performed the “completely absurd” ballad to milk the wackiness of the scene. Even though he morphs into a schmaltzy lounge lizard to do it, the dude can truly sing—he gets regular offers to do session work as a vocalist.

Dickson has had more fun working with Cox than any other sci-fi director. He also respects Cox’s artistic vision. Of all the flicks they’ve done together, Dickson is most partial to *Larva*. The film is set in Host, Missouri, a rural town where an experimental genetic cocktail turns a man into a huge mutant parasite that attacks people and uses their bodies to host more parasites.

“I like the approach we took for the score, which was much more intimate for most of the film, much quieter, and it had retro elements of ‘70s television in



terms of the orchestration and the kind of eeriness of it,” Dickson says. “And there are some good [acting] performances in *Larva*. Again, the film gets a little silly when Tim actually has to deal with CGI critters, because you eventually hit that budget wall and can’t do what you really want to. And those Saturday night movies have a distinct formula to them where something always has to blow up at the end. But the film has some beautiful shots. I think Tim used what he called ‘tobacco filters’ to give the film this sort of rusted look. He’s always trying things and that’s why I love doing those films with him. Because even though they’re these campy little popcorn movies, he’s using them to learn and to test some things out. And for each one he does, there are elements that get better in terms of what he brings to the table. Those are the kind of cats I want to work with.”

Cox has since graduated from TV movies to a bigger-budget theatrical film, and he brought Dickson along for the ride. Their latest project is *Miss Nobody*, an indie comedy-horror starring Leslie Bibb (*Confessions of a Shopaholic*) and Adam Goldberg (*Saving Private Ryan*), due out sometime this year. The story centers on a mild-mannered secretary who discovers she has a talent for murder as she ascends the corporate ladder. Dickson received enough of a music budget to do justice to his orchestral score. He was able to hire the best studio musicians in Los Angeles, saying, “It’s so great to work with live players, it makes such a difference. You can get these wonderful light textures that you can’t really get out of a box. And you hire great players so you can get their personalities and what they bring to the music as well. You know, it’s not just notes.”

In between working with Cox, the composer has just finished scoring a third season of the hit TV series *Burn Notice* on the USA channel. *Burn Notice* is a sort of contemporary hybridization of *Miami Vice*, *Magnum, P.I.*, and *MacGyver*. Set in Miami’s South Beach, the show stars Jeffrey Donovan as a spy recently disavowed by the U.S. Government who uses his Special Ops training and an expertise at improvising gadgets, to help others in trouble. Dickson had to write over 300 pieces for the first season’s 11 episodes.


“Donovan plays a heavy hombre, a martial arts guy, a wise-cracky guy, so I have to support each side of his character,” says the composer. “I soften him when he talks to his mom, and harden him during heavy straight scenes, like when he gets trapped or in trouble.” Then we have the beautiful and dangerous Gabrielle Anwar who plays Fiona, an ex-IRA operative with weapons and hand-to-hand combat expertise. “Fiona can be incredibly sexy and alluring, so the music has to walk those lines without getting silly.”

In scoring one-hour episodes of *Burn Notice*, Dickson has to write hundreds of short pieces that draw from “every conceivable kind of music,” he says. “I’ve done heavy metal, Latin, full-on orchestral. I’ve done these blended orchestral things, like the stuff you hear in *The Bourne Identity* scores that have a big techno flavor, but there’s still an orchestral element to it. I’ve done outright techno, R&B, and a sort of *Get Shorty* style of jazz. I’ve also done what I call ‘gadget cues,’ but I wouldn’t know how to categorize them.”

His *Burn Notice* music won him an ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) Top Television Series Award for the show’s last two seasons.

Of late, the Saturday night Syfy flicks are drifting into Dickson’s rearview mirror—the last one to feature some of his music was *Stem Cell*, which aired in 2009. His work is drawing more attention by industry executives these days and, in turn, bringing in bigger projects with more enticing budgets, including the new Fox TV series *The Good Guys*, a cop show starring Tom Hanks’ son, Colin Hanks. The maestro has by no means closed the door on sci-fi and is still partial to the genre. “I’ll never lose my feel for sci-fi,” he says. “I just want the budgets to be the right size. *Avatar*-sized would be great.”



To listen to Dickson’s music go to www.johndicksonmusic.com, click on “film-tv” at the top, choose a sci-fi movie poster (the poster gallery alone is worth checking out), then click it open for inside info about the film and music samples from the score. 

HOROSCOPES

Aries: (March 21—April 19)

Years from now, you’ll look back on this and laugh. Leading Gotham City’s scientists to marvel at just how long the Joker’s nerve toxin has lasted in your system.

Taurus: (April. 20—May 20)

Your success at combining business with home life won’t seem quite as impressive after you get that job on the demolition crew.

Gemini: (May 21—June 21)

Nothing is set in stone for you in the coming months. Except, of course, those pesky Weeping Angels. Don’t blink.

Cancer: (June 22—July 22)

Building new friendships takes time. Building an evil robot army mostly just takes a secret lab, a propensity for violence, and ample supplies of WD-40.

Leo: (July 23—Aug. 22)

Now is the time to toot your own horn. Nobody’s going to want to listen to your dumb vuvuzela jokes a year from now. (Heck, even *this* one isn’t all that funny, come to think of it.)

Virgo: (Aug. 23—Sept. 22)

A quiet night at home with a good book could be just what the doctor ordered. Or maybe it was psychological counseling and electroshock therapy the doctor ordered. Oh well, it’s bound to work itself out either way.

Libra: (Sept. 23—Oct. 23)

Sometimes, being a good listener is all that really matters. Especially when you’re trying to avoid capture by a pack of bloodthirsty alien predators.

Scorpio: (Oct. 24—Nov. 21)

You sometimes worry that you’re getting pulled in too many directions at once. But that’s what happens when you trip and fall into a salt-water taffy machine.

Sagittarius: (Nov. 22—Dec. 21)

Your future is as lofty as the boundless sky. Which is really just a nice way of saying you’re going to get pushed out of an airplane if you’re not too careful.

Capricorn: (Dec. 22—Jan 19)

Remember, you can lead a horse to water, but people are going to talk if you insist on making it wear that silly two-piece bathing suit every time you do so.

Aquarius: (Jan. 20—Feb. 18)

A secret admirer will surprise you with some love poetry. Although you may be a little disconcerted by the repeated use of the phrase “massive internal hemorrhaging.”

Pisces: (Feb. 19—March 20)

As the planets move into alignment, you’ll spend most of your time making dirty jokes about the full moons of Uranus. Maybe it’s time you grew up, huh?

Labyrinth

by Janet E. Sever

You know them without always recognizing what they are. They are the mystic places, special places. Stonehenge. Easter Island. The Nazca Lines. The Pyramids. Places important in the universe before their edifices appeared, or perhaps made significant in the grand schema because of their structures.

We were visiting such a place, taking in the scenery, laughing occasionally at the primitive beliefs of the natives. My husband, Leslie, ever the scholar, toured me enthusiastically around Knossos and the rest of the island. This was month six of our honeymoon. Who knew when we would decide to go home?

“The Minoans were quite warlike, my dear.” He peered over the tops of his glasses, frowning at a map of the place. “The legendary labyrinth has never been found. Some say it was a series of caves under the island that have since been lost, some say it was a series of caves on a nearby island. Most experts say it never existed.” Still talking, he wandered off. A husband three times one’s own age can be tiring. But I had many options for relaxation and rest.

His voice carried on the breeze; he droned at a group of students. “The Minotaur was probably a construct growing from Mithraism, which evolved from the legend of Mithras overcoming the bull and dragging it into his cave. No such monster, of course, ever existed.”

Fascinating stuff. That little man was my love, my paramour, my new life. We’d met in the elevator of his building, and two weeks later I’d accompanied him to Hong Kong on business. You’ve read about us in the papers; Leslie’s the man richer than Bill Gates, who handed over control of nearly everything to pursue his two passions: archaeology and me.

Today while he continued to seek answers from history, I sought better shopping, a cool gin and tonic, and a spot out of the blinding sun. Maybe a cheeseburger. The cuisine of Greece sickened me. My lips sent a kiss Leslie’s way, which he grabbed in his hand and blew back at me. Our porter, Nigel, led me toward the boat.

“Hot, isn’t it?”

Nigel, a well-muscled Ethiop, grunted. Always a man of few words, the size of his vocabulary was not what interested me. Steep stairs taxed my legs as we descended to the Zodiac that would take us back to the *Cassandra*, but my admiration of Nigel’s nearly naked body distracted me from the mild discomfort. His strong back rippled as he stowed my shopping bags; tiny white shorts snugged his buttocks. A sheen of sweat covered all six and a half feet of him. He glistened. In twenty minutes I would be admiring the contrast between our skin tones as my pale legs wrapped around his dark waist and we moved together once again on Leslie’s sheets.

We motored out to where the yacht was anchored, and saw that the boat belonging to Leslie’s business partner for the Greek operation was moored alongside. Nikos had been around entirely too much since we’d arrived. He was exactly what you’d expect from a caricature Greek tycoon: slicked-back hair, too many gold chains, pendulous paunch that must have been a joy to his lovers. Heavy rings decorated eight of his ten fingers. He was shirtless and a pelt of black hair covered his chest and back. He quickly slurped the olive from his martini and then held out his arms to me as we climbed aboard.

“Good to see you again, Nikos. Are they giving you everything you need?” I grasped his hand and smiled my best hostess smile; he kissed both of my cheeks and the sea air cooled the saliva left there.

“Cassie! Have you been enjoying the history and scenery of our island? Did you leave Leslie to his own devices today? How he could leave such a lovely wife as you alone for even a moment is beyond my comprehension!” His eyes flicked toward Nigel, who was at the bar mixing drinks. A sly grin shaped Nikos’ mouth, and I knew that despite his boorishness, this man was not stupid. I would need to be much more careful unless I wanted to lose everything I had gained by marrying Leslie. I tried to extricate my hand from his, but he held on tightly.

“Oh, you know Leslie. He found an eager audience and was discussing the historic elements of Mithraism when I left him. I was starting to

sunburn, so I came home. We'll have plenty of time together this evening." Again I tried to pull my hand from his, but his grasp was firm as he stroked circles over my palm with his thumb.

"I thought we might take you over to the other side of the island. There are some fascinating rock formations there, and even some caves that legend says used to be connected to our infamous labyrinth."

"Oh, Leslie will love that trip. That sounds like a great activity for tomorrow." It was terrible to contemplate spending the rest of the day alone with this oily man.

"Unfortunately, I have to go to Athens tomorrow, and I will be there for a week. This is my last opportunity to show you this, and there are some intriguing carvings and paintings you must see." He fingers were stroking the fine hairs on my upper arm now, his porcine face leering too close to my own. A headache germinated behind my temples.

"We couldn't possibly just leave and not let Leslie know."

Nikos gestured to Nigel, who had been following our discussion. "Please go tell Mr. Smythe-Davis that we will meet him at 5 at Herakles." He named the exclusive restaurant on the other side of the island. I knew Leslie would be delighted to continue uninterrupted his amateur archaeology studies until this evening. Nigel looked angrily over his shoulder at me as he disembarked to do his errand.

"Fine, fine. It's a plan," I said brightly, finally yanking my hand from Nikos' and backing away. I realized it would be easier to agree than to continue to debate, and now with some distance between us, I no longer had to inhale his garlic-scented breath. Still, I resented someone controlling my life on my own boat, a wedding gift from Leslie that he'd named for me.

Nikos signaled the captain. The noise of the anchor rising fertilized my headache. I stepped behind the bar and looked for the bottle of wine Leslie had opened last night. Then a sound startled me, and when I realized what it was, my headache realized full flower. Nikos' teenage son was aboard and accompanying us on this trip. I don't know where he'd been—on the bridge with the captain perhaps. Had I known he was with Nikos, I never would have agreed to visit Nikos' cave.

Tauro was loathsome, a mass of ailments. Everyone who met him no doubt wondered at how God could be so perverse and pile so many problems into one human being. He was nearly seven feet tall, with a hump-like deformity on his back. His neck was nonexistent; his head appeared to rest directly on his shoulders. Where Nikos was hairy, Tauro was covered with fur. Leslie had explained that the boy suffered from hypertrichosis, which caused hair to grow heavily on his face and upper body. And not only was Tauro a disgusting mass of physical problems, he was mentally challenged and schizophrenic as well. He could not speak, communicating with a series of grunts and noises that only Nikos and their help could understand, and he often flew into unchecked rages if he was frustrated, confused, or frightened. Why Nikos hadn't institutionalized him long ago I would never understand.

My head throbbed and I reached into the cabinet. A lovely 1982 Petrus sluiced three aspirin down my throat. Sinking into a deck chair, I tried to look relaxed and content as the *Cassandra* skated over the waves. Nikos and Tauro prattled to one another, Nikos occasionally looking over at me and giving me a grin or wink. I closed my eyes, pretending to drowse.

The three of us boarded the Zodiac and skipped over the waves. We scrambled ashore and I followed Nikos across the rough rocks to his secret grotto. Why hadn't I worn tennis shoes? The Hermes sandals Leslie had bought for me in Paris would be ruined. Although, I supposed, we could always go back and get another pair. Or two.

"Aha! Or as we say here in Greece, eureka! We have found it!" Nikos grinned at me, and behind me Tauro emitted a grunt that might have been a laugh. "Let me show you our labyrinth!" He handed me a flashlight and motioned for me to enter the cave that gaped before us. "You wait here, like a good boy." Gently he patted Tauro's hairy cheek. Tauro sat down on a rock, and together Nikos and I entered.

Despite my misgivings, I have to admit that I was fascinated. The walls were covered with ancient frescoes of Mithras and worship ceremonies. Bas-relief sculptures of bulls decorated the areas between the pictures. I ventured further inside, reaching up to touch one of the ornate columns that was carved out of solid rock. It was lovely, and was—perhaps—worth forfeiting an afternoon of steamy sex with Nigel.

I traced the outlines of the sculpture. “This is lovely. I am so glad you brought me here today; I’ll have to bring Leslie back tomorrow. He will be so upset if he misses this.”

“I am so glad you like it, my little *adonia*.” His breath was steamy on the back of my neck and he reached around, cupping my breast in his paw and squeezing hard.

I still can’t believe I didn’t see this coming. I tried to pull away, but he held me tight.

“Nikos, please. I am a married woman. Leslie would—”

“Leslie would be interested to learn that you have been fucking his porter behind his back for your entire honeymoon.” He turned me around to face him; his other hand reached between my legs and crushed painfully. He pressed me hard against the wall of the cave.

“You’re hurting me!”

“You love it, and you know it. You’ve been giving it away to Nigel, but I know you have some left to give me.” Still holding me against the wall, he reached his hand into the elastic waistband of my shorts. Two fingers dug painfully inside me. “Pure silk,” he purred, and pressed up against me. His penis pushed hard against my thigh.

I went limp in his arms. “Oh, God, Nikos, you’re right. I have wanted you since I first met you that day in London.” I pushed him away slightly and unbuttoned his shorts, freeing his erection. I caressed it and he moaned.

“I knew it, you whore. I am going to fuck you like Leslie and Nigel could never fuck you.” His kisses were garlic and gin.

I encircled his penis with my fingers as he pinched my nipples. I dug all five of my strong, silk-wrapped nails into his scrotum and shaft as far as I could dig them. I was rewarded immediately by a gush of warm blood. Nikos screamed and pulled away, as my nails raked his flesh.

I ran toward the exit and the safety of the Zodiac, but was met by the grunting, howling form of Tauro coming to see why his father was screaming. I turned around and ran back inside, past the prone form of Nikos holding his bloody penis and sobbing. My flashlight was where I’d dropped it, but

fortunately I had the presence of mind to grab it as I ran further into the cave.

I could hear Tauro grunting and moaning at his father, and then Niko’s exhortation to Tauro to “go get that bitch.” I ran faster and hoped that this cave was deep enough to shelter me from the deranged Tauro.

I ran. The tunnel twisted and turned, but it didn’t branch off, and I could hear Tauro gaining on me. I was going to be trapped here, and Tauro would tear me apart. I looked over my shoulder and could barely see Tauro in the gloom. The tunnel twisted to the right, and just as my flashlight illuminated the turn, I tripped on a large rock and fell against the wall in front of me.

More correctly, I fell through the wall in front of me. Although it looked just like the stone of the cave, the wall I fell through was apparently soil covered lightly with plaster. I must have hit it just right to fall through it like that, and I realized that this must be the entrance to the rest of the labyrinth. I almost laughed; I, of all people, had discovered the ancient secret labyrinth of Knossos! My mirth was cut short as I felt a hand grab my ankle and heard a satisfied grunt behind me.

I kicked out, hard, and caught Tauro in the face with the spiky heel of my shoe. He yelped and let go of my ankle to try to staunch the flow of blood from his nose. I scrambled up through the hole into the labyrinth. Perhaps I could escape him here. I ran into the new area, paying little attention to where I was going.

This area was different from the passage I’d just left. Instead of one long cave that had simply turned, this was a series of caves, or perhaps a single cave, with numerous passages. I stopped for moment to catch my breath, flicking my flashlight around. Another bas-relief of a bull decorated the tunnel. It was crude, but I could tell what it was. Near it, other jagged carvings were visible. Greek letters; I strained to read them. “Kratos lives,” said one. Another said “120 days, I think.” Were these carved by some poor soul who had been trapped down here in ancient times? I shuddered, hoping I would be spared their fate of dying in the labyrinth alone. I gave a start as I heard a wheezing breath nearby. Tauro had followed me.

I slipped into a crevice and stifled my flashlight. I heard Tauro pass my hiding place, and held my breath as he stopped. Could he hear me in the dark? Did a preternatural sense of smell or sight compensate for his many other afflictions?

I tiptoed down the passageway, and slipped into another gap in the rock, then into another, then into yet another. I couldn't imagine that Tauro could find me now, but was surprised when I heard him pass close to me again. I continued my way, slipped into gaps in the rock walls as I felt them, until I was so hopelessly lost that I knew Tauro would never find me. Indeed, I could no longer hear his heavy breathing, his senseless grunts and snorts.

I waited nearly half an hour, until I was sure that he was nowhere near, then I switched on my flashlight and tried to make my way back. I wondered if Nikos was still crouched in the cave holding his crotch. Perhaps he'd already bled to death. I hoped I'd done permanent damage. If not, I would work out some agreement with him; if he didn't tell Leslie about my fling with Nigel, I wouldn't tell Leslie how his business partner had tried to rape me. I was feeling more hopeful about my life situation.

Mentally I counted the number of turns I thought I'd taken while fleeing Tauro, but realized that my count was not accurate. I tried to find my own footprints on the floor of the cave, but after a few more twists and turns, I could see that I had crossed my own steps several times. Visions of string or breadcrumbs flashed through my mind. The prints left by my spiked heels were clearly visible, but in some places they'd been scuffed by Tauro's sneakers. What did he wear, I thought. Size twenty? For a moment I wondered about the size of his penis, but bile crept into my throat.

Nausea turned to pure fear as my flashlight sputtered out. I am ashamed to admit that claustrophobia and despair completely overcame me; I could only lean against the wall of the tunnel and try to think how I could get out. Would I be stuck here like poor Kratos, apparently centuries before? One hundred twenty days, or more, in this hellish maze? Would they find my body, nothing but dry bones and dust—but exquisite—couture?

I heard a bellow and...were those tears? Tauro neared me, and momentarily I felt sorry for him. Poor

insane idiot, I thought. He'll starve to death here and he won't understand. But then I remembered his tendency to violence and had no choice but to keep walking. My feet ached, my mouth was painfully dry, and I relinquished all hope of ever seeing the sun again.

I don't know how long I was in the maze. It could have been six hours; it could have been two days. It was long enough for me to become ravenously hungry, and long enough for that hunger to dissipate. It was long enough that I nearly fainted from thirst. It was long enough that I wanted, more than once, to simply lie down and wait for sweet death. But the grotesque sounds of Tauro, sometimes distant, sometimes uncomfortably close, followed me as I walked and walked and walked.

I almost thought it was a hallucination when I smelled fresh air. The entrance? The exit? I tried to yell, but my parched mouth and throat would not cooperate. The tunnel got lighter; I could make out shapes in the shadows. I heard someone muttering in Greek. "Help me," I whispered in English and Greek. I was sure no one could hear me. I tripped on a rock and didn't have the strength to stand; I crawled on hands and knees toward the dusky light. Turning a corner, I saw a man, dressed completely in ancient garb. He looked as exhausted as I felt. Had he been wandering here lost as well?

I looked around me. It wasn't an exit, but it was a large room in the cavern with holes in the rock above where daylight streamed through. I could see the man clearly and just for a moment, I marveled at the authenticity of his costume; most of the sites had guides sporting cheesy outfits not remotely as convincing. "Help me," I said again.

He looked at me vacantly and opened his dry, cracked lips. "Help," he said weakly in Greek. He was as lost as I was. Then he screamed. "Minotaur!"

Tauro lumbered up behind me. Already disoriented by our trek, exhausted, dehydrated and hungry, he bellowed and lunged at the man, grabbing him around the waist. Even in his weakened condition, Tauro was strong enough to heave the man over his head. I jerked to my feet; my frantic steps had taken me well down the tunnel by the time the man's body hid the stone floor beside me. Tauro's screams and grunts and cries quickly faded from my

hearing as the distance grew between us. I ran blindly, I don't know for how long.

Miraculously, suddenly, full daylight beckoned, and before me was the courtyard of the fully restored palace at Knossos. Sunlight glinted off the freshly hewn rock; the gardens were fragrant and cool. I could hear running water somewhere in front of me and tried to find it, mouth open and panting. I remember several elaborately costumed people running toward me just before I passed out.



My transport through time into the Knossos of an era long before Christ has no rational explanation. But Knossos is a mystical place, with an old religion, and the crust of time is thin here.

This ancient time suits me. Minos treats me well, showers me with riches and jewelry far more valuable than anything Leslie ever gave me. We cannot marry, but I am content to be his most valued concubine. I

try to keep a low profile so that my presence here does not disrupt the course of history.

My thoughts sometimes turn to Tauro, but he, too, seems content here, having found a place in the labyrinth of caves beneath the palace. I asked Minos to take care of him; servants leave food and water, and somehow Tauro manages to find it. There are occasional stories of sightings of him, hairy, tattered, furious and crazy, and he has grown to legend status. Sometimes it's hard to sort the truth from the fictions people tell. Tauro serves a beneficial function: he dispatches Minos' enemies. Certainly he is more useful here than he was in our own time.

But I confess, as much as I thought I'd enjoy leading a life of utter and complete luxury, sometimes it's a bit boring here. Travel seems like an option. Even though Leslie's talk bored me senseless, there is still much knowledge in my brain that others here might find useful—and valuable. Delphi sounds like a wonderful place, and the boat ride there is not that long. ❧

Star Spores

by William Doreski

Peering through a telescope
on overwrought summer midnights
I learn that the stars are spores
of a fungus so unlovable
some cultures think it a god.

The huge dish of agar we call
the universe excites DNA
to gargantuan poses, feeding
off the collective ignorance
of modestly sentient creatures.

I'd like to take a spore print,
but even the clearest photographs
catch star-spores not as they are
but as they were millions or
billions of years ago. Maybe

the so-called dark matter, the ripened
fruiting body, has so enlarged
that its mycelium has ferned

through the forelock of my brain,
teasing me with sensations

too similar to a love-life
to distinguish me from other
individuals of my species.
I peer so hard through the telescope
my good eye distends like the foot

of an amoeba, and the star-spores
peer back with fungal humor,
the earth whirling beneath me
without that sense of purpose
only sexual or religious

gestures embody: the parting
of the great vacuum as we sail
in ellipsis not in the least
like the Red Sea parting for Moses
and his carefully sterilized faith.

Fire Eater

by Cort Ellyn

Shackled ankle and wrist, the creature barely breathed. He drooped like a wet blanket between the two turnkeys. Pasty pale orange skin drew taut over long limb bones. If the creature could stand on his own, he might top seven feet. A pair of black horns spiraled another three feet from a lousy mat of hair faded to a sickly pink-gray, and black talons grew uncontrolled from fingertip and toe.

Mother Mirrah lowered a perfumed kerchief and asked, "What is this?"

"It's a draeling, mum," said the turnkey.

"I can see *that!* Why was he not moved with the others last week? Wyvern Prison can't be demolished until the inmates are out of it."

"Yes, mum, but the thing is—"

"The thing is," the second turnkey interrupted, "we rather forgot he were there."

"He were in the well, you see."

"The well?" Mirrah asked.

"Yes, mum. The keeper of the Ass Level tells us yesterday that there had to be someone down there, for the bread always got ate. Best to make sure it weren't rats, he said."

"The *well*..." Mirrah said, anger flaring in her cheeks. She heard tales of abuse far too often.

The turnkeys looked uneasy. Offending a priestess of Vatanne wouldn't earn them the gods' favor. "Yes, well, you see, mum..."

"I see perfectly. Clean up this creature and take him downriver to the infirmary immediately."

"Don't let him fool ya, mum. He were down there for a reason."

"Aren't they all..."

Wyvern Prison for Extraplanar Delinquents rose like a black boil above the Rahnish town of Aureth. Mirrah had first encountered the prison ten years earlier when, as a novice, she had made a pilgrimage to pay homage to the shrines dedicated to the Earth Mother. Compelled to visit the precincts, Mirrah longed to bring the light of hope to the creatures penned there. She quickly learned the arrogance of her intentions. The prisoners, gaunt and dull-eyed, hid from her in reeking dark corners, if they took note of her at all. The

turnkeys had no qualm about torturing the inmates in her presence, and the warden had considered her a menace and kicked her out. Mirrah returned to Moonfall Monastery, sick with the certainty that something had to be done. Five years she appealed to the throne for help. She must have written a thousand letters. When the High King had died without so much as a line in reply, Mirrah had no reason to suspect that his heir would regard her any more favorably. So she was astonished when one of the royal ministers came to the monastery to escort her to Caryth, the city of kings.

Now, seven miles below the old prison, the Wyvern River divided in a turbulent froth around a series of rocky islands. Upon the largest island, a compound of basalt towers neared completion. New Hope Prison was a commendation to High King Astyn's generosity and vision, the sign of a new age, or so Mirrah hoped. Iron bars still secured the windows and iron doors the exits; guards armed with mace and crossbow still patrolled the corridors. The King told Mirrah she would be a fool to dispense with those basic precautions, and he would not invest in a fool.

Returning to New Hope, Mother Mirrah went straight to the infirmary. Healers resided on the island, continually available for the care of the inmates. Cleanliness of both facility and residents was a primary priority; novices in white robes scrubbed the corridors and set out fresh rat traps. So different from the dank filthy darkness of old Wyvern. But the crisp scents of lye soap and sun-bleached sheets weren't enough to mask the odor of lingering disease. Among the rows of beds, a naede gurgled for water, an elphin tossed fitfully and coughed up bloody phlegm. Like these and a hundred more strange and wondrous creatures, the draeling had been shaved head to foot and powdered with lime to get rid of the lice, then bathed and clothed in cool white trousers.

A long time Mirrah stood at the foot of the draeling's bed, watching for each breath. They came slowly and shallow.

"I'm afraid we're going to lose that one," said Healer Selisse. She hovered behind Mother Mirrah and

looked at the draeling from the corner of an eye.

“You’ve no reason to fear him, Selisse.”

The healer regarded Mirrah with stinging doubt. “Begging pardon, Verdant Mother, but I have plenty cause. You didn’t read my report?”

“I came straight here. Why? What happened?”

“See the bloody welts on his wrists? We had to restrain him to bathe him. I’ve never seen such immediate wakefulness and fit of violence. Two of our orderlies are in the recovery room upstairs, one with a broken jaw, the other with a concussion.”

Mirrah found it difficult to believe that this wasted creature could sit up on his own, much less attack anyone. But the welts told the truth of it. The breadth of the draeling’s chest and shoulders, the weight of his bones, spoke of a strength that had once been formidable, but now? He was but a shadow on the edge of oblivion.

All at once she realized what must have roused him. “The water! Selisse, he’s a creature of fire. The water must have awakened instinctual panic in him. Of course. We shall have to remember.”

“How shall we forget?”

“We need to find a different bed for him as well. This won’t do at all.” Though the draeling was propped up on a stack of pillows, his feet dangled six inches off the bed. “What did you learn from him?” A wise couldn’t convince some inmates to talk, others couldn’t be made to shut up. Of course, Mirrah intended to use gentler methods to accomplish both.

“Nothing, Verdant Mother. It’s in the report. Except for the fit in the bath, he’s remained largely as you see him now. His eyes, though...” The healer stepped back from the bedside. “When we tried to feed him, his eyes opened. It wouldn’t trouble me to never see them again.”

“Healer Selisse,” whispered Mirrah, “if you cannot stomach the work to be done...”

“It’s not the work, Mother. It’s *him*. It’s all these foreign...monsters! They don’t belong here.”

Mother Mirrah had become adept at taming her anger. Long years of training among the Emerald Order had shaped her into a well-disciplined pacifist, in deed as well as word. “Yes,” she said, “I understand your... discomfort. But you must understand something, too, Selisse. Many of these creatures, the draeling included, share human blood. Many more are here simply because

they are considered foreign, misfits, outsiders. They have been abused and neglected by men who can’t imagine that these creatures share the same pain and fear that you feel, Selisse. And until we came along, no one cared. These creatures, from that wingless harpy over there to this draeling, deserve our unflinching compassion, not because they are good or pretty, but because we have it to give.”

Healer Selisse looked contrite enough, large black eyes larger still and misty.

Softly Mirrah requested, “Bring me a chair, child, I’ll sit with him awhile.”

He must have been a splendid creature once. Half human, half drilyga. His kind were rarely seen in the Plane of Flesh; drilyga raiders preferred to take human women back to the Plane of Fire with them. Mirrah herself had never seen a drilyga, though she remembered tales of draeling mercenaries wielding blazing swords or throwing balls of fire at their foes. There was also the tale of the draeling troubadour whose voice had set maidens’ hearts ablaze. He had eventually married one of the many and was supposedly the progenitor of the Sunfire Clan in northern Rahn. Certainly not a tale of violence.

And this creature? Mirrah couldn’t learn why he’d been thrown down that horror of a well until she learned who he was.

His color hadn’t improved since he was raised from the dark, and he stopped swallowing the broth Mirrah spooned into his mouth. For the safety of the orderlies, the long spiraling horns had been sawn off; only six inches remained. The black talons, too, had been cut. A husk, pale, shrunken, and helpless was all that Mirrah had to work with. She could think of nothing to do to help him but apply more salve to the welts on his wrists. She noted the size of his hands. His palm dwarfed hers, her fingers half the length of his. The lines in the palm, the delicate rosettes of the fingerprints, so very...human.

“Don’t die on me, draeling,” she sighed, smearing on another coat of salve. The medicine smelled of mint and must have burned like fire and ice together, for the draeling’s arm flinched and Mirrah found him staring at her. She couldn’t prevent the spark of fear that surged through her at the first sight of his eyes. Selisse had been right about that. The irises were red-orange, like embers, the pupils wide at first, but fast narrowing to slits in the strong daylight sifting through the shutters on the high

windows.

Mirrah caught her breath and asked, “Can you... can you understand me, draeling?”

For a moment he just stared at her, as if the slight movement of those eyes over her face were the only response he could manage. But at last his shaved, dehorned head gave a tiny nod.

“Good. If you feel you have the strength to speak, I need to know your name.”

The draeling made several feeble attempts before he muttered, “Name?” The voice, rough and unused, had a great deal of bass in it.

“We have records, you see,” Mirrah explained slowly. “It’s my duty to review the inmates’ cases, but I can’t identify your case until you tell me your name.”

The draeling stared past the whitewashed ceiling, frowning, shallow breath coming quicker now. The lids rolled down over the eyes, and with immense effort he whispered, “One Four Three ... Nine.”

Mirrah choked on a sob. “Not...not your prison number.”

He appeared more confused than ever. Then a distant, inward-seeing look came into the smoldering eyes. A tear rolled from one of them and down the side of his face. “Derinzan,” he said. “I am Derinzan.”



She set a team of novices to searching the books for the draeling’s records. “He was in that deplorable place for a long time,” she told the young women and wrote the draeling’s name and number at the bottom of a parchment listing all the other names and numbers the novices were looking for. The Wyvern’s record-keepers had been lax and disorganized at best. “I wouldn’t bother looking in the recent records. Start with that log there, sisters, the one from the first year of High King Astyn’s reign. Work backward. And take your time.”

While she waited for the novices’ findings, Mirrah sequestered herself in her quarters near the front gate of the compound and delved into the few case summaries the novices had managed to match with living inmates. Prepared by Rahnish court-scribes, the summaries were given to the prison wardens who, more often than not, couldn’t read. They detailed the highlights of each prisoner’s trial and conviction, along with any recommendations the court had given concerning

inmates with specific needs. The naedine had to be held in individual water cells or they would eventually drown like fish on shore. The keepers of Wyvern Prison had well understood the necessities of their extraplanar prisoners, and depriving them of those necessities had provided the keepers with easy means of torture. When Mirrah first assumed control of Wyvern, she had found a naede locked in a dry cell, skin dried out and stuck to the stone floor and peeling back from his teeth. None of the guards seemed to know...or admitted knowing... how long the naede had been dead.

Small as they were, many of the gnomes hadn’t escaped notice either. Deprived of earth and tree, the little diggers were bound to go insane. New Hope provided each of the gnomes’ cells with five feet of raw earth from the Rahnish countryside. Mad or sane, they could burrow now without risk of escape. And the poor harpy. Her wings had not only been clipped but hacked off. In her ensuing madness, she had worn her claw-like fingers to the bone trying to crawl up the walls of her aerie cell.

According to the summaries, plenty of inmates had admitted to their crimes, freely or after a session of “coercion.” The latter, of course, merited extra review. But whether or not the inmates were guilty, Mirrah couldn’t bring herself to justify their mistreatment. Where was the satisfaction in poking a chained dog with a stick?

By evening meal, Mirrah’s patience waned and she descended to the records room. She met a novice coming out. A water-warped log and a yellow scroll were tucked under her arm. “Lora?” she called. “Did you discover something after all?”

“One Four Three Nine wasn’t in the books like the others, Verdant Mother. The log, yes, but not in the bound summaries. We had to look through the scrolls. Some were so old they just fell apart.”

Scrolls, Mirrah was aware, fell out of use in the courts nearly a century ago. Inserting a page or two into a leather binding with a hundred others had been found to be far more efficient. Taking the items from the novice, Mirrah tilted the log toward a lantern and made out the words stamped on the cover, “19th year of the Reign of High King Sherlaine VII.”

Mirrah gasped and did a quick calculation of kings. “A hundred and forty years at least. An age and a revolution ago.”

“Wasn’t Sherlaine the Seventh the one who got his head lopped off?” Lora asked, wrinkling a delicate nose.

“He was, that. The draeling may well have fought for Sherlaine. Many royalists died in prisons like Wyvern. Well, we shall see. Thank you, Lora.”

In her rooms, Mirrah turned up the lamp beside her bed. The novice had inserted a red ribbon to mark the exact page in the log book; the entry hardly made for cozy bedtime reading. Derinzan had been convicted for murder and arson during the last and bloodiest year of the War of Kings. Seventy-three years into his imprisonment he was accused of inciting a breakout and setting the warden on fire. As a consequence he was tossed down the dry shaft on Level Five. The Well, where there was no light, no company, no escape.

The scroll told a fuller tale, one Mirrah could hardly stomach. Three times she read the case summary, each time less able to believe that any creature, of whatever plane, could commit such evil. In the morning she paid a visit to the infirmary. The draeling lay awake but failed to acknowledge Mirrah when she greeted him. All his attention clung to the skinny shaft of sunlight that crept through the eastern shutters and fell across his belly. The fingers of his right hand inched in and out of the light, and the flesh of those fingers had darkened to a strange rich brown-orange. The skin of his belly too darkened where the sunlight touched it. He was absorbing the light, feeding on it.

Mirrah asked an orderly to set up a screen around the draeling’s bed to provide them a measure of privacy. Only when the white sheet obstructed the sunlight did he look up and see his visitor.

“You must be Mother Mirrah,” he said.

Communicating still did not come easily. Speech left him breathless. The sound of his own voice and the whispers of the healers in the next room seemed to pain him. He put a darkened hand over an ear to muffle the noise.

Assuming the chair once again, Mirrah spoke quietly, “I am the Verdant Mother, yes.”

“You’re young.”

“Vatanne has blessed me with many opportunities since I was consecrated her daughter.”

“A healer told me this place is your idea of a prison.”

“New Hope belongs to High King Astyn, but he’s granted me the run of it.”

“Doesn’t look like a prison.”

“I hope not,” she replied, smiling. “Derinzan, we located your records.”

He stared at her as if this meant nothing. The smoldering eyes were still slow and confused. They drew pity from Mirrah’s breast like flame draws moths.

“Do you want to know how long you were down the well?”

His breathing changed, became short and fast. “I don’t want to think about it! Don’t put me back...”

“No one will put you back in that hole,” Mirrah assured him. “All the rubble from Wyvern Prison is being put down the well. There is no well.”

The draeling settled down and asked, “How long?”

“The best I can reckon is sixty-seven years. One hundred and forty-some years in Wyvern altogether.”

He didn’t believe her. She saw the denial all over his shrunken face.

“That was eight High Kings ago,” she added.

Slowly, acceptance set in. “And the rebellion?”

“Won by the rebels.”

“We *won*?” He tried to sit up, failed, and stared up at the ceiling, panting. “Ah, that’s right. Someone told me the King lost his head. I thought I’d dreamt it.”

“You didn’t fight for Sherlaine, then?”

“If I had, he would’ve survived. A while longer anyway.”

“How did *you* survive so long...down there?”

“Gods, lady,” he sighed. “You’re persistent. I guess it’s my misfortune that drilyga are the toughest race on their plane. Draelings only a little less so. That’s why we’re so damn hard to kill in battle. Why lords and kings give us everything they have if we win their wars for them. I tried to die, but I kept waking up in the same... in the same darkness.” The memory sent a violent tremor through his body. “In the beginning I screamed and screamed, but no one answered. I climbed until my fingers bled. Back then I could make a fire for myself. A little light, a little warmth to feed on. Then the fire went out and I couldn’t summon it again. And there was only the dark. So thick I could almost bite it. I gave up and laid down to die. Oh, gods, why didn’t I die?” The trembling grew worse and he sobbed. Mirrah tucked the woolen blanket tight around him and shushed him like a baby.

He grew quiet and complained, “Someone cut off my horns.”

A predictable evasion from unpleasant memories.

Mirrah had taken note of this recurring habit among the inmates she interviewed. Trying to make light of it, she said, "We could hardly get you through a door."

The dark right hand toyed with the blunt end of a horn and Derinzan scowled. "Drilyga are vain about their horns, you know?"

"They'll grow back."

"I need sunlight."

"In time."

His scowl deepened, and like a pouting child, he wouldn't look at her.

Would he evade the issue if Mirrah mentioned what she'd read in the scroll? "Derinzan," she began cautiously, "it may be overtaking right now, but I...I need you to tell me about the children. The crofters and their children."

Malice ignited in the smoldering eyes. On this matter there was no confusion. He knew exactly what she referred to. "No!" he said and rolled onto his side, putting his back to her.

"Later then," she conceded. "You see, if I'm to decide what's to be done with you, I need to learn the truth."

"Done with me?"

"I happen to believe that not every inmate of Wyvern Prison deserved to be there."

After a prolonged silence he said, "I thought they were the enemy."

Her heart sank. "So you did kill them."

"We all had a hand in it. I was put in charge of a *foraging* party. That was an insult, you see. There was a new commander and he didn't approve of me, said I was too destructive. I said this is a war, isn't it, but arguing availed me nothing, and I was sent out with twenty men to scrounge for supplies. Rebels were supposed to mark their houses with something...rabbit feet. I don't know why, but that was the rule. So we came upon this farm but saw no rabbit feet. Even if we had seen the sign, the master of the place started yelling at us and waving a pitchfork. He said they had nothing left to give us. We'd taken everything already. But I could hear the pigs in the barn. I sent a couple of men to check it out and the farmer cursed me for a fire eater. I couldn't really argue because that's what I am, but I hit him. Humans are fragile creatures."

"Did you mean to kill him?"

"He wasn't dead, not yet. Everyone went crazy after

that, my men, the crofter's family. I...I don't remember anything else."

Hmm, Mirrah would see about that. "What about the girls?"

Derinzan lay still, so still he hardly breathed, then he said, "Pretty little things. Bright hair like the sun. Thought about them often. All the time. I should've...protected them better. My men went after them, the three little girls. The crofter's sons came after me. Two full-grown sons. I defended myself as any soldier would. I killed them."

"And their mother?"

"I don't remember what happened to an old woman."

"You found her in the house..."

"A butcher knife...she came at us with a butcher knife. Couldn't blame her, really. It was all a mistake. We didn't know anyone else was in the house and we were ordered to come back with supplies."

"The mother was found in...several places."

"That's a lie. She was screaming her damned head off, so one of my men broke her neck."

"At your behest?"

"Shut her up, I said. The man took it too far. I told you, everyone went crazy."

"And the bodies...you burned them?"

"To hide what we'd done."

"From the branches of trees..."

"A lie. We piled them all together. Laid them in the straw."

"All but one of the girls. When you were arrested, she was found with you."

"A common courtesy. The men give spoils to their commanders."

"She was dead."

"Not when they took her from me."

"Close to dying?"

"No."

"How did she die then?"

Faster than Mirrah thought possible, the dracling flipped over and glared at her with hostile orange eyes. "How the hell should I know? I was in a cell by then. She probably killed herself because all her people were dead, and they blamed me for her death, too. Look, lady, look at me. Why would a human charge one of their own with these terrible crimes when they have me for a scapegoat? I was available to take the blame and I took it

all.” He fell into his pillows, breathing labored. “I swear to Helakius, it was war, I defended myself, but I didn’t *murder* anyone. And when I tried to protect my men, they turned on me. But you don’t believe me, do you, Mother Mirrah?”

“I’m trying very hard to separate war from...other kinds of killing. But I...I think I do believe you, Derinzan. And why not?” she asked, smiling. “I have only the scroll and your word, and you’re the only one alive who had anything to do with your case.”

“You trust the word of a convict? Naïve, aren’t you, Mirrah?”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t trust you?”

“I can only hope you do. Just, um, be careful with some of these others.”

“Sound advice.” She stood and swept aside the curtain. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Done with me already? Why, Mother, I was just starting to feel better.”

Mirrah caught the hint of something roguish in his face. She had worked in sick houses all her life and had seen similar expressions on many a recovering man’s face. “You’ll feel better once you’ve gotten some *sun*. I’ll arrange a time for you to be brought down at noon, when the inmates go in from the courtyard.”

The draeling gaped a little, suspicious. “Why would you do that?”

“Allow you an hour in full sun?” Mirrah folded her hands serenely atop her apron. “Because I don’t understand cruelty. And I don’t believe you’re evil, Derinzan.”

The draeling had to be carried downstairs on a stretcher. He looked paler than ever in the strong midday sun. Even a draeling’s eyes, it seemed, were sensitive to direct light after so long in the dark, for his face turned down toward his shoulder and a hand strayed over his eyes.

“Set him down right there, yes, that’s fine,” said Mirrah. The orderlies looked nervous. When Mirrah saw the immediate effect the sunlight had on the draeling, she realized the orderlies might have every reason to be nervous. She waved them inside. To her relief a pair of guards paused on the parapets above, crossbows in hand.

The draeling’s skin began to darken. His breathing quickened and his hands gripped the side of the stretcher as though the light burned him. Water to a long

-parched throat. Balm to a deep wound. Mirrah couldn’t stand to see the creature suffering. She was about to call the orderlies back and move him into a spot of shade, but the draeling collected a deep breath and relaxed. No longer the pale sickly orange, his skin was the rich brown-red of autumn leaves...or of a smear of blood. The flesh began to fill out; the bones were not so prominent inside excess skin. He turned his face toward Mirrah and opened his eyes. She knelt beside the stretcher. “Is it too much?”

The draeling shook his head, brow furrowed. He was still in pain, but the pain was bearable now.

“Wonderful,” he muttered.

“I fear an hour will be too long.”

“No! Please...”

She patted the red-brown shoulder. “I’ll be back in an hour then.”

After recording the draeling’s transformation in the log and inspecting the finishing touches on the naedine’s water cells, Mirrah returned to the courtyard. The draeling was on his feet, slowly walking the perimeter. There remained a fatigued stoop to his shoulders, and he stopped frequently to lean against the walls. Black hair had sprouted on his head; it was already two inches long.

“Remarkable recovery.” Healer Selisse stood at Mirrah’s elbow.

“Indeed,” Mirrah said. “I had no idea...”

“Verdant Mother, I urge you to be careful.”

“Careful, Selisse?”

The healer looked at the draeling and back at the priestess. “You’ve a tender heart, Mother, but they’re convicts all.” The healer curtsied and bustled away.

Across the courtyard, the draeling had come to a window, secured with two rows of bars. Derinzan peered through them, across the river at the green Rahnish countryside. Mirrah joined him. Dark eyebrows were pinched tightly. “We’re on a bloody island, aren’t we?” he said. “Surrounded by water. I can feel it.”

“It may pose a temptation to the naedine, but...”

“Not to me. I couldn’t escape if I wanted to.”

“Don’t you want to?” she asked lightly.

He looked down at her. Only then did Mirrah realize how tall he stood. The top of her head, wimpled and all, just reached his chest. He replied frankly, “In time. Maybe.” A corner of his mouth flipped up and the fire-hued eyes darted over her face and away out the window.

Typical, Mirrah reminded herself and asked, “Why did you never go home?”

“Home?” The word was foreign or offensive or both. “The Plane of Fire? Lady, I don’t belong there anymore than I belong here. They don’t make a plane for misfits like me, half-breeds. Here, at least, people flee from me. On the Plane of Fire I was the small one. People just tried to kill me. My father’s kind.” He snorted with derision. “When...” Orange eyes glanced at Mirrah, then at the ground. “When he was killed, the tribunal banished me. I was thrown out, if you must know. I can never go back.”

“All draelings are treated thus?”

He met her eyes squarely now. “No.”

“Then...”

“I was outspoken...in my...dislike. I was never treated kindly.”

“No love lost then?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He drifted to the next window.

Mirrah pursued with words alone. “The crofter then. I failed to ask you this morning.”

“I told you everything!”

“Not quite.” Mirrah kept her tone soft, passive, guileless.

The draeling gripped the iron bars and gave them a frustrated jerk, but the bars, inner and outer, went deep into the ground and halfway up the wall; no threat of even a draeling breaking them loose. “I thought you believed me.”

“I do.”

“Which one was the crofter?”

“You hit him, you said.”

“Pitchfork, right.” He chuckled suddenly. “He ended up with that pitchfork in his chest, if I recall. Pathetically ironic.”

“And?”

“And pinned to his pig barn. That’s what the summary says, hmm?”

Mirrah nodded.

“I don’t know which of my men did that.”

“It would take a great deal of strength for a man to pin up another man.”

“Yes...” Derinzan said, making his way back toward her. He looked like a wounded animal, stalking. “It would take two, maybe three men. I had twenty with me. And someone wanted everyone to believe that

twenty moral men stood by and watched while I tortured and killed an entire family, and for some reason, everyone *did* believe.” He sagged against the stone wall. “Maybe an hour...was too much.”

“I’ll get the orderlies.”

“No. I’m nothing to them. Look at them, they’re terrified of me. Like everyone else.”

The four orderlies waited under the portico, trying to look casual, bored, but they were tightly wound. They preferred to be anywhere else.

“Except you, Mother. I’ll lean on you.”

Seventy-third year of imprisonment...1439 led uprising... set warden on fire...

She smiled. “The orderlies will assist you. That’s why I pay them.”

An orderly under each arm, the draeling climbed the stairs to the infirmary. Mirrah went ahead of them. “I’ll do everything I can for you, Derinzan. Justice may be a hundred and forty years late, but I wasn’t alive then.”

The draeling summoned a tired chuckle.

“Unfortunately, the final decision isn’t mine to make. Once I’ve reviewed all the cases, I’ll have to go to Caryth. The High King’s justiciar will review the cases for himself, as well as the summaries of my interviews with the inmates. He’ll make a new ruling...or not... depending...”

“You and I both know he’ll not release a draeling,” said Derinzan from the landing below.

Mirrah turned and found herself on a level with him. “You presume too much. I know no such thing. Once, your situation was quite hopeless. But no longer.”



After four weeks of tireless reading and questioning, Mother Mirrah set out from New Hope Prison. The journey was faster by ship than over the uncertain terrain of the Moonfall Mountains. In a trunk secured in her cabin aboard the *HK Irsha's Heart*, Mirrah had packed the pertinent logs, trial summaries, interview records, and with them Derinzan’s yellowed scroll. The nearer the ship drew to the royal city, the more doubtful Mirrah felt. The Lord Justiciar had laughed at her when she’d made her proposal to High King Astyn. Why should he take her seriously now? Twenty-seven hopeful extraplanar creatures were depending on the judgment

of a man who scoffed at Mirrah's vision.

Once she reached the castle, high on a hill overlooking crowded piers and the gray waters of Ashen Strait, Mirrah was not kept waiting long. Two porters carried the trunk into the throne room. The Lord Justiciar did not laugh. The trunk was heavy, his workload enormous; he groaned. High King Astyn heard and addressed the man, "You will devote the next few weeks to this task exclusively. When you are finished, we wish to approve your rulings." The threat was clear...do this well, do this objectively, or do this again. "When I have gone into the Valley," he added, "I will be known as Astyn the Just."

He saw no reason why Mirrah should wait idly in Caryth for the justiciar's decisions, when she could be continuing her work at New Hope. The justiciar himself would bring the rulings to the prison as soon as he had them to give.

Mirrah was just as eager to return. After twenty days aboard a tossing ship, seasick, she gladly took up the keys to the prison again. The daily reports stacked on her desk detailed nothing more extraordinary than the usual brawls and outbursts. The naedine had been moved at last to their water cells and swam in circles. Over half the convalescents in the infirmary had been moved upstairs to the recovery room, the draeling among them. Healer Selisse said Derinzan hadn't spoken to a soul since Mother Mirrah left. He'd begun having nightmares and slept badly, but if Mirrah approved, he would be moved to a cell the next morning.

Entering the recovery room, Mirrah was astonished by the changes that had overtaken the draeling. The stoop was gone; he was taller than she remembered. The color of his skin was more red than brown now, the muscles of arm and torso as solid as if he'd never left the battlefield. Glossy red-black curls tumbled to his waist, and the black talons had grown to wicked barbs. He leant against the whitewashed wall opposite the windows, absorbing more sunlight still. When he saw Mirrah gawking, he grinned and approached.

"You must be feeling better," she said.

"Aren't I beautiful?" he teased.

Mirrah's face might have flushed as red as his. She did her best to hide it by shaping a motherly hauteur. "Terrifying, but splendidly so."

He was more than happy with that. "And look at this." He opened his palm and a globe of fire spun over

it, like a tiny sun. "It's been so long..."

Mirrah took an involuntary step back. "Please, refrain from doing that. You'll frighten someone."

"You, perhaps? Why, Mother, I'm surprised at you." He closed his fist and the ball of fire dispersed. "Look, I don't suppose I could have a stone, a fine-grained river stone."

"Why in the world...?"

He wrapped fingers around a horn. They had grown another six inches, but were still blunt. "I don't want them taller, and they should have shiny points."

Mirrah debated. "You'll have to be shackled when you use it."

"What, you think I'll try to bash someone's head in?"

Mirrah lifted an eyebrow.

"Fine."

"Healer Selisse finds you recovered enough to go to your own cell. I'm inclined to agree with her."

Derinzan frowned. "What does *she* know? She looks from a distance. Asks how I'm feeling, better, thanks, but anything's better than before. She doesn't look inside. Darkness lingers..." he tapped the side of his head... "in here."

"She said you're having nightmares."

"I don't want to talk about it. They're all the same, all about the well. What was decided?"

"Nothing yet. We're playing the waiting game. When the justiciar arrives, then we'll know. I can't promise anything, Derinzan. The one making the ruling isn't a visionary man."

"Then I must forget about it. Pretend there's nothing to hope for. Or I'll go mad."

"Me, too."

That afternoon, Mirrah saw to the preparation of Derinzan's cell. His only concern was that it had a window. "We'll put you on the southeast corner. You'll have two windows that way. Construction's not quite finished in that wing, though. You'll have to put up with some noise..."

"Doesn't matter," he insisted, relieved.

Mirrah might have seen less of Derinzan after that, but she made a point every day to visit his cell, where he followed the progress of the sunlight across his floor. She also kept an eye on him in the morning when he began going out to the courtyard with the other inmates. He kept to himself for the most part, defending a

particularly sunny space of wall as fiercely as a dog its bone. Few dared to invade his territory.

When the Lord Justiciar arrived a month and a half later, everyone in New Hope Prison seemed to know at once. A taut silence hung about the cells, the mess hall, but in the courtyard fights broke out. Inmates with no hope of leaving attacked a number of those awaiting a new ruling, the general attitude being that if all inmates couldn't go free, none would. Just to be safe, the hopefuls were removed to their cells until Mirrah concluded her audience with the justiciar.

"Out of twenty-seven rulings," he announced, standing formally before Mirrah's desk, "nineteen have been amended. The High King and I felt that some of your inmates have indeed served more than enough time for the petty crimes they committed, while some were accused wrongly or too little evidence was given against them. Others...not. My reports and the appropriate pardons are there in the trunk. Now, if you'll excuse me, Madam." He bowed in preparation to depart.

"My lord," Mirrah began, surprised, "you will not stay with us, take a tour of New Hope?"

"Pray, forgive me, Verdant Mother," he replied with shallow sincerity, "the invitation might well have appealed to His Majesty, but as for myself, I couldn't care less. My ship leaves with the tide."

As soon as a novice showed the justiciar out the door, Mirrah dove for the trunk. Her heart soared for some inmates, wept for others. A couple of appeals would be necessary.

"Sister," she called when she'd gathered her composure. The novice entered and curtsied. "I will see Derinzan now."

The draeling looked pale and sick again when the guards admitted him. Mirrah extended a scroll tied with blue ribbon. "Your pardon," she announced, unable to quell her pride.

Derinzan stared at the scroll.

"You're free to go," Mirrah clarified. "No more cause for nightmares."

The first real sign of fear entered the smoldering eyes. Hesitantly, a great red hand took the scroll.

"There are two stipulations, of course."

He looked up from the wondrous blue ribbon. "What stipulations?"

"All who are pardoned are ordered to leave Rahn immediately. And concerning you in particular, the High

King demands that you vow never to fight against Rahn in any war, present or future."

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"I would, yes."

He stood in the middle of the office looking lost.

"Where should I go?"

"Well, we're always at war with Akta, but to get there you would have cross the Middle Sea anyway. And we're usually at war with Mýtravus. I'd suggest the Wilds, to the west of Mýtravus, north of Si Rang. It's a long journey, but few humans dare settle there. And if you're up to crossing the sea, there's the Negu Desert. Lots of sun..." Something sank deep inside Mirrah's chest. The Wilds...the Negu...both so far away.

"I have to brave the waters of the Wyvern first," Derinzan said, a smile beginning to take shape.

Mirrah blinked rapidly and quipped, "Just don't fall off the ferry."

She walked him to the gate herself and with an oversized key, turned the lock. The guards cranked the great door open. Beyond stretched the fruitful hills and verdant forests of Rahn. Sheep ranged the pastures and two-wheeled carts followed oxen up the road to Aureth. The ferry waited at the dock, the ferryman clutching a long pole.

Derinzan stood inside the gate, wide-eyed. "I don't know what to think of all that open space. So peaceful..." He looked down at Mirrah suddenly, confounded. "How in your goddess's name can you be letting me go? You're a pacifist, I'm anything but. I'll take up a blade again. It's the only thing I'm good at."

"Unfortunately, that's the business of war, isn't it. You're a warrior, Derinzan, not a criminal. And you deserve your freedom."

He gave a vague sort of grin, one of sarcasm, perhaps, or of self-doubt or of scorn, and he asked, "Do I?"

Before Mirrah could encourage him or wish him well, Derinzan started along the road that wound down the island to the river. He boarded the ferry with far more confidence than Mirrah expected. The ferryman shoved off, and a long rope secured between the banks guided the ferry away. Instead of gazing forward, at the open world, Derinzan looked back toward the prison. He didn't wave farewell but watched Mirrah recede, as she watched him.

Deep in the cold month of Daraedis, Mother Mirrah received a report of a manhunt underway near the Rahnish town of Lochston, high in the Moonfall Mountains. The reeves of several surrounding shires had been summoned to track down an especially ferocious extraplanar “monster,” as the report stated. Mirrah’s legs turned to water when she read the description of the fugitive and the scene of slaughter he’d left behind: “A draeling, perhaps a three-quarter drilyga, well over seven feet tall, was seen fleeing the homestead of herder Gyr, son of Haddis, of Lochston, thirty-eighth of Daraedis. Gyr, his wife, son, and two daughters were hung from the beams of their cottage and immolated.”

The deputy reeve who delivered the notice said, “He’s been easy to track in the snow, but the snow’s deep. Once we’ve apprehended him, he’ll be brought here to await trial, seeing as your prison’s the only one that deals with this kind of rabble. Mother? You look faint. . .”

They couldn’t be after Derinzan. He should be halfway across Mýtravus by now.

“Can you. . . can you tell me anything more, deputy?” she asked.

“Whoever he is, he’s a cruel one, that’s for sure. He didn’t hang ‘em by their necks, but around their chests, under their arms, like. He toyed with ‘em a long time.”

Mirrah pushed her voice from her throat: “You were there? You saw this?”

“Aye.” The deputy grew gray in the cheeks. There was more, the man’s eyes reflected the awful memory of it, but Mirrah didn’t ask for details.

It was toward the end of Astradis, some ninety days later, that the reeves brought him in. Mirrah’s replacement was on his way from Caryth by then, and all Mirrah’s things were packed for the journey back to Moonfall Monastery. Somehow, High King Astyn had learned who the authorities were hunting, and, of course, the High King would not take the fall for this unforgivable error in judgment. New Hope had been branded a failure across Rahn and the Verdant Mother Mirrah a fool blinded by woman’s compassion and naiveté.

Before she relinquished her vision once and for all, Mirrah had to be certain. After nearly two months of seclusion, she left her rooms and descended to the gate.

The great door clanged shut behind a small army of reeves, all armed with sword and crossbow. They had dropped their captive on his knees. His wrists were bound with small chain that cut the skin, and larger chain coiled many times around his body like a constricting serpent. What effort these men must have made to subdue him. They hadn’t been gentle. He was bruised about the ribs, and when he raised his face, Mirrah saw the bruises there too, the split lip, the gash on the brow.

“Hello, Mirrah,” he said.

“Derinzan. . . gods. What were you doing still in Rahn?”

“The Wyvern’s one thing,” he replied, “but the River Dask is far wider, the Middle Sea wider still, and I got lost. . . in the mountains, you know.”

Anger, confusion welled full. Pacing wildly, Mirrah demanded, “Gentlemen, stand away, but do not leave us.” The men stepped out of earshot and a team of sisters brought them flasks of sweet Rahnish ale. Under the portico, Healer Selisse glared at Mirrah; she hadn’t spoken to the Verdant Mother in weeks.

Mirrah whispered to the draeling, “Tell me you didn’t do this, and we’ll find a way to disprove the charge.”

He snorted with suppressed laughter. “I’m counting on you, Mother. As always.”

“Ah,” she said, nodding. “They are not mistaken then.”

“Oh, gods, I’m doomed already. My defense doesn’t believe me.”

He was mocking her. That, perhaps, hurt most of all.

“Did you. . . did you do it to get sent back here?” One of the gnomes hadn’t lasted a week before he was apprehended for stealing a silk shoe right off a lady’s foot. He now burrowed happily in his cell.

“That’s it, of course,” Derinzan said. “I just wanted to see you again.”

She flew at him, hands slapping at his face. She stopped herself only when he doubled over with laughter. “The p-p-pacifist,” he spat. His laughter was gone as quickly as it came, and he demanded, “Don’t look at me like that!”

Mirrah smoothed the horror from her face and tucked her hands tightly inside her apron. “Tell me a different story.”

“About what?”

“The crofter, a hundred and forty years ago. The three girls.”

He held her eye, and Mirrah forbade her courage to fail. She stared back. A dull fire pulsed around the narrow pupils, like a hypnotic spell. Lowly, just for her, he said, “It wasn’t pigs we heard in the barn. There weren’t any pigs. The crofter wasn’t lying. We’d been by his farm already, taken everything. Well, nearly everything. When the crofter threatened us with his pitchfork, my men rode on, all twenty of them. I stayed.”

“The trial summary. It didn’t exaggerate?”

“Well, maybe a little. Don’t they always? But I didn’t lie when I said I didn’t kill all of them. The elder girl, the one I took with me, she *was* dead when I was arrested, but I didn’t kill her. I told you, maybe she killed herself. That’s exactly what happened. She used one of my own daggers to cut her wrists in the night.”

She tore her eyes from that mesmerizing gaze. “I don’t believe you. A suicide like that would’ve been obvious.”

Derinzan smiled. “You learn slowly, Mirrah, but eventually you do learn. Don’t take it so hard. My own mother never believed I could kill my father, and she knew how much I hated him.”

“And the herders, the Lochston family?”

“Hmm? Oh, *those* girls. So pretty, both of them. Their mother was young, too. About your age. The herder hired me to help him move some stones, build a new fold for his sheep. But the woman, she didn’t want me around her children. She told me to leave.”

“Why didn’t you go, Derinzan? *Why?*”

“I wasn’t ready to leave. She was kicking me out of her home. She had a home and I didn’t.” He sat in the dust under the gatehouse looking lost again. Lost and helpless in his chains. He glanced up at Mirrah with a smile as charming as a child’s. “But you won’t tell *them* what I’ve said, will you? They’ll have me locked up forever.”

He still expected Mirrah to defend him?

“Don’t worry, Derinzan,” she said. “You have a home now.” She sent one of the novices running for the chief builder who was wrapping up his projects on the upper eastern floors. The delay gave Mirrah time to decide her course. Derinzan went on talking, but Mirrah didn’t listen. When the builder arrived, she beckoned

him into the shadow of the gate, where only he and Derinzan could hear her request. “I need you to prepare a cell.” Mirrah stared Derinzan hard in the eye as she named her specifications. “On the north side of the prison, lower floor, choose any available cell and brick up the window...”

“Mirrah...” Panic began to seed itself in the dracling’s eyes.

“Build a tight-fitting iron door with no peep hole and a food slot only wide enough for a slice of bread. There will be no torch bracket outside this door, no light whatever must be allowed to seep in...”

“Mirrah!”

“...and bring the locksmith from Aureth. This door will have a lock and key unique to the prison. When it’s finished, bring the key to me.”

Derinzan struggled inside the chains. The reeves moved in to subdue him. He shouted, pled, but Mirrah turned a deaf ear and left him to his captors.



The new warden arrived a few days later. He was the Lord Justiciar’s man and quickly showed himself to be as shortsighted and unforgiving as His Lordship. Scornful of Mirrah’s failed project, he spared few words for her, merely held out his hand, and Mirrah filled it with her key ring. Every key hung on that ring but one. As the ferry swept her away from New Hope Prison, she took another key from around her neck. Extending her arm, she dropped it into the silent mouth of the Wyvern. ❧

(a version of this story appeared in *Midnight Times*, Fall 2008)

Adam

by Jenny Blackford

There's something sinister about a neat child. Little Adam next door creeped me out, when he was dumped on me to be baby-sat. It wasn't just the way he stayed so clean; his mouth was too wide, and his lips were too fleshy and damp. My half-sister Boo, on the other hand, has always been a filth-magnet. I put a clean t-shirt on her once, left her in the reasonably clean family room, and timed her. After twenty minutes, the t-shirt was covered in yogurt, dead leaves, and something that might once have been fairy bread.

I guess we were the best baby-sitting option Tiffany had for creepy little Adam while she went out for a Brazilian wax, or nail extensions, or whatever. She didn't seem to have any real friends, though she was sometimes seen lunching with groups of skinny thirty-something women wearing too much gold jewelry. No one in the neighborhood had met Adam's father, though a long black Yank tank with tinted windows sometimes pulled into Tiffany's garage. Dad and I suspected that he was an underworld figure of some kind, but perhaps he was in the chemical industry; when he was around, a nose-wrinkling miasma blew around our patch of Melbourne suburbia.

Dad's second wife Diana finally went back to work when Boo was two years old. Diana had enjoyed her break from the world of high finance, but she was ready for stiletto heels and balance sheets again. I spent a lot of my afternoons picking up Boo from childcare and looking after her until Dad or Diana got home and took over, and I could go back to my student flat.

It wasn't as bad as it sounds. They paid me almost commercial babysitting rates, and, as part-time jobs go, minding Boo was a lot better than McWaitressing—except when Tiffany dropped five-year-old Adam in “just for half an hour.” The house was like a fortress—Dad had installed a state-of-the-art security system, after a rash of burglaries in the area, and I'd helped him with the computer side of it—but all the security in the world couldn't stop Tiffany from ringing the door-bell. I watched Adam

obsessively whenever Tiffany left him with me, but, for a long time, nothing happened.

Then, one day, I found him staring coldly down at Gran's dressmaking scissors, clutched in his clean, chubby little hand.

“But how could he have got hold of them?” Diana said, when I told her. “You always keep them in your room, don't you, Suzie?”

I nodded. “Yep, in Gran's old sewing box, and it was still up on the top shelf in the cupboard in my old room when I checked. And I'm sure *you* didn't get them out.” Diana's not the kind of woman who sews her own corporate couture. She's very, very good with a credit card.

“Well, somebody must have. Maybe it was your dad. Honestly, Suzie, you've got an overactive imagination.”

Oh well, I thought, she *is* an accountant. *No* imagination. But there was no way Dad would have put the scissors anywhere Adam could have found them. His hospital work had left him with a household safety fetish that almost amounted to neurosis. And Diana hadn't got the scissors out, and I certainly hadn't.

But then, was I implying that Adam had miraculously wafted them out of the sewing box, down the hall and into his hand? That was just ridiculous. No wonder Diana didn't believe me. And I hadn't even told her about the smell of burning rubber that had clung to him afterwards. I still thought that I'd imagined that.

The next time, it was the big carving knife.

I'd gone to Boo's room to get Blue Teddy for her, because Adam had taken her Pooh Bear. Blue Teddy was actually her favorite, but neither of us was going to tell Adam that. When I got back to the kids, ten seconds later, Adam was sitting on the sofa smiling down at Dad's carving knife. Luckily, Boo hadn't noticed; she was out in the backyard hunting for snails in the violets under the lavender hedge. After Tiffany had picked up her small blond horror, I collapsed on Diana, gibbering.

She smiled and patted my arm. “Maybe your

dad left it somewhere stupid this morning. Don't worry, Suzie, I'm sure it wasn't your fault. No harm done."

"But—" I *knew* that the knife hadn't been in the family room when I'd left it.

"Forget it, Suzie. What do you think we should order for dinner? Thai? Malaysian?" She wandered off, unconcerned, while I was still shaking inside. The look in Adam's pale blue eyes when I'd taken the knife away from him had been pure contempt.

My roommate Fiona was out that night with her new boyfriend, and I didn't much feel like going back to an empty flat—or being there when she came home with loudmouth Jared—so I decided to stay in my old room in the front of the house.

Dad was, as usual, late. By nine o'clock, Diana had given Boo her bath and put her to bed, and I'd been conned into reading her an extra story or five. Finally the big brown eyes closed, and Diana and I sneaked silently over to the huge new bedroom she and Dad had built at the back of the house, next to the family room and Boo's bedroom. We were quietly looking at the fabulous Italian lingerie that Diana had bought that lunchtime when we heard Boo shout, "Suzie!" It sounded as if she was in the kitchen, or the hall, not in her room. Then we heard her footsteps running up the hall towards the front of the house. We looked at one another, dropped the exquisite lacy confections on the bed, and ran to the bedroom door. Boo wasn't anywhere in sight.

We both ran the three steps into her bedroom, and looked at the wooden bed where she should have been sleeping. There was a scattering of fluffy toys on it, as usual, but there was no sign of Boo in the bed. We ran for the front of the house, and looked quickly in every room, but we couldn't see her anywhere.

Diana started to look inside cupboards and under beds, calling out Boo's name, but I had an odd feeling that she wouldn't find her there. I ran back to Boo's room; the bed still looked quite empty. But that was where we'd left her, only a few minutes earlier, fast asleep. Surely she was in there somewhere.

I walked over to the bed, and tentatively pulled Blue Teddy and Red Dog aside—and there was a pink toddler cheek. It was Boo, breathing deeply and evenly, with her eyes squeezed shut. I almost cried with relief. The shape of her body was obvious now,

under the covers. A small lavender twig was caught in her hair, and there was something sticky and bright pink on her ear: strawberry ice cream! Where on earth had *that* come from?

I called out from the doorway, "Diana, come here." Boo didn't stir in her bed, and there was no answer from Diana. I could still hear Diana calling to Boo in the front of the house.

"Diana, she's here," I called again, but I couldn't do it loudly enough, for fear of waking the kid. Reluctantly, I left Boo's bedside, and walked through the darkened hallway to find Diana.

"Boo, darling, where are you?" I heard her say, yet again. "Tell Mummy where you are, darling."

"Diana, she's in her room," I called out from the hall.

Either she didn't hear me, or she couldn't take it in. "Boo, where are you, darling?"

I tried again: "Diana, she's in her room." No answer. Finally, I caught up with Diana in Dad's study, looking under the desk.

She was frantic. "I heard her in here, but I can't find her," she said. "She was running around and laughing."

"Diana, she's in her room, honestly."

"No she's not. I looked. She's not there, Suzie." I had to get through to her. "Yes she *is*. Come on."

"But I heard her in here."

I grabbed Diana's arm and dragged her back through the darkened corridors to Boo's room. But there was no sign of a bump in the bed. The child had disappeared again. *What now?* I thought frantically, but I couldn't afford to panic in front of Diana. I just breathed deeply, and pulled Blue Teddy aside, hoping desperately that Boo would be there again: and there she was, blissfully sucking Eeyore's tail. The snakes-and-spiders bunny rug molded itself gently around her heavily sleeping body. How could the bed have looked so empty, a moment before?

Diana really didn't believe Boo was there until she'd touched her cheek. Automatically, she pulled a tissue from a pocket and wiped the smear of strawberry ice cream from her ear.

The twig was one thing, but that ice cream really worried me. I knew there was none in the house—I'd checked the freezer that afternoon, just in case the

Supermarket Elves had visited the house in my absence. Boo adored ice cream, but she'd been forced to settle for frozen juice with no added sugar. So where had she got the strawberry ice cream from? *Where had she been?*

Diana interrupted my worrying. She looked at me and said, "But the bed was empty. And I heard her running into the front of the house."

"So did I."

"And I heard her in Bob's study, laughing, just a few minutes ago. It was her voice. She couldn't have been in two places at once."

"No." *Surely not.*

"But she couldn't have got back here from the study without us seeing her," Diana said.

"No," I said, a touch uncertainly. "She couldn't have. It's impossible. But she was here under the toys, when I looked."

We clutched at one another, and looked again at the small visible patch of sleeping child.

"The night I stayed here last week," I said tentatively, "Wednesday, I think, I was in my room testing some new code, after you'd gone to bed, and I heard her running around the house. The night Dad was really late."

"What?" Diana said.

"Really, Diana," I said, "she was running around, babbling away for ages—it must have been almost fifteen minutes. Then she went quiet."

Diana sighed. "Hang on, Suzie, that couldn't have happened. I put her to bed, and she went straight to sleep. I sat and read in our bedroom until Bob came home, and her room's right next to us. She was still asleep in her room. I couldn't have missed it, if she'd gone running around. You must have dreamt it."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, here she is, all safe and sound. How about a cup of herbal tea?"

When we'd calmed down, we both went to bed, but I left my old nightlight on that night.



The next week, Boo's game-of-the-day was something that involved wrapping herself up in a thin old muslin tablecloth of my Gran's that had made its way into the dress-ups box, and screeching a lot.

Eventually, I worked out that she was being a caterpillar in a cocoon, ready to emerge as a beautiful but noisy butterfly. Every now and then, she unrolled herself from the tablecloth and "flew" around the room waving her arms and screaming like a banshee.

My heart sank when Tiffany turned up again with her creepy son in yet another spotless white cotton sailor suit. I'd already done everything I could to keep Boo safe: scoured the house for sharp objects, just in case, and made some changes to the security system. All the same, I watched the little blond horror like a hawk.

Nothing happened. I almost relaxed. After a while, I gave the kids the muesli biscuits and milk that were as close as Diana would go to junk food. Boo immediately spilled most of the milk on her shorts and then slowly smeared soggy biscuit all over her new Pooh T-shirt, but Adam didn't drop a crumb.

After a couple of hours of watching them, I couldn't hang on any longer—I just had to go to the bathroom. In hindsight, I should have taken Boo with me, on some pretext or other, but I didn't. She'd rolled herself up in Gran's tablecloth again, which seemed safe enough. It was very old and thin; I'd already checked that she could breathe easily through multiple layers of it. I double-checked that Adam's hands were empty and that nothing sharp was in sight, or within lunging distance, then I dashed to the bathroom as quickly as I could. I couldn't have been longer than a minute. I wasn't fast enough, though.

When I got back to the living-room doorway, Adam was standing over the rolled-up tablecloth, stabbing at the plump shape with the fiercely sharp dressmaking scissors. The stench of burning tires filled the air. I screamed, ran across the room, and snatched the scissors out of Adam's hands. I shoved him aside and unrolled the tablecloth, expecting the worst.

There was no blood, as I unrolled layer after layer of torn cloth. All I found were more and more of Boo's soft toys with their stuffing falling out of long gashes. Blue Teddy, Pooh Bear, Red Dog, Eeyore, Big Ted, an appallingly ugly stuffed Alsatian, Pink Rabbit... At the end, I had a shredded tablecloth full of dead toys—and no Boo.

"What did you do with her, you little horror?" I screamed at Adam, but he looked as shocked as I felt.

I grabbed his hand firmly and pulled him through the house, as I called out for Boo more and more frantically. When I got to the front hall, I heard Boo screeching and running around in Dad's study. Deeply relieved, I flung the door open.

There was absolutely no sign of Boo in the room. I searched it from top to bottom—in the cupboards, under the desk, everywhere. She just wasn't there.

Eventually, I ran back to the living room, still gripping Adam tightly. Gran's torn old tablecloth was rolled up again like a tattered cocoon. Surely Boo couldn't be... My heart pounding, I unrolled it. There was Boo, filthy but unhurt.

"What?" I shouted. "Where have you been?"

She giggled, and stood up, flapping her arms and squealing loudly. There was something suspiciously like squashed snail-shells all over her shorts, and chocolate ice cream on the collar of her T-shirt. I let go of Adam, picked up Boo and hugged her very tight, and kissed the top of her head. It smelled of birthday cake. When I looked closely, I could even see hundreds and thousands in a blob of cream, and a few sponge crumbs.

There hadn't been birthday cake in the house for months—or ice cream, for that matter, except for the strawberry smear on her face the week before. Where had she been, to get cake in her hair, and ice cream on her clothes? And as for the snail shells... I shook my head, baffled.

Boo wriggled until I put her down, and ran around the room, flapping her arms. Adam looked at her with undisguised resentment. I decided she'd be safer outside, in the carefully enclosed backyard, so I let her out of the big glass doors, keeping Adam inside with me.

I placed the dressmaking scissors on top of the highest piece of furniture, pushed Adam down onto the sofa, and sat down next to him to wait for Tiffany. After a while, he turned to look at me, and the light from his cold blue eyes pierced me.

"This won't work forever," Adam said. "No one is going to believe you, Suzie." He licked his lips.

I stared at him, speechless with horror.

Slowly, patronizingly, as if talking to someone unfamiliar with the local customs, he said, "And, one day, when you aren't here—" he parted his lips in a wide, wet smile "—I will be, and so will Boo."

For the first time, I started to understand berserker rage. If he weren't just a little boy, I'd have torn him apart with my bare hands. I started to breathe in, to scream at him.

Then something glinted at the corner of my eye, and I looked down. There was a metallic light falling from somewhere—where?—across Adam's right hand. One end was sharp and pointed, the other dark and rounded. As I watched, it was becoming darker, brighter, more solid. A huge knife, with a black handle. Our carving knife, from the big wooden knife block in the kitchen. It was impossible, but it explained a lot about how he'd been getting hold of the knives and scissors.

The doorbell rang. I've never been so happy to hear Tiffany at the door.

"Your mother's here to get you," I said, "and she's in for a nasty surprise." I grabbed for the knife handle: however spooky he was, he was still only five years old. Surely I was much stronger. But my hand clutched at air; there was nothing there. Any hint of



the knife had disappeared—but how?

Adam smirked at me. I stood up and dragged him down the hall to the front door. I wasn't leaving him alone anywhere near Boo ever again. When I opened the door, Tiffany would have fussed over Adam, if he'd let her, but he avoided her eyes and hands.

"Come in, please, Tiffany," I said. "We've got to talk."

I dragged Adam back down the hall with me, and put him firmly between Tiffany and me on the sofa. I started, with some awkwardness: "Look, Tiffany, did you know that your son has a thing about knives?"

"What the hell do you mean, Suzie?" she snapped. She kissed the top of his blond head, and he flinched from her touch.

"This afternoon," I said, "I saw him try to stab Boo with my dressmaking scissors." I pointed to them on Gran's dresser.

"We don't have to sit and listen to this nonsense, Tiffany," Adam said. "We're going home." His voice was full of weary cunning.

Tiffany just repeated, like a robot, "We don't have to sit and listen to this nonsense. We're going home."

I pointed to Boo in the backyard and said, "Look at the old white tablecloth Boo is playing with. See the holes? Adam did that. He thought Boo was wrapped inside it. He wanted to kill her."

"She's insane," Adam said.

"You're insane," Tiffany repeated. "My darling Adam would never do anything like that." She grabbed him, and pulled him tight against him. He made a disgusted noise, and pulled away sharply. The burning-tires smell in the room intensified, and a shadowy knife started to glimmer on his right palm.

"Look at his right hand," I said, but by the time I'd finished speaking, his hand was empty.

"Come on, Adam," she said, and stood up, glaring at me.

"You just stay here for a minute, Tiffany," I said, as I grabbed the remote-control to Dad's huge flat-screen TV screen, and my laptop. "You're going to see something you don't want to miss." I hoped desperately that new pinhole cameras I'd installed in the family room, and the link between the security system and my laptop, had been working right. I'd

tested them for hours, over the last week, but...I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, when the right footage finally appeared on the screen.

"There he is, Tiffany," I said. "See that rolled-up tablecloth he's stabbing? He thought Boo was in there." *And she was, before he started*, I thought. *But I'm not telling you that.*

Tiffany was pale under her fake tan. Adam just looked down at his hands. There was no hint of a knife.

I said, "That footage is going up on YouTube any minute now. I've set everything up; it will only take a couple of clicks." I brandished my mouse at her.

Tiffany gasped, and clutched at her heavy gold necklace. "You wouldn't."

"Yes, Tiffany, I would. Like a shot. Unless..."



The long black car with tinted windows drove into Tiffany's garage that evening, and out again soon afterwards, leaving only black tire marks behind. There was a "For Sale" sign in front of her house the next day. Neither she nor her eerie little psychopath has ever been seen again, in our seaside suburb.

As for Boo, I still don't know how she escaped from Adam, or where she went on the way, to get that birthday cake in her hair. I've studied the footage time and time again, but there isn't a clue. I can see Boo rolling herself up in the tablecloth, Adam stabbing at it, and myself unrolling it and finding the stuffed toys, but that's all.

Boo still disappears now and then, and comes back with food and stuff smeared over her clothes and skin—usually party food, and garden-type stuff. She must go *somewhere*, but she only giggles when I ask her about it.

But I don't care. She's here, and Adam isn't. That's all I care about. ❧

The Guilty Parties (Contributors)

C.J. Bahnsen's articles and essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *OC Weekly*, and *Scuba Diving* among others.

Jenny Blackford is a writer and critic based in Newcastle, Australia. Her first two published stories for adults received Honorable Mentions from Gardner Dozois. Jenny's novella set in ancient Delphi and Athens, *The Priestess and the Slave*, was described as "elegant" by feminist sf icon Pamela Sargent; Alison Goodman called it "a compelling blend of vivid storytelling and meticulous research." Jenny was one of the judges for the World Fantasy Awards 2009, and she reviews regularly for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. Her website is www.jennyblackford.com.

Daniel Braum (www.bloodandstardust.wordpress.com and www.danielbraum.com) brings you stories from Long Island, just like *Kaleidotrope*. Sometimes those stories are set in Long Island, like the one in *Kaleidotrope* #5. Other stories are set in an alternate universe Japan like the one in this issue and "Sumo 21," which can be found for free in *Abyss and Apex* #16 and in audio form in *Escape Pod* (March 2009). His fiction has recently appeared in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Cemetery Dance*.

William Doreski teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire. His most recent collection of poetry is *Waiting for the Angel* (2009). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *New England Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Antioch Review*, and *Natural Bridge*.

Cort Ellyn's fiction has appeared in *Midnight Times*, *Silver Blade*, *A Fly In Amber*, and *Realms*, while her poetry has found its way into several small magazines. She is an active participant of Orson Scott Card's Hatrack River Writers' Workshop and a member of the Oklahoma Writers' Federation, Inc. More and more of her time is spent moderating and administrating the LegendFire Writing Community, which in her unbiased opinion is the best writing community available. Ms. Ellyn would like to invite anyone interested in writing fiction, non-fiction, or poetry to check out the community at www.legendfire.com

Phil Estes' poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Gargoyle*, *Harpur Palate*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Lamination Colony*, *NOO Journal*, *West Wind Review*, and others.

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Inna Hansen is Norway-based illustrator and has been showcased as issues artist in the Norwegian magazine *Pegasus*.

Jason Heller has been writing sporadically since his epic poem about alligators was published in *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine* when he was 8. He's currently the Denver city editor of *The Onion A.V. Club*. His fiction has appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *Apex Magazine*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Expanded Horizons*, *Atomjack*, and *Sybil's Garage*.

Alec Kowalczyk is a native of South Troy, New York, and a civil engineer by day with an interest in the mechanics of poetry.

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Jay Lowrey lives with his wife, daughter, and two dogs in Lafayette County, Mississippi, supposedly less than a mile from where Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* begins. In addition to *Kaleidotrope*, his stories have appeared in *Voices* and *Night Chills* and his poetry in *Blue Collar Review*.

Marshall Payne has worked as a touring musician, music producer, sound technician, a salesman, and a waiter. He has written over 100 short stories and his fiction has or will appear in *Aeon Speculative Fiction*, *Brutarian*, *Talebones*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Hub Magazine*, *Fictitious Force*, to name a few. He has a website at www.marshallpayne.com and a blog at marshallpayne1.livejournal.com.

Janet Sever's work has previously appeared in *The Foliate Oak Online*, and will appear in the upcoming print anthology, *The Best of the Foliate Oak*. It has also appeared in *Southern Fried Weirdness*, *Barbaric Yamp*, *Children Churches and Daddies*, and *Yellow Mama*. She lives and writes in Irving, Texas.

Anna Sykora has been an attorney in New York and teacher of English in Germany, where she resides with her patient husband and three enormous Norwegian Forest Cats. To date she has placed 143 poems, mostly dark ones, in the small press or on the web, and 72 tales. Writing is her joy.

Rachel Swirsky has published short fiction in a number of venues, including *Tor.com*, *Subterranean Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Interzone*. She began writing this story after helping to judge a contest for which a number of the entries were shaggy dog stories. Someone said, "It's impossible to make a shaggy dog story that works as a piece of fiction," and she began wondering if it would, in fact, be possible to do it—as long as the pun-like stakes of the story were clear up-front in the text.

Genevieve Valentine is a writer in New York; recent work has been published or is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Sybil's Garage*, and the *Federations* anthology.

Grant Wilson enjoys creating all types of Art both traditionally and digitally; he is also a Cartoonist and has had Animation screened at two well known venues in Edinburgh, Scotland. He enjoys the weird and wonderful, subscribing to the *Fortean Times* in the UK

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