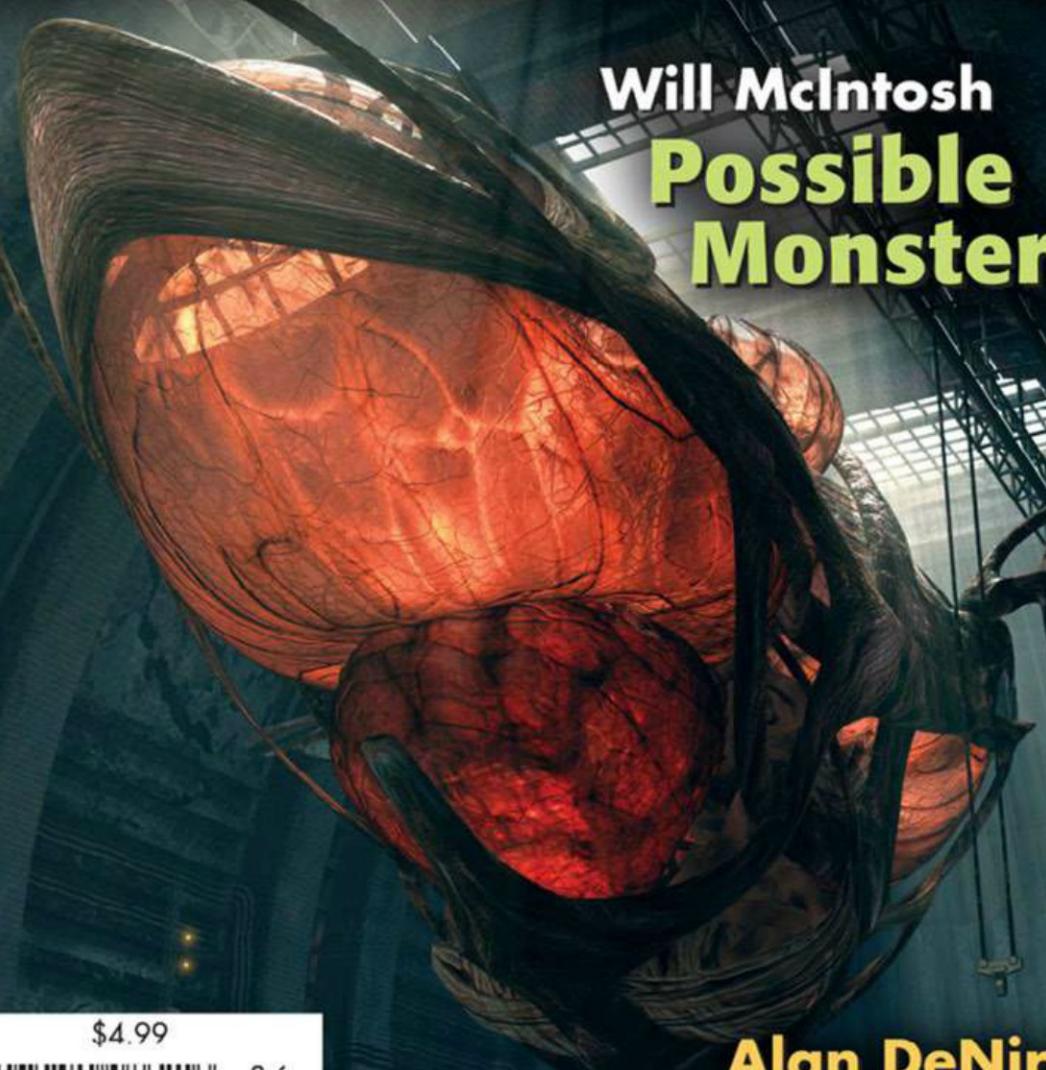


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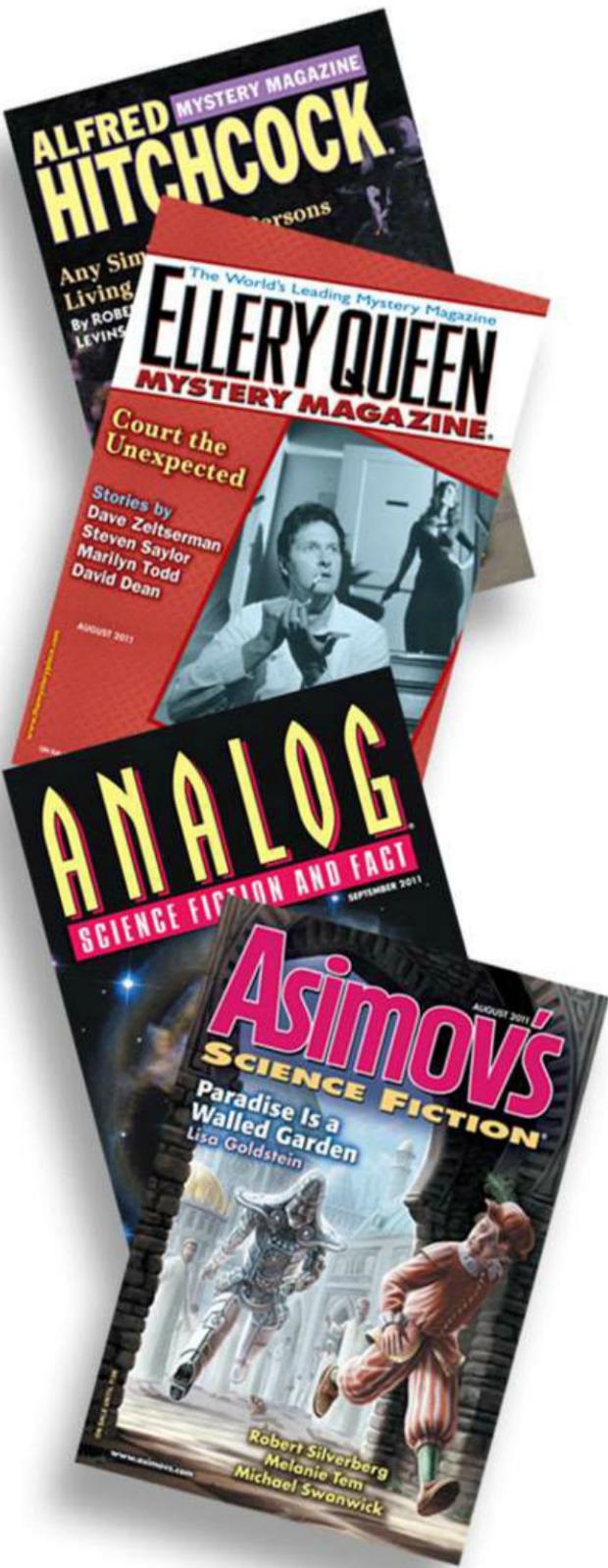
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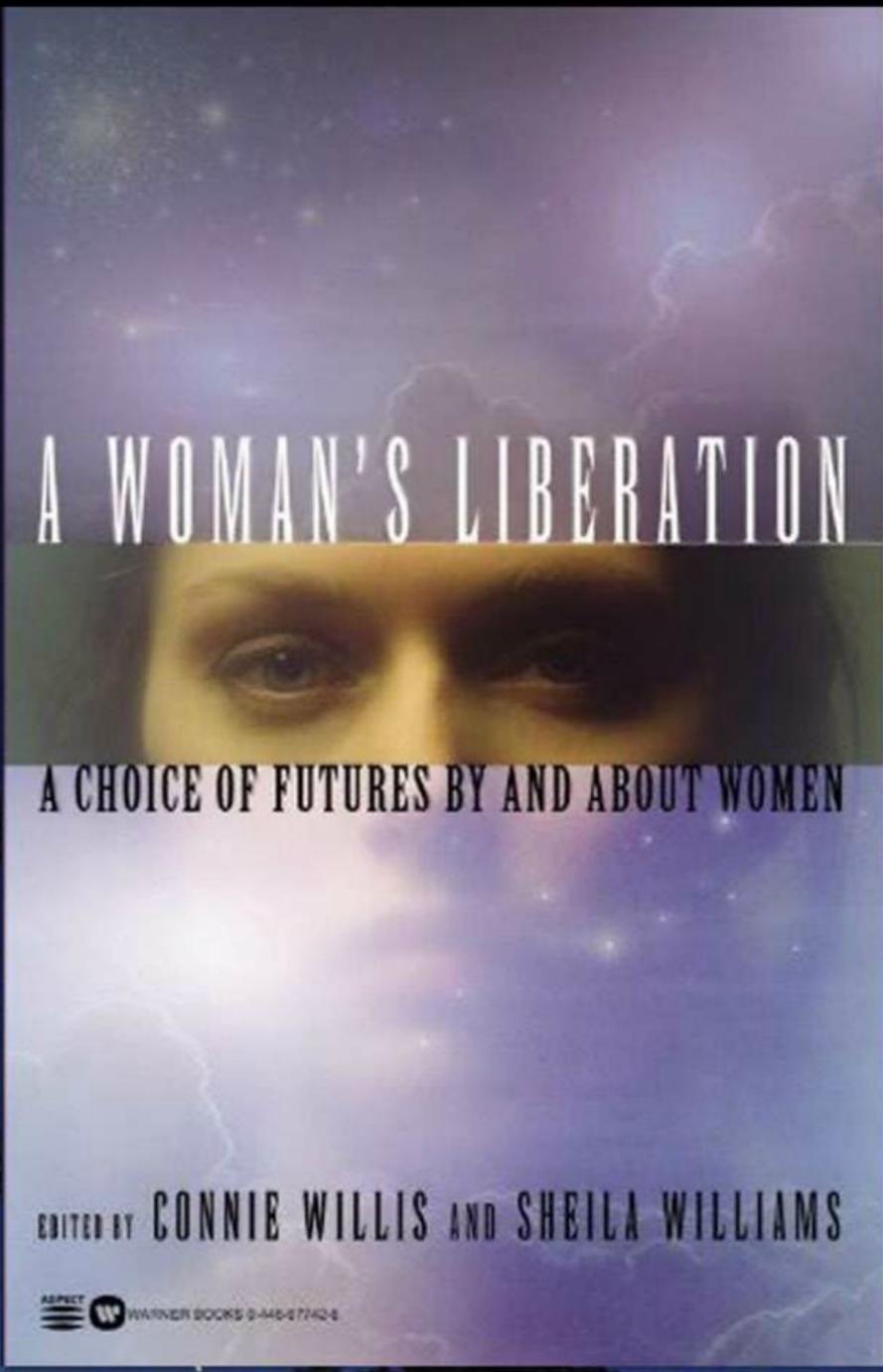
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WE HAVE MET THE ALIEN . . .

"[He] was fully fifteen feet in height and, on Earth, would have weighed some four hundred pounds. He sat his mount as we sit a horse, grasping the animal's barrel with his lower limbs, while the hands of his two right arms held his immense spear low at the side of his mount; his two left arms were outstretched laterally to help preserve his balance, the thing he rode having neither bridle or reins of any description for guidance."

John Carter's initial encounter with Edgar Rice Burroughs's olive-green Martian thark was my first memorable introduction to the concept of an alien life form. Tars Tarkas contributed much to my early thinking about extraterrestrials. It made sense that they would at first seem dangerous and deadly—Burroughs further describes Tarkas as a "huge and terrific incarnation of hate, of vengeance and of death"—but that we might realize they were decent once we understood their point of view. After all, Tars wasn't such a bad guy once you got to know him.

And though I loved the incomparable Dejah Thoris and brave Thuvia, Maid of Mars, even as a child I found Tars Tarkas's strangeness much more believable than Burroughs's humaniform aliens. For the most part, whether they were beautiful or bug-eyed, I didn't find aliens that wanted to mate with us very convincing.

As a teenager watching reruns of *Star Trek* episodes, I found the silicone-based Horta oozing its way around Janus VI terrorizing the mining colony in "The Devil in the Dark" far more plausible than Mr. Spock, the Klingons, Captain Kirk's latest squeeze, and all the other bipedal aliens who usually populated the show. Fortunately, although, the Horta was also a misunderstood monstrous alien, Mr. Spock's mind meld gave us humans a clear insight into its issues.

But even Tars Tarkas and the Horta shared some common ground with humanity. It took Terry Carr's ground-

breaking story about "The Dance of the Changer and the Three" to make me realize that Burroughs's Martian and the Horta might be no more realistic than *Star Trek*'s dancing green girl. In the Carr story, another hapless mining colony has a nasty run-in with an alien species, but this time there seems to be little likelihood that either group will ever come to an understanding of the other. Carr tells a beautiful story about an alien culture that is unfathomable to us simply because it is alien. This highly rewarding tale deserved its Hugo and Nebula nominations, but it intentionally gives us virtually no insight into the alien condition.

Clifford D. Simak, one of SF's most distinguished writers, implied in an interview with Darrell Schweitzer that no author was capable of fashioning a story about a truly *alien* alien. Simak said, "We can only think in human terms. What we try to do is twist human concepts into strange, distorted shapes. They seem alien, but all they are are distorted human concepts. You don't know how many years I have tried to develop a true alien. I have never been able to. Terry Carr came awful close . . . but he wasn't quite successful. I think probably it's very close to impossible to do it."

Yet, though it may be a Herculean task, the challenge doesn't prevent creative authors from coming up with entertaining extraterrestrials. I think the best of these are not humanoid in their appearance, but authors have to be cautious when setting about crafting such characters because they run the risk of producing something ridiculous. Burroughs describes the tharks as having eyes "set at the extreme sides of their heads . . . [they] protruded in such a manner that they could be directed forward and back and also independently of each other . . . permitting [the tharks] to look in any direction or two directions at once without the necessity of turning the head." Preview

images of Tars Tarkas in Disney's new film, *John Carter*, seem to have deemphasized this detail—and that's probably a good thing. Formidable as the giant Martian is, it's hard to take seriously the vision of his eyes swiveling backward and off in multiple directions simultaneously.

Many authors apparently circumvent this problem by keeping the alien off stage. Sometimes the aliens are only to be found in the ruins of their civilization. Though the aliens are mysterious and long gone, we learn something about them from the artifacts left behind. From H. Beam Piper's "Omnilingual" to Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* this is an idea I seldom tire of—perhaps because there are so many ways in which it can be handled. These stories often leave us with no clear image of what the alien looked and acted like before they became extinct or departed to another plane. We can make assumptions about what mattered to their civilization, maybe pick up some FTL or other advanced technology, but we don't have to try to form a three-dimensional conception of what they looked like when they were at home.

Keeping the alien invisible, communicating with a story's human characters through some form of telepathy, is another way to avoid writing a physical description of an extraterrestrial. Sometimes these aliens are pure energy. Other times, they inhabit a different dimension or occupy another universe. We can't really know them, but if we listen carefully, we may be able to absorb some aspect of their philosophy. The authors of these stories can avoid turning the alien into some kind of distortion of the human form, but, being only human, they can't avoid modeling the alien thought on some aspect of the human mind.

So we have met the alien and he is us. Still, no matter how hard it is to create a plausible alien, the implausible ones are often lots of fun to play with. Imaginative authors may never show us exactly who or what to expect should SETI someday receive an answer of some sort through its telescopes or probes, but stories about aliens may give us an insight into the minds and hearts of the humans who take ET's phone call. O

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REREADING PHILIP K. DICK

They were ugly little things. I mean the first editions of Philip K. Dick's first novels—squat, scrunchy, cheaply printed 1950s paperbacks, artifacts of a primitive era in science fiction publishing. Ace Books was the name of the publishing company—they are still in business, though vastly transformed—and Ace writers then were paid one thousand dollars per novel, which even then was the bottom rate for paperback books, although in modern purchasing power it's a good deal more than most new SF writers can command today.

Still, there were harbingers of things to come in those early Dick books. The very first sentence of the very first one tells us that in the most literal way: "There had been harbingers." That's *Solar Lottery*, Dick's debut novel, an Ace Double Book of 1955, printed back-to-back, as Ace did in those days, with Leigh Brackett's *The Big Jump*. As the novel opens, the harbingers include "a flight of white crows over Sweden," "a series of unexplained fires," and the birth of a two-headed calf. For us, the readers of science fiction half a century ago, the harbinger was the book itself, the announcement of the presence among us of a brilliant, quirky new writer.

How I read and re-read that book! How I studied it, and its successor of just a few months later, *The World Jones Made*, and *The Man Who Japed* that followed just a few months after that. How I loved those books! And how I yearned to write the way Philip K. Dick did! Like an earlier idol of mine, Henry Kuttner, whose work Dick had plainly studied, he was prolific, he was a compelling storyteller, he was a fountain of cunning ideas. I could not have chosen better models for the sort of writing career I hoped to have than Dick and his earlier avatar, Kuttner. Dick was

only twenty-seven when *Solar Lottery* came out, a youthful beginner who had appeared in the science fiction magazines just three years before with a double handful of ingenious short stories. I had already begun to sell some stories myself in 1955, so in terms of career launch we were virtually contemporaries, but I was only twenty, a college junior, and that seven-year gap in our ages made me regard Dick as vastly older, vastly wiser, vastly more skillful in the art of storytelling. I was an earnest beginner; he was already a pro.

He was good, all right. But I don't think either of us realized, back there in 1955, that he was destined to make an imperishable mark on American popular culture.

Solar Lottery is a crisp, fast-paced book, unmarred by the convoluted, contorted style of Dick's later work, a style that led one astute critic to say that his prose read like a bad translation from the German. It hums along at an unrelenting pace. The basic extrapolative situation shows Dick's early debt to the frantic, dizzyingly intense novels of A.E. van Vogt: out of the midcentury television-quiz popular culture has somehow evolved a world ruled by the Quizmaster, a dictator chosen by a random twitch of an electronic lottery, who can be displaced from supreme power as readily as he has been elevated to it. There is something of Robert A. Heinlein in this, the early Heinlein of *If This Goes On* and *Beyond This Horizon*, but the main inspiration had to be van Vogt.

Van Vogt, giving us similar situations in *The World of Null-A* and *The Weapons Makers* and other classic 1940s novels, rarely made sense, but the breathless tumble of one idea over another led his

readers to ignore or even welcome that. Dick, in *Solar Lottery*, does a van Vogt novel that makes sense . . . almost. He does one other thing that van Vogt never achieved: his characters seem like real people. They yearn, they suffer, they get angry, they get frightened. They fret and worry and bicker in a way that no one in any of the novels of van Vogt or Heinlein or Asimov in science fiction's 1940s Golden Age ever did, and the strange world they inhabit becomes all the more real because of that. And the book ends not in a slam-bang pulp-magazine climax but in a wistful, open-ended vision that tells alert readers that Dick, even at the age of twenty-seven, wanted to break free of the mold that had shackled other science fiction novelists in that era of the rigidly formulaic three-part magazine serial. He wanted, in fact, to be a novelist, period, without the "science fiction" label. (Between 1952 and 1958 he would write eight mainstream novels, novels without a shred of science fictional concept—*Voices from the Street*, *Mary and the Giant*, *In Milton Lumky Territory*, etc.—which no publisher would touch during his lifetime. I saw them, once, stacked up in boxes in his agent's office. They all were published, finally, after his death, when the movie *Blade Runner* had conferred bitterly ironic posthumous fame and fortune upon him.)

Solar Lottery had a powerful impact on me when I read it, in one wide-eyed sitting, in the autumn of 1955. I had already begun to pattern my short stories after Dick's, and now his first novel would reshape my notions of what a longer science fiction story ought to be. I had it very much in mind when his publisher, Ace Books, asked me to write a novel of my own the following year. Reading it again now, at the far end of my long career, I still admire the mastery Dick showed at the outset of his. The book fizzes and sparkles with ideas, and, miraculously, they all hang together in a way that the myriad plot explosions of Dick's predecessor in this mode, van Vogt, never managed to do. And his crisp dialog and lucid

exposition carry the story along efficiently and powerfully.

The World Jones Made came out, again from Ace, just a few months later. It's an even better book. Again we have the van Vogt technique of concept piled on concept, but again, where van Vogt simply stacks one idea on another without much of an attempt at an integrated plot, Dick manages, astonishingly, to hold everything together to tell a coherent story—an atomic war that fills the world with bizarre mutant humans, mysterious alien creatures drifting in from space who may be planning to colonize Earth, a security-minded government with a strong KGB flavor, and—the primary van Vogt touch—a sideshow performer who claims to be able to see the future, and, as it turns out, actually can. It is that sideshow performer—Floyd Jones is his name—who provides the unique Philip K. Dick flavor. In a van Vogt novel, Jones, the superman, would have been a remote and incomprehensible figure who had made himself emperor of the world before the story opened. To some extent power of that sort is what Jones achieves in the course of the Dick novel; but Dick shows his superman as a tragic, almost pathetic figure, whose anguish under the burden of his extraordinary gift makes him far more real than any of van Vogt's miracle-men. ("It's not so much like I can see the future; it's more that I've got one foot stuck in the past. I can't shake it loose. I'm reliving one year of my life forever." He shuddered. "Over and over again. Everything I do, everything I say, hear, experience, I have to grind over twice.") The complexity of Jones' predicament and the pathos of his character lingered in my mind for decades, and traces of it showed up in such novels of mine as *The Masks of Time* (1968), *Dying Inside* (1972), and, most particularly, *The Stochastic Man* (1975). None of those books is anything like *The World Jones Made* in plot, setting, or tone, and yet the spirit of that 1956 Dick book hovered over all three as I was writing them, many years later.

He was twenty-eight years old when he wrote *Jones*, living in Berkeley with the first of what would eventually be five wives, and trying to earn a living as a free-lance writer in the wobbly and uncertain science fiction market of the 1950s. (He had been working as a clerk in a record shop until his early flurry of short-story sales encouraged him to take the rash step of making writing his full-time profession.) That decision meant that he would spend most of the remaining twenty-six years of his life living close to the poverty line, which gives an even darker twist to his posthumous Hollywood prosperity. I had no idea at the time, of course, of how little Dick was actually earning. I saw him as a figure to emulate: a successful full-time writer, selling stories to every magazine around, and now writing brilliant novels for Ace. To me he was already one of the best science fiction writers in the business. Two more books that followed in quick succession, both of them from Ace in the same low-echelon format, served to confirm that belief: *The Man Who Japed* and *Eye in the Sky*. 1959 brought *Time Out of Joint*, the escape from Ace into hard covers and the first of his significant explorations of the nature of reality. And then, in 1962, came the Hugo-winning masterpiece, *The Man in the High Castle*. From then until the end of his short and troubled life in 1982 there could be no question of his place at the highest levels of the field.

Reading *The World Jones Made* fifty-five years later, I see no reason to revise my youthful opinion that it, and *Solar Lottery*, demonstrate that their author was not just a facile producer of clever short stories, but a writer of major stature. (They have been reissued often over the years, and copies are not hard to find.) In those early books he isn't yet tinkering with the nature of reality as he did, again and again, in the great novels of his mature period, *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (which became the movie *Blade Runner*), nor is he departing from the norms of the science fiction novel altogether as he did in the mysterious final books, *Valis*, *The Divine Invasion*, and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Readers who go to *Jones* or his other early novels will not find the manic strangeness of the 1960s books in them or the challenging philosophical intensity of the later ones, and they will be disappointed if that is what they are looking for. But, taken on their own terms, they are superb examples of science fiction in the classic mode, building on the work of such 1940s pulp-magazine stalwarts as A.E. van Vogt and Henry Kuttner and Robert A. Heinlein to give us something new and strange and wonderful. ○

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Pavane

On that planet, they learned early
the hour and color of their deaths.
There, the Temples of Doom were
the largest industrial complexes,
offering personalized predictions,
with the option of added details
and costly updates, day and night.
Most citizens devoted their lives

to a calm acceptance of their fate,
to composing elegies and epitaphs,
to weaving their own shrouds. But
those who believed that defiance
was possible formed secret cults
devoted to making the demises
of others diverge completely from
times and circumstances foretold.

—F.J. Bergmann
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ENCYCLOPEDIC!

amazed

In October of 2008, the comedian **Louis CK** <louisck.net> while visiting the now defunct *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* show launched into a rant about our attitudes toward technology. It went viral, and although NBC tends to pull down unauthorized links, you can probably find **Everythings Amazing & Nobodys Happy** (sic) <youtube.com/watch?v=8r1CZTLk-Gk> here. Since the video has been downloaded 4,067,640 times, chances are good that you may have already seen it. But if not, I commend this cogent cultural criticism to my glass-is-half-empty friends out there in Readerland. My favorite part comes when the comedian lights into all of those who complain about arduous plane trips. He reminds us exactly how marvelous flying is: "You're sitting on a chair . . . in the sky!" As someone who lives and loves science fiction, I need to keep remembering that, for all its problems, this is as cool a future as any of those I read about back when I was a kid.

I experienced a similar moment of future shock a few days ago when the beta version of the **Science Fiction Encyclopedia** (SFE) <sf-encyclopedia.com> debuted. Why call it beta? The encyclopedists explain: "Our current 3.2m word-count will probably expand to 4.2m by the time we're done at the end of 2012. So there will be some entries missing in the beta text, and some cross-reference links that aren't yet working. Of course, we hope that 3.2m words will be enough to occupy everyone for a while. . . ." That m stands for million, dear readers. And

all of them are free!

Now that's amazing.

You must understand that I've owned every version of the SFE up until now. Owned, as in paid for. I was a cheapskate back when I was starting out, so I bought only the trade paperback of the 1979 first edition edited by **Peter Nicholls** <sophiecunningham.com/features/alien_star_inte>, **John Clute** <johnclute.co.uk>, and **Brian Stableford** <free-space.virgin.net/diri.gini>. Alas, serious overuse caused the covers to part ways and the binding to crack, so I no longer have the remains of that book. I was happy to buy the hardcover of Clute and Nicholls's 1993 edition, which is still here on my shelf. Later, I kept the 1995 CD version of the SFE, *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, in my drive for months at a time.

Of course, the SFE is not the only science fiction encyclopedia in my library. Our little corner of literature is fortunate in its many encyclopedists. For example, there's **Brian Ash** <http://sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/ash_brian>, **Don D'Amassa** <dondamassa.com>, **James Gunn** <<http://www2.ku.edu/~sfcenter/bio.htm>>, **George Mann** <<http://georgemann.wordpress.com>>, **David Pringle** <http://sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/pringle_david>, and **Gary Westfahl** <sfsite.com/gary/intro.htm>, to name but six of recent memory. Many are specialists who consider various slices of the genre, such as SF movies, or art, or themes, or movements. Some of their projects are more like coffee table books, lavishly illustrated, but rather thin on text, while others aspire to be

comprehensive surveys, if not necessarily to delight the eye.

browsing

The print versions of the SFE belonged to the latter group, as does the current incarnation. It sorts information into several broad categories: *authors*, *themes*, *media*, and *culture*. The *authors* and *themes* categories are self-explanatory; these are the entries I will probably make the most use of. But drilling down the various submenus of *media* and *culture* categories reveals the ambition of the effort here. The editors take *media* to mean not only TV and movies, but also comics, games, music, and radio. The infrastructure of genre culture includes our many awards and publications, fans and their organizations, 'zines and publishers. A tour of the literary scenes in countries from Albania to Yugoslavia demonstrates the ubiquity of SF.

I suppose that I am giving away one of my secrets as your columnist when I reveal that browsing the thematic entries in the print SFE has inspired many an installment in this space. As an example, read the SFE articles on **alternate history** <http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/alternate_history>, **cyberpunk** <<http://sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/cyberpunk>>, and **robots** <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/robots>, and then fire up the **Internet Wayback Machine** <archive.org> for a jaunt back through the "On the Net" archives. And I often consult these erudite surveys of our common tropes and ideas before I begin a story. As a longtime fan of the fantastic, I sometimes discover to my chagrin that what I thought was my very own brilliant new idea was in fact something I read in a **Cordwainer Smith** <cordwainer-smith.com> story in 1965.

The SFE has ever been distinguished by the quality of writing and the depth of scholarship. This is especially true of the author entries. The editorial team of John Clute, **David Langford** <ansible.co.uk>, Peter Nicholls, and **Graham Sleight** <grahamsleight.com>, as well as their many contributors, are gifted prose stylists and astute critics. Here are a few ex-

cerpts from their takes on some of Asimov's stars.

Paul Di Filippo <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/di_filippo_paul>: Writing of Paul's novella, "A Princess of the Linear Jungle," the encyclopedist applauds, "The deft, haunting, glad equipoise here achieved may be Di Filippo's central 'note' as a writer."

Nancy Kress <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/kress_nancy>: "In a career that has lasted so far less than three decades, Kress has traversed much of the territory of the fantastic in literature; she does not seem ready to stop."

Robert Reed <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/reed_robert>: Writing about Bob's Marrow series, the encyclopedist notes, "The cool architectonic delight of the overall concept, plus his unfailing capacity to focus his narrative through the lives of plausibly conceived protagonists, has brought Reed to a significantly wider readership. Given the habit of contemporary SF readers to expect a kind of brand identity from authors, Reed's increasing fame is very welcome."

Robert Silverberg <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/silverberg_robert>: "In the early twenty-first century, he remains one of the most imaginative and versatile writers ever to have been involved with SF."

Connie Willis <sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry/willis_connie>: "In the best of Willis's stories, as in her longer work, a steel felicity of mind and style appears effortlessly married to a copious empathy. Perhaps most memorably in the Time Travel books, she is a celebrator."

As I type this in October, our own **Sheila Williams** <asimovs.com/archives.shtml> does not have an entry. So far. Recall, however, that this is the beta version and that a million words of new and revised material are yet forthcoming to complete entries toward the end of the alphabet.

caveats

As if they weren't busy enough, the encyclopedists are also writing a compan-

ion blog to their project. In one of the first posts, they outlined their **philosophy** [sfencyclopedia.wordpress.com / 2011/10/04/some-philo](http://sfencyclopedia.wordpress.com/2011/10/04/some-philo). They intend their project to be “a coherent whole. Although no one person has written the 3m words of the SFE, we hope and believe they reflect a consistent sensibility. The group of contributors and editors are approaching the field from the same sort of perspective.” They also aspire to create “a balanced whole.” On the other hand, they acknowledge that they are not neutral. And it is from this non-neutrality that controversy may arise. Because these writers care passionately about the history and the future of science fiction, they freely mix the objective and the subjective. For example, you may find that they do not think as highly of some of your favorite writers as you do. Unlike, say, the dry science fiction entries in **Wikipedia** wikipedia.org, the SFE can make for some lively reading!

Then there is the flaw common to all encyclopedias, and that is that they are out-of-date the moment they fall under the light of readers’ eyes. And the SFE is no exception. You will search in vain for entries about some important new (although really, not that new) writers like **Aliette de Bodard** <http://aliettede bodard.com>, **Will McIntosh** will mcintosh.net, **Tim Pratt** timpratt.org, and **Mary Robinette Kowal** mary robinettekowal.com. It would be churlish to criticize this new enterprise for being behind the times before its time has properly begun, but the question remains: Will the SFE be updated once it passes out of beta? I posed this query on the SFE site and got an answer from John Clute. “From this point on, we expect to do a regular monthly global upload, which will include all the new titles, etc that have come to notice during the previous four weeks or so.” Wait, does that mean the plan is to update continually until the Heat Death of the Universe? Or at least, for the next twenty or thirty years? I sent my follow up and John replied, “But yes, even though we’re

not a wiki, there will be nothing written permanently in stone about the SFE, it’s just that we will take responsibility for what goes in—and for how any new entry or piece of information is integrated properly into the whole. . . . Four million words (estimated completion total) and 14,000 entries and 120,000 internal links or so sounds a lot, and is, but does in fact make up a small enough entity that we should be able to keep it alive. This is the plan.”

exit

I understand all about being too new to make the cut for the SFE; I was a lightly published twenty-eight-year-old tyro when the first edition came out, and thus did not merit a mention. However it was deeply satisfying to receive 6 3/8 inches of column space in the second. (And yes, I measured!) The Kelly entry, written in 1993, ended thus: “He stands at the verge of recognition as a major writer.”

Gulp.

Naturally the first thing I did after clicking over to the new version was to look **myself** sf-encyclopedia.com/Entry /kelly_james_patrick up and see if that prediction had come true. Writing about my involvement with the **Clarion Writers Workshop** <http://clarion.ucsd.edu>, the encyclopedist concludes: “In this as in his writing, he is a central part of the community of SF.” So you see, I can’t very well give an unbiased review here. All I can tell you is I’m very excited to play with our new Science Fiction Encyclopedia.

And I, for one, continue to be amazed at my good fortune to have access to this digital wonderland that is the internet. ○

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FINAL EXAM

Megan Arkenberg

Megan Arkenberg is a student in Wisconsin. In the name of story research, she racks up late fees at the college library, gets dizzyingly lost along the shores of Lake Michigan, consumes a steady diet of M.R. James, and lusts quietly after the architecture and costume of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and dozens of other places. She procrastinates by editing the online magazines *Mirror Dance* and *Lacuna*. Megan's first story for *Asimov's* is an unconventional tale about a troubled marriage further rocked by an unspeakable horror.

Part I—Multiple Choice

1. The first time you visited the ocean, that Fourth of July weekend when purple storm clouds swallowed the horizon and the great cerulean expanse below them was freckled with parti-colored sails, you looked out over the water and felt . . .

- (a) the smallness of humanity in the face of a universe that is older and vaster and more full of life than any of us can imagine, much less understand.
- (b) a sudden urge to jump.
- (c) the awful terror of living.
- (d) nothing; there was only the sea-spray on your face, salty, cold, and needle-fine.
- (e) all of the above.

2. At what point did you know—and I mean really *know*, in your gut, in the tautness of your heartstrings—that things had gone horribly wrong?

- (a) When you ran the faucet in the motel bathroom to wash the salty tear-tracks from your face, and the water came out cold and red, staining the sink.

(b) When the equipment at work started breaking down, first the conveyor belts on the registers, then the adding machine in the office, then the registers themselves. IT had the same advice over and over again: unplug it, turn it off, and plug it in again. Of course it never worked.

- (c) When Donald looked up from the papers he was correcting at the kitchen counter and said *Baby girl, what do you think about couples therapy?* and you were so startled that you dropped the whole carton of orange juice.

(d) When the pink-suited reporter interrupted the inspirational drama on the television in the marriage counselor's waiting room, her hair frizzled with electricity and her left eyebrow bloodied from a shallow cut to the forehead. Tell us what you're seeing, somebody said, and she said, God . . .

- (e) When you asked him to pass you a butter knife from the drawer, and he must

have heard you, but he was marking something in the margin of his book and you had to ask a second time. He slammed the book shut and pulled the drawer so hard that it came off the slides. Here, he said, flinging the knife across the counter. It landed with its tongue-like blade pointed at your breast.

3. When the pink-suited reporter's station showed the first footage of the things shambling out of the water, you compared them to . . .

(a) your neighbor's dog, a blond-gray whippet with a scratched bald patch high on his left shoulder. You thought of Sultan when you saw the first shambling thing bend, draw back its black and rubbery lips, and sink its long yellow teeth into its own thigh, biting down to the bone.

(b) fish, especially the fat, foul-smelling, tasteless white fish Donald used to bring home by the bucket-load and smoke over a charcoal fire on the patio.

(c) skinny girls, like the neighbor three blocks over who took her early morning jogs in a white tank top that, by the time she reached your house, had turned transparent with sweat, displaying her prominent ribs.

(d) Godzilla, whose movie you had never seen, but whose general shape you vaguely remembered from a commercial for a Japanese automobile.

(e) the sea-witch from a picture book your favorite teacher read to the class one day, when it was raining too hard to go outside for recess. The artist had drawn the sea-witch with a water snake wound around her shoulders like a mink; the sea-witch was offering it a taste of a tiny red crab, which she held between her own sharp teeth.

4. After several months watching them, first through the reporter's camera and then, later, through the slats in the boards you had pounded over your windows, you came to the conclusion that the shambling things had originated . . .

(a) on Mars.

(b) in an alternate dimension, where the laws of physics and geometry and merging into freeway traffic are subtly different, and it is possible to have four-sided triangles.

(c) in the nightmares of mankind, where we let our guard down and unleash the latent psychic powers of creation which, when we are awake, limit themselves to such pieces of good fortune as the perfect seat in the movie theatre, or a bra that fits.

(d) on this planet, in the natural course of evolution, which has already produced such monsters as the platypus, the hyena, and your skinny neighbor.

(e) after Chernobyl, or Three-Mile Island, or a worse disaster that a national government, or the Illuminati, had been more successful at covering up.

5. Now that it has been months since the last sighting, many people have chosen to believe that the shambling monsters are gone for good. You, however, know that they are . . .

(a) still in the ocean, huddled at the bottom of chasms too deep for sonar, waiting to rise again and feel the cold moonlight on their bulbous faces.

(b) taking on the appearance of everyday people, the cashier at the newly re-opened liquor store, the gang of skinny gun-dragging teenagers who moved into the old marriage counselor's office, the woman who walks up and down the sidewalk in the late afternoon, calling out names you can never quite understand.

(c) in our nightmares, slowly shaping us to our true forms.

(d) hiding under your bed.

(e) both c and d.

6. What could you have done to prevent all this from happening?

(a) Become a better cook, as Donald's mother always hinted with her gifts of Julia Child and Betty Crocker collections, the elaborate kitchen gadgets whose names, much less their functions, remained shrouded in mystery. Though you never really learned to love food, you did learn to cook, to boil and bubble the bacteria out of a can of condensed soup. Incidentally, your mother-in-law would be proud.

(b) Become a better liar. It is true that the pink-and-emerald tie he wanted to buy at the church flea market was the ugliest thing you had ever seen, uglier even than the monsters from the sea, uglier even than Sultan. But it would not have hurt you to bite your lip and nod your head and say *Yes, for seventy-five cents it certainly is a steal.*

(c) Prayed more, and harder, and to the right people. Saint Helena is the patron of dysfunctional marriage. Saint Neot is the patron of fish.

(d) All of the above.

(e) None of the above.

7. The worst part was . . .

(a) when the first shambling thing ate the pink-suited reporter, and the camera man didn't turn away, and you sat there petrified in the marriage counselor's office, watching the flesh blossom and drip over the creature's scaly lips. *Jesus Christ*, you said, reaching for Donald's hand. He was gripping a magazine cover too tightly to notice.

(b) when he flung the little velvet box at you over the dinner table, and you looked at him and you asked *What is this for?* and he said *I knew you'd forget.*

(c) when you checked into the motel, and you couldn't stop licking your bottom lip even though you knew your saliva was keeping the split open, and the man at the front desk was clearly worried for you but he just as clearly didn't know what to say, so he handed you a pair of key-cards and told you, earnestly, to have a good night.

(d) later that night, when you opened the bottle of pinot grigio that the liquor clerk had recommended and drank it all in one long throat-tearing gulp. Your cell phone started to sing from its compartment in your purse, the sweet black-and-white movie love song Donald had tried to serenade you with, once, in the back seat of your car. Even drunk, your thumb found the phone's power button and turned it off.

(e) this moment, now, as you look back on all of it, and can't think of anything that you would do the same.

8. When you came home from the motel the next morning, a hangover ringing in your ears, you found his packed suitcase sitting on the coffee table in the living room. You stumbled into the bathroom to vomit, and when you came out again, the suitcase was gone. That was, in a way, the last you ever saw of Donald. What happened to him?

(a) Shortly after he left, he was eaten by one of the shambling creatures.

(b) He met another woman on a bus to Chicago. She was taller than you are, and skinnier, and she smelled like cinnamon and vanilla.

(c) He joined that cult down in Louisiana, the one with the blood sacrifices and the idol built of concrete blocks, and he was one of the men who walked into the ocean on June 21, and became a pillar of salt.

(d) He committed suicide with a shaving razor in the bathtub of the same motel room where you hid from him, that last night. He never forgave himself for hitting you, not even when he remembered that you'd hit him first.

(e) He slipped, somehow, into an alternate dimension, where the laws of physics and geometry are subtly different, and there is a house just like yours, but the woman inside is a better liar.

9. His last thoughts were . . .

- (a) incomprehensible with fear, the nauseating smell of his own blood.
- (b) of you.
- (c) revelations about the falseness of Euclidian geometry, the sheer *wrongness* of all human conceptions of time and history and causal relationships, that could never have been comprehended by another human being, even if Donald had lived, and admitted to himself what he had understood.

(d) of Christine Kaminski, the slender brunette who took him to junior prom, and who forged a deeper connection with him on that one night in the rented Marriott ballroom than you did in seven years of marriage. She wore pale blue, his favorite color, and only kissed him once, during the last dance of the night. If he had married her, he would have been happy.

(e) of his little brother, who died at birth, whom he never told you about. He intended to, but there was never a moment in that first year of marriage when you weren't too busy with something else—arranging furniture, organizing closets and cupboards, filing for loans, writing thank-you cards. Afterward, it seemed too late to bring it up. The closest he ever came was during that Christmas dinner at your sister's, when you teased him about being an only child.

10. Looking back on all of it, you still don't understand . . .

(a) why all the equipment at work broke down that day. You even stayed an extra fifteen minutes to play with the reset buttons and a bent paperclip; it made you late to the marriage counselor's office, which in some ways didn't matter, because her previous appointment was running over and you had to wait anyway, but in some ways it did matter, because Donald was expecting you to arrive on time. It didn't help in any case. Everything was still broken the next day.

(b) why the water in the motel bathroom turned to blood. Afterward, you asked around town, and learned that no one else had discovered blood or any other bodily fluids running through their pipes. But there was a lot going on at the time; maybe they simply hadn't noticed.

(c) why you told Donald about the Little Mermaid picture book as you collapsed drunken and giggling into your own back seat. Your throat was hoarse from swearing at your baseball team as they permitted run after humiliating run, and you had spilled beer on the sleeve of your sweatshirt. You tried to wiggle out of it and it got stuck around your arm, and you said, *This reminds me of a story . . .*

(d) what attracted you to Donald in the first place. Was it his eyes, his soft lips, the way he ran his fingers through his hair when he was nervous, the way all his undershirts smelled like chalkboards, the way he tightened his tie with both hands before saying something important?

- (e) all of the above.

11. After that incident in Portland, when the shambling thing almost caught up to you by clinging to the bottom of your bus, your favorite shirt became stained with

- (a) seawater.
- (b) blood (yours).
- (c) ichor (its).
- (d) semen.
- (e) merlot.

12. Your sister, who knows these things, told you that the best technique for fighting the shambling monsters is . . .

- (a) frying them with a blow torch.

- (b) dowsing them with holy water.
- (c) dragging them behind a truck.
- (d) flinging them into a nuclear reactor.
- (e) running until they tire of chasing you.

13. You most regret . . .

(a) missing that shot at the fast food joint in Vancouver, when the little boy died. It was not your fault; no one had ever taught you to fire a revolver, much less where to aim on a bulbous heavy-lidded nightmare as it slithered over a drive-thru window. But it *was* your fault, because the creature had followed you, and if you hadn't stopped to eat at that particular restaurant and that particular time, it would never have killed that child.

(b) not letting him buy that hideous watermelon tie at the church flea-market, when you knew it reminded him of his grandfather, and made him smile.

(c) wearing your favorite shirt on the bus in Portland.

(d) shaking Donald as you got into the car in the marriage counselor's parking lot, then slapping him across the face. No matter how terrified you were, no matter how much you thought he'd earned it, you should have known better than to hit him. You did know better. You knew it reminded him of his father.

(e) turning into your pillow that last time he tried to kiss you good night, so that his lips caught you on the cheek.

14. In your dreams, the shambling monsters appear at your bedside, and their voices sound like . . .

(a) radio static, interspersed with love songs from old black-and-white movies.

(b) the screaming of the pink-suited reporter as those yellow teeth crunched through her clavicle.

(c) the marriage counselor, with her gentle eastern accent, the sharp tick of her pen against her clipboard punctuating each clause.

(d) footsteps over broken glass.

(e) the whisper of a fish's breath.

15. Now, when you look out at the sea, you feel . . .

(a) the smallness of humanity in the face of a universe that is older and vaster and more full of life than any of us can imagine, much less understand.

(b) a sudden urge to jump.

(c) the awful terror of living.

(d) his absence; there is only the sea-spray on your face, salty, cold, and needle-fine.

(e) all of the above.

Part II—Short Answer

16. Is this really the end of the world? Defend your answer with evidence from the following texts: the *Apocalypse of John*, the *Collected Works* of H. P. Lovecraft, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Ibn Al-Nafis' *Theologus Autodidactus*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, the fortieth through fifty-eighth stanzas of *Völsuspá*, and last week's edition of the *New York Times*.

17. Just what is it about filling in bubbles on a multiple choice test that makes you believe that every terrible decision you've made might, with luck, with sheer cussedness, have turned out right in the end?

Part III—Extra Credit

What color were Donald's eyes?

Part IV—Answer Key

1. The correct answer is (e) all of the above. You were nine years old, and had wanted to see the ocean ever since the day your third-grade teacher read you a picture book with the *real* story of the Little Mermaid—Andersen, not Disney. You wore a pink-and-yellow bathing suit that you had outgrown the previous summer and carried a purple plastic pail, not because you had any intention of building sand castles but because the children in the picture book (who appeared in the seashore-margins on every page, though they had nothing to do with the mermaid or her prince or her beautiful raven-haired rival) had carried pails and shovels, made of tin, in which they collected seashells. At that moment, standing at the edge of the pier while your parents argued through a transaction at the overpriced snack-shack behind you, you registered nothing but the caress of the spray on your face. Only later, with reflection, did you feel the smallness, the terror, the urge to jump.

On your honeymoon, Donald tried to recreate this experience (which you had shared with him in the back seat of your car, after a drunken night at the worst baseball game your team had ever played). He took you to the same pier, bought you a paper cone of roasted peanuts at the same overpriced snack-shack, but the weather was different, clean and peaceful, and your red two-piece fit your body like a second skin.

2. The correct answer is (e) when you asked him to pass you a butter knife, and he must have heard you, but he was marking something in the margin of his book and you had to ask a second time. It cost sixty-seven dollars to fix the drawer slides, sixty-seven dollars you didn't have but managed to find somewhere, probably in the old plastic KFC cup you kept by the telephone to collect money for date nights, back when you went on dates. In days to come, that cup would hold many things: pinot grigio, as you drank yourself into a stupor; vomit; distilled water for an impromptu eye wash; strips of bloody gauze.

3. The correct answer, I'm sorry to say, is (d) Godzilla. You had never done your best or most original thinking under stress. Donald would not have hesitated to point this out, but then again, when Donald saw the shambling things on the television his first thought was of the illustration of the sea-witch, which he had seen only days before as he wandered through the mall, looking for your anniversary present. He found the old picture book in a store that specialized in plush animals and greeting cards, and he thought of buying it for you, but he remembered that day on the pier by the ocean, and bought you a pearl bracelet instead.

There's an old superstition that a bride shouldn't wear pearls on her wedding day, because for each pearl she wears, her husband will give her a reason to cry.

4. The correct answer is (b) in an alternate dimension. At least, that was your theory; the true answer is somewhat closer to (d) on this planet, in the natural course of evolution. You, however, are not expected to know this, or to retain your sanity if you had glimpsed some hint of it by mistake.

What happened between you and Donald was also by and large the result of a natural chain of events, an estrangement, a distancing of the sort that shambles into so many relationships. The truth—which you are also not expected to know—is that you never had very much in common to begin with. Your date nights stopped because you could no longer agree on a restaurant, or a movie, or a group of friends to visit. Breaking the cutlery drawer was the natural result of too many nights listening to you root for a baseball team he had never cared for in the first place.

5. The correct answer is (b) taking on the appearance of everyday people. The marriage counselor, who spoke to you briefly on the office phone when you called her during your lunch break, said that Donald thought you had trust issues. *It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you*, you said. *Who is out to get you?* asked the marriage counselor.

If your memory had a better sense of irony, it would have recalled that conversation two months later as you darted from shadow to shadow down your near-deserted block, clutching a gun you didn't know how to use, listening for the gelatinous thump of the creature's footsteps behind you. You'd learned by then that they could distinguish humans through scent, and that they gave off distinctive odors of their own; this particular creature, a female who smelled as chalky as a jar of antacid, had been trailing you for weeks. In the end, you only lost her when you packed the truck and moved up to Oregon for a few months, to stay with your sister, who'd compulsively saved canned goods and ammunition in her basement. Even later, after you worked up the courage to return home, when you cracked open the front door and slipped into the foyer, your nostrils were assaulted by the stench of mold and chalk.

6. The correct answer is (e) none of the above. Of course, you could have tried cooking, or lying, or praying; it would not have hurt to try. But you never did.

7. The correct answer is (a) when the first shambling thing ate the pink-suited reporter, and the cameraman didn't turn away. You will see that scene in your nightmares for the rest of your life. You will never again look at that particular shade of pink without your stomach churning, your tongue fumbling compulsively past your lips, your ribs curling inward, your vision spotting like blood on bathroom tissue. In all of this, the reporter's death is the only thing about which you have never spoken to anyone. Sometimes, you think it is the real reason you drink.

8. The correct answer is (b) he met another woman on a bus to Chicago. Her name was Nora and she used to work in a bakery; she was not a very good baker, but her hand was perfectly steady as she drew looping cursive letters in pink gel across the smooth buttercream canvases. The last cake she decorated was for a little girl named Rebecca, who ate the frosting in huge gobs with her fingers, but had wanted the lettering to be blue. Nora didn't care that Donald was married, and he didn't care that her last relationship had been with a woman who died of suspiciously severe food poisoning. They settled for a while in an apartment over an abandoned antique store. Then, after a year and a half, Nora joined the Louisiana blood-cult, and Donald never heard from her again.

Though he did eventually commit suicide with a shaving razor, it is too much of a coincidence to think that he did it in that same motel room where you'd sobbed over the sink all those months before.

9. The correct answer is (b) of you. For better or for worse, you were the love of his life. In the early whirlwind years, he imagined that some corner of his heart had always known and loved you, even at junior prom, when he was kissing Christine Kaminski and smelling the soapy-bubblegum scent of her shampoo. Later, when Nora disappeared, he began to write letters to you. He never sent them, which is just as well. You would never have opened them, and they would not have told you anything you didn't already know.

(Here is what the last one said:

Baby girl, I've forgotten the color of your eyes. Sorry for everything. Don.)

10. The correct answer is (e) all of the above. It's ironic, when you consider that an Apocalypse is meant to be a revelation, an unveiling, that at the end of everything so much remains veiled. No one knows why, in offices and stores around the country, computers and cash registers went down in droves that Tuesday afternoon. You were the only one to see the blood come out of the faucet, and you wouldn't even swear that it was blood. It might have been zinfandel. You will never learn why you always need to be drunk before you can share really important information with the people you love. Even this answer key won't give you all the answers.

(What first attracted you to Donald was the way he mispronounced your last name.)

11. The correct answer is (b) blood (yours). You were sitting at the window above the left rear wheel, your head jolting with each pothole against the padded headrest, when you caught the stench of chalk coming through the air conditioning. You panicked and fought your way to the front door, and the driver misinterpreted your flailing and laid you low with a punch between the eyes. Everyone was jumpy, those first few months. You woke a half-hour later to learn that the bus had crossed six bridges while you were out, and the smell of chalk was gone, replaced by the sour-metallic taste in the back of your nostrils and gummed in your lace neckline.

12. The correct answer is, of course, (d) flinging them into a nuclear reactor, but you had to make do with (e) running until they tired of chasing you.

13. The correct answer is (e) turning into your pillow that last time he tried to kiss you good night. In the days and months and years to come, you would miss the taste of his mouth, miss the cool scratch of his unshaved chin across your cheek. Of course the little boy's death bothers you, and the pink-and-green tie, and the hideous satisfaction of the hard granite sound your hand made when it collided with his jaw. But none of these produced in you the same yearning, the same hunger, the deep chilling pain of a hollowness you yourself created.

14. The correct answer is (a) radio static, interspersed with love songs from old black-and-white movies. If Donald ever calls you, the ring tone will be the same: a sweet plucking of violin strings, a woman's too-mellow voice. The worst thing about these nightmares is that you often think he *is* calling you, and it pulls you out of your dream of running into the cold and poorly lit reality of the place you ran to. And once there, in the silence, in your narrow bed, you are all alone.

15. The correct answer is (d).

16. Answers will vary.

17. Answers will vary.

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Jack McDevitt's work has appeared on the final Nebula ballot sixteen times. His novel *Seeker*, an Alex Benedict mystery, won in 2007. Alex is back in the current *Firebird* (Ace). A story about the early career of Jack's other popular character, Priscilla Hutchins, "Maiden Voyage," appeared in our January issue. "Hutch" is still in training in the author's new story about the perils and the promise of space travel and what it might mean to be left . . .

WAITING AT THE ALTAR

Jack McDevitt

The *Copperhead* was floating through the fogs of transdimensional space, somewhere between Fomalhaut and Serenity Station, which is to say it was well off the more traveled routes. Priscilla Hutchins was half-asleep in the pilot's seat. Her mentor, Jake Loomis, had gone back to the passenger cabin, where he might have drifted off, or was maybe playing chess with Benny, the AI. Soft music drifted through the ship. The Three Kings doing "Heartbreak."

Hutch was vaguely aware of the humming and beeping of the electronics, and the quiet flow of air through the vents. Then suddenly she wasn't. The lights had gone out. And the ship bounced hard, as if it had been dropped into a storm-tossed sea. The displays were off and the warning klaxon sounded. Power down.

"System failure," said Benny, using the slightly modified tone that suggested he'd also suffered a cutback.

Emergency lights blinked on and cast an eerie glow across the bridge. The ship rocked and slowed and accelerated and rocked again. Then, within seconds, all sense of motion stopped. "Are we back in normal space, Benny?" she asked.

"I can't confirm, but that seems to be the case."

Jake's voice came loud and subtly amused from the cabin: "Hutch, what happened?" She knew exactly what had happened. This was one more test on her qualification flight. There was no danger to the *Copperhead*. Nobody was at risk other than herself. "Engines have shut down," said Benny.

"Engines off," she told Jake. "Power outage."

The navigational display flickered back to life. Stars blinked on. Jake appeared at the hatch. "You okay, Hutch?"

"I'm fine." The misty transdimensional universe that provided shortcuts across the cosmos had vanished, replaced by the vast sweep of the Milky Way. "We're back outside." That would have been automatic. During a power failure, the drive unit was designed to return the vehicle to normal space. Otherwise, the ship risked being lost forever with no chance of rescue. "Benny, is there an imminent threat?"

"Negative, Hutch. Ship is secure."

"Very good." She turned to Jake, who was buckling down beside her. He was middle-aged, low-key, competent. His voice never showed emotion. Forbearance sometimes. Tolerance. But that was all. "You want me to send out a distress call?"

"Where would you send it, Hutch?"

"Serenity is closest." It would of course be a hyperspace transmission. The station would know within a few hours that they were in trouble.

"Good. No. Don't send. Let's assume you've done that. What's next?"

There wasn't actually that much else to do. She asked Benny for details on the damage, and was told where the problems lay and what needed to be done before restarting the engines. The electronics had gone out because the main feeding line had ruptured. She went down into the cargo hold, opened the access hatch, and explained to Jake how she would have managed the repairs. He asked a few questions, seemed satisfied with her replies, and they started back topside.

They were just emerging from the connecting shaft when Benny came back on the circuit. "Hutch, we're receiving a radio signal. Artificial."

She looked at Jake. And smiled.

"No," he said. "It's not part of the exercise."

That was hard to believe. But even though the ground rules allowed him to make stuff up, he was not permitted to lie about whether a given occurrence was a drill. "What's it say, Benny?"

"I have not been able to make a determination. The signal, I suspect, is greatly weakened."

It made no sense. There wouldn't be *anybody* out here. They were light-years from everything.

While Hutch hesitated, Jake took over. "Benny, can you get a fix on it?"

"Within limits, yes."

"Where's it coming from?"

"The nearest star in that direction, Captain, is Capua. But Capua is more than two hundred light-years. Moreover, I believe the transmission is a broadcast signal. Not directional."

"Okay," said Jake. "What do you make of it, Hutch?"

"No way an artificial radio signal's going to travel two hundred light-years. Especially a broadcast."

"Therefore . . . ?"

"It's a distress call. Somebody actually did what we've been rehearsing. Broke down and got thrown out into normal space."

"So what do we do?"

"If the signal's so deteriorated that we can't read it—"

"Yes?"

"They've been out here a while, and are probably beyond help."

"And, Priscilla—" He always used her given name when he wanted to make a point. "Are we going to make that assumption?"

She straightened her shoulders. "No, sir."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Benny," said Hutch, "is the signal still coming in?"

"Yes, it is, Hutch."

"Any chance if we sit tight you'd be able to get a clear enough reading to tell us what it says?"

"Negative."

Jake cleared his throat. "Why would you bother anyhow?"

“What do you mean?”

“What are the possibilities?”

“It’s probably a distress call.”

“That’s one possibility. What else might it be?”

She frowned. “Just a decaying signal that’s been out here a while.”

“Good. So what do we do?”

“Find the source.”

To do that, they had to move. Get another angle. “Benny,” she said, “start engines. Prep for a jump. We want a seventy-degree angle on the transmission. Set for thirty million miles.”

“Starting engines, Hutch.”

The drive unit would require about forty minutes before they could actually do the transdimensional insertion. So she sat back to wait. “You ever run into anything like this before?” she asked Jake.

“Once,” he said. “But it was an automated vehicle. No life-and-death issue. I’ve never seen one where there were actually people involved. Which is probably the case here.”

She brought up the signal. They could hear nothing but static, the routine racket produced by stars, 1 or 2 percent left over from the Big Bang. That always blew her mind. “I wouldn’t want to get stuck out here,” she said.

“No, Hutch, me neither.”

There had been a few ships that had vanished over the years. Vehicles that simply went out somewhere and were never heard from again. It was, she supposed, inevitable. If you were going to travel to seriously remote places, you took your chances.

Jump technology was notoriously inexact. They emerged less than halfway to their intended destination.

“Are we still reading the transmission?” asked Hutch.

“Give me a minute.”

Meanwhile, Benny relayed a chart to the navigation display. He marked their initial position, and drew a line from it indicating the direction from which the transmission had come. Then he showed their current location, about thirteen million miles away.

Jake poured himself a cup of coffee. “You want some?” he asked.

“No, thanks.”

“Sorry it’s taking so long,” said Benny. “It’s difficult to sort everything.”

“It’s okay, Benny. No hurry.”

“I think we have it now.”

Hutch kept her eyes on the screen. The marker that represented their present position brightened momentarily. Then it produced a second line that began moving parallel to the original transmission line. The scale changed. The lines and markers drew close to each other, then merged.

“I don’t think we went far enough,” said Jake.

Hutch felt embarrassed. What had she been thinking? “Benny, take us out a billion miles.”

It was enough. Hutch watched the lines intersect. “Range,” said Benny, “is slightly more than nine light-years.”

Jake was studying the display, deliberately showing no reaction. The source was literally in the middle of nowhere. There was no place within any reasonable dis-

tance that could have picked up their signal, unless they'd gotten extraordinarily lucky. "If they're still there," she said, "they're all long dead."

"That's correct." His voice was flat. "Maybe somebody got to them. Let's hope."

"So what do we do?"

"You're the captain, Hutch. Call it."

She wondered momentarily if, despite Jake's denial, the signal was a plant, part of the exercise. They were testing her judgment. "Benny," she said, "do we have a record of any ships lost nine years ago?"

"The *Forscher*," he said. "It was last reported at Talios in the spring of '86. Carrying an exobiologist and an actor. Started home and was never heard from again."

An *actor*? Hutch's heart rate began to pick up. "Jake, that would be *Dave Simmons*." The ultimate action-hero vid star turned explorer. Simmons had turned out to be even bigger than the characters he portrayed. He'd financed scientific missions, founded schools in remote places, once famously challenged the African dictator Kali Anka to have it out man to man. Anka had declined and been driven from the country a year later.

"The exobiologist was Paul Trelawney," said Benny. Trelawney had won the Casimir Award the year before the *Forscher* set out. "And of course there was also the pilot, Fudoki Kobayashi."

The ship had sent a movement report when it left Talios. A long search yielded nothing. "So something happened on the way back," said Hutch, "and they jumped out." If they'd sent no hypercomm call, used only a standard radio, their chances of being found would have been virtually nil. There was simply too much ground to cover. "Why would they send a *radio* transmission?" she asked, before answering her own question: "The hypercomm must have gone down."

Jake nodded.

It was hard to imagine the tall, lantern-jawed Simmons dead. The guy'd been the epitome of the leading man, in charge, indestructible, always one step ahead of events. One entertainment commentator had remarked that his loss had "reminded us all of our mortality."

"So what are we going to do?" she asked.

"What do you think, Hutch? Make the call."

"Okay. We make a report and then head for Palomus, right? We can't do anything for the *Forscher*, so we just give the Patrol what we have and continue the mission."

He nodded. "That's by the book."

She read disapproval in his eyes. Maybe another test of her judgment. "Jake, there's no possibility here of anyone's life being endangered. So we let the Patrol know and get back to what we're supposed to be doing."

"On the other hand," he said—

"On the other hand, what?"

"We're reasonably close. And our mission isn't under time constraints. We can go have a look and send back additional details."

"Do we really want to do that?" Hutch was thinking about the shape the *Forscher's* captain and passengers would be in after nine years.

He straightened and looked down at her. "There's a code, Priscilla. We owe it to them."

"Okay."

"We don't leave people adrift out here if we can help it. It doesn't matter what the book says. We go over to the *Forscher* and stand by until the Patrol comes."

When they arrived in the vicinity of the radio source, they did not find the ship. What they saw instead was a shuttle, a vehicle used primarily as a lander. It was a

Voltar II, a later model of which rested inside the *Copperhead's* own launch bay. It was adrift in a place where even the stars seemed dim.

"Where's the *Forscher*?" asked Hutch.

Jake shrugged and looked at the scattered stars on the display. "Out there somewhere. But it explains why they had to use a radio."

"They had to abandon ship." The shuttle didn't have a hypercomm.

It looked undamaged. Its registry number, VC112, brightened when the *Copperhead's* navigation lights fell on it. It had drifted a long way since sending out the distress call nine years before, but they'd been able to track it by fixing its position at several points over the few years during which it had been intermittently transmitting. That had given them direction and velocity. The rest had been easy.

It was silent now. Its ports were dark, although there was still enough power to cause a flicker in the fore and aft warning lamps as they drew near. Hutch turned her forward lights on the vehicle.

The pilot's seat was occupied.

Jake climbed out of his harness and opened the storage bin. He took out a set of air tanks and the backpack that contained the Flickinger generator and a jet assembly. Then he looked at her.

She had an obligation to go with him. It shouldn't have been a problem. She'd done EVA's in training. But she wasn't excited about what they were going to find in the shuttle's cabin. "I'm coming," she said.

Flickinger fields had long since replaced cumbersome pressure suits. The generator provided an electronic shield against the vacuum. A passerby, had there been one, would have seen nothing like the astronauts of an earlier era. Rather, there were two people wearing only green and white uniforms, with backpacks.

They crossed to the shuttle and looked in through the ports. Only one body was visible. It was in the pilot's seat. It appeared in much better condition than Hutch would have expected after nine years. "The environment," Jake explained. "In a case like this, you don't get all the microbes and whatever else is involved in decomposition. A corpse is more likely to look a bit mummified."

He opened the hatch, climbed into the airlock, and made room for her. She squeezed in beside him. She noticed he'd brought a laser. "Just in case," he said. "You're going aboard a vehicle that has very little power. You wouldn't want to get trapped in the airlock." He touched the control pad and the outer hatch closed. Next it should have begun to fill with air. But nothing happened.

"See what I mean?" He used the laser to cut a hole in the inner hatch. There was air pressure inside, and it quickly equalized. Then the hatch opened and they floated into the cabin.

They turned on their wrist lamps. Jake went up front to identify the corpse. Hutch took a deep breath, told herself it was no problem, and joined him. She recognized the body immediately.

"Simmons," said Jake.

Hutch stared. Somehow, even now, he was sprawled beneath the restraints in that easy charge-the-hill manner she knew so well. Goodbye, Dave, she thought. Growing up, she'd loved the guy. "What do you think happened?"

"We'll have to wait for somebody to find the *Forscher* to be sure," he said. "But whatever the breakdown was, it probably killed Kobayashi and Trelawney." Jake shook his head. "Poor son of a bitch. To die out here, like this."

"I'm surprised he didn't end it," said Hutch. "He could have walked out of the airlock."

"I suspect he kept hoping somebody would come. He'd sent out a distress call."

"I guess so, Jake. But he must have known nobody would hear it for a long time."

"Maybe. But he was an actor. Maybe he didn't really understand how big it is out here. Or maybe he didn't know it wasn't a hypercomm. Whatever it was, it doesn't matter now."

Maybe, she thought, he just wasn't inclined to give up.

Something had become stuck to one of the storage cabinets in the rear of the vehicle. It looked like a notebook. Hutch removed it, opened it, touched the keypad. Nothing happened. "I think it needs charging."

"We'll take it back with us."

"What do we do about Simmons?"

"Leave him where he is. Let the pros take care of it." He took a last look around. Shook his head.

They crossed back to the *Copperhead*, and Jake called the Patrol to let them know what they'd found.

"Thank you, *Copperhead*," they said. "We have a unit on the way now."

"Okay," said Jake. "We'll be here. *Copperhead* out."

Hutch connected the notebook to a power source. And began paging through.

"What's it say?" asked Jake.

She frowned at it, scrolled through to the last entries: *Whoever reads this: Get to Talios III by the last week of November.*

And, the last line: *Guess we bombed.*

Jake leaned down, closer to the screen. "I guess they did."

"Get to Talios by November? You think they were running an experiment of some kind?"

"Whatever," said Jake. "It's irrelevant now. That would be November nine years ago."

"Benny, show us anything that deals with what happened to the ship."

He put it onscreen. Simmons described the moment: He had been enjoying a quiet hour, reading the comic novel *Last Man Out*, which was not at all the kind of book she'd have expected. The voices of Trelawney and Kobayashi were just barely audible on the bridge. Then, in Simmons' words, everything came apart. There was a loud bang, screams, and darkness.

"Probably a power surge," Jake said. "It would have knocked everything offline. Including the AI."

When Simmons got to Trelawney and Kobayashi, they were both dead on the bridge. Electrocuted. The backup lights had come on, and of course life support had been maintained. But other than that—

The hypercomm system either didn't come back online or Simmons didn't know how to operate it manually. Normally, all that's necessary is to give an instruction to the AI, but the AI, of course, was down. Simmons decided his best chance was to use the shuttle radio, send out a distress call in case anybody was nearby, then come back and try to figure out how to work the hypercomm. But he decided the hull would significantly reduce the strength of the radio signal. So he got into the shuttle and launched.

As if things could not have gotten worse, the launch doors closed behind him and wouldn't reopen.

It was hopeless. The last pages were filled with messages left for his two ex-wives, for his kids, and for friends and colleagues. There was no sign of self-pity. Frustration, yes. But if he was frightened, he didn't leave any of it on the record. Incredibly, he remained the action hero so many had come to admire. Except this time it didn't end happily.

Get to Talios by the last week of November.

Guess we bombed.

Benny broke into her thoughts: "I think," he said, "I've discovered what he's referring to. About November."

"And what's that?" Hutch asked.

"In the Talios system, they encountered an interstellar vehicle."

"Too bad it wasn't around when they broke down," said Jake.

"You misunderstand me, Captain. It doesn't seem to have been one of ours."

Jake and Hutch sat frozen while Benny explained. "They were on the surface of Talios III, doing field work, when their AI alerted them that they weren't alone. She told them there was a spacecraft in the area that did not fit any known configuration. And that it was approaching."

"My God," said Jake.

"Do you want me to put the pertinent sections onscreen?"

The vehicle had been considerably larger than the *Forscher*. It was enormous. Probably two miles long, its hull black and smooth. They could see illuminated ports, including an area that had to be the bridge. *We ran for the shuttle*, Simmons wrote. *Ten minutes after we got back inside the ship they were on the radio. Strange-sounding voices. Not human. Nothing like us. But we responded. We said hello, and I'll admit I used the friendliest tone I could come up with. They answered. One of them did. Don't know what it said. Though it wasn't hard to guess.*

"You know," said Jake, "there should be a complete record of this on the *Forscher*. Pictures, the radio transmissions, everything. We're going to have to find the ship."

"That won't be easy out here," said Hutch.

She kept her eyes on the screen: During the course of the first day, the AI's learned to communicate with each other. Greetings back and forth. The alien vessel was an explorer from a distant place. Trelawney, apparently beside himself with exhilaration, pointed out that *Forscher* also meant "explorer."

They got a quick reply: "There is little to do out here other than explore."

The aliens had a sense of humor. And another question: "Would you allow us to visit your home world?"

Nobody on board the *Forscher* thought that would be a good idea. There was no way to know the intentions of the visitors. *Above our grade level*, Simmons commented. They didn't dare reveal Earth's location.

The visitors replied: We understand.

When Trelawney asked where they were from, they also showed reluctance, and would say only that they'd crossed the galaxy. "We have come a great distance."

And the biologist gave the same response. "We understand."

They talked for several days. Simmons and Trelawney both visited the alien vehicle. Apparently, Kobayashi passed on the opportunity. Several of the aliens came aboard the *Forscher*; after the pilot had arranged a trigger that would overload and blow the drive unit—which was to say everything—if a problem developed. "He doesn't say what they looked like," said Hutch.

Jake shrugged. "The AI probably has all kinds of pictures. I wonder," he continued, "if that's what created the problem going home? Rigging the ship to explode, just in case? When he disconnected, Kobayashi may have overlooked something."

"Could you do that to us?" asked Hutch. "Rig us to explode?"

"It wouldn't be that hard."

After a week, it ended. The aliens were moving on. "But," said Trelawney, "we should arrange to meet again. Maybe, given some time, we can get permission to invite you to come to the home system. Though, to be honest, I think that could be un-

likely. I suspect there will be political problems. But we have people who would very much want to meet you. It would be a start."

Simmons quoted one of the aliens: "We would like that."

But how to do it?

Kobayashi pointed out that two of the planets, the fifth and sixth, would line up in the "near future." "When they do," he suggested, "perhaps we could arrange to be here with those who would like to take this further."

Jake was getting frustrated. "Damn it," he said. "Are they talking about a few weeks or what?"

"Talios is pretty far out," said Hutch. "Apparently the *Forscher* never reported the incident. Or if they did, it was kept quiet."

Benny broke in: "Simmons says that they decided to say nothing until they got home. They had time to do that and come back, though he does not say how much time. But he and Trelawney agreed that a hypercomm report would only generate a rejection. That the politicians would want to keep clear of a meeting. Trelawney wanted to be there to fight for that meeting."

"Well," said Hutch, "it doesn't matter now. It's nine years ago. The aliens are long gone. And everybody's dead on this side."

Jake looked up from the screen. "So what do we do, Captain Hutchins?"

"File a report, hope they can find the *Forscher*, and get on with our own mission."

"You're not interested in going the rest of the way out to Talios?"

"You said we should stay here until the Patrol shows up."

"We will. But they'll be here in a couple of days."

"Jake." She felt uncomfortable. Hutch was used to running her life on schedules. "It'll throw us way behind."

"Sure it will. Think anybody will notice?"

Talios was a class G dwarf, about the same size as Sol, but younger by two billion years. According to the data charts, there were eleven planets in the system. Talios III had life forms. And that was pretty much the extent of the available information.

Talios V and VI were where?

They needed several more days to track them down. Talios V was small and airless, half a billion miles from the sun, completing an orbit every twelve years. VI was a gas giant with an entourage of forty-some moons and a magnificent set of rings. It was just over twice as far out. "Orbital period thirty-one years," said Benny. "They were lined up three and a half years ago."

"So we're a little late for the wedding," said Hutch.

Jake's eyes closed. "Unfortunately, the groom never showed up at all."

"Benny, when will V and VI line up again?" asked Hutch. "Not that it matters."

"Thirteen years and a couple of months."

"It's a pity," said Jake.

"You didn't expect them to wait around, did you?"

"I wasn't sure I *wanted* them to wait around." It was the first time she'd seen him look uncertain. "Still . . . Well, let's go take a look at Talios III."

The planet floated serenely on the navigation display, but it was hard to believe it harbored life. It *did* have large blue oceans. White clouds drifted through the skies, and there was snow at the poles. But the continents, the land masses, looked utterly desolate. No fleck of green appeared anywhere. Nothing moved across its bleak flat plains.

"According to the database," said Benny, "life got started here less than five hundred million years ago."

“So it’s still in the oceans,” said Jake.

“That’s probably correct, Jake. In any case, you would not be able to detect its presence.”

“Too small?”

“Unicellular. It will be a long time before there’s anything down there that would be visible to the naked eye.”

“I wonder if they’ll ever figure out,” said Hutch, “why life is so rare.”

Jake magnified the images. Large brown patches of land. River valleys. Mountain chains cutting across continents. All empty. “Hard to believe. What’ve we looked at now, hundreds of worlds with liquid water and stable suns? And just a handful are alive.”

“A century ago,” said Hutch, “they thought that almost any biozone world was likely to produce living things.” She was thinking that this was why the meeting at this world had been so important. With life so rare, and advanced civilizations virtually nonexistent . . . Damn.

So close.

There was nothing to look at. From Hutch’s perspective, they’d wasted time coming here. But she wasn’t going to argue the point with the guy who held her license in his hand. “Jake,” she said, “do you want to go into orbit?”

“Yes,” he said.

“How long do we plan to stay?”

“Not long.”

“Okay. What’s next?”

“Use your imagination, Hutch.”

She laughed and raised her hands in confusion. “I’m not sure what you’re asking me to do, Jake.”

“Think about the situation. Look at it from the perspective of the aliens.”

She wanted to point out that aliens would probably not think like people. But she let it go. “How do you mean?”

“If you were in their place, and you’d come back here for a rendezvous with representatives from another technological species, something everybody knows is very rare, you’d expect them to show up, right?”

“Yes. Probably.”

“What would you do if they didn’t?”

She was thinking of the jilted bride. “They’d never see me again.”

He laughed. “Assume for a minute you’re rational.”

“I’m fairly rational.”

“All right then. Let’s say unemotional. The failure to show up could not have been personal. Maybe the other side is afraid. Or maybe something happened to delay them. What do you do?”

She exhaled. “I’d leave a note.”

“Now answer your own question: What next?”

“Benny,” she said. “Commence search for artificial satellite.”

“Excellent.” Jake looked pleased. “You’re going to be good at this yet, Hutch.”

The satellite found *them*. “Greetings,” it said. “We are sorry we missed you.”

Jake took over. “We are, too.”

“We hope there was no difficulty.”

“The people you talked to were lost in an accident. On the way home.”

“That saddens us. Please accept our—” It used an unfamiliar word.

“—Our condolences,” said Jake. “We would say ‘condolences’ in our language. Thank you.”

"We wish we could do more."

"Are you perhaps still in the area? Is another meeting possible?"

"Unfortunately not at this time. We are long gone, and will probably not return in the near future."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"We also have regrets. We waited as long as we could. But there were limitations."

"I understand. Perhaps, one day we will meet again."

"I'm sure we will. Until then, know that you have new friends. Farewell."

They waited a few moments. Hutch looked at the planetary images, at the clouds, at the oceans. Listened to the silence. "Do we want to take the satellite on board?"

"No." He shook his head. "Leave it where it is. Take it home and they'll just put it in the Smithsonian. This is where it belongs." He pointed at the control panel. "Meanwhile, Captain Hutchins, you have a report to file. And some deliveries to make."

"Jake," she said, "Simmons was wrong. He *didn't* bomb. He went outside in the shuttle. That made all the difference."

"I know."

"I wish *he'd* known." ○

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(I am nothing, you say, to you, coming close to it)

and I am trying to be nothing, approaching void
(too empty to be only dark and really

more the ultimate echo of nothing, than nothing itself);

I want to become that trusted emptiness

into which softly you will speak secrets,
make wishes

or pray

when you must pray a thing

(or wish,

or tell

a thing for no one else to hear),

and I will gather me unseen that whisper, murmur,
the muttering of unguarded privacy.

I can be this for you—I can be nothing;

I will be the night turtle—your world, hoist upon me.

I am becoming a hollow tree you will trust to hold,
in silence, what must be stilled

and must be told, and old folded letters, and their ribbons,
and what else you will leave there to forget—
and I will be joyfully, cautiously
nothing as long as it takes

for that tree to happen 'round the emptiest years—
I will be where tree rings were.

You go on with things, your life.

I will resonate, 'verberate, resound—soundless
with everything you ever say

to no one, ever there.

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THE FLOWERING APE

Alan DeNiro

Alan DeNiro is the author of a short story collection, *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead* (Small Beer Press), and a novel, *Total Oblivion, More or Less* (Spectra). He lives outside St. Paul, Minnesota, with his wife and newborn son and daughter. Alan recently completed a fantasy novel about the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. The author's first story for us was the zany "Walking Stick Fires" (June 2011), he returns to our pages now with a moving coming-of-age tale about a group of young people with an enormous burden who must learn how to navigate the treacherous waters of the teen years while simultaneously learning how to commune with mysterious aliens.

I sprinted through the translucent tube with the curfew avatar slithering behind me. I had a date that night with Kathy at the Flowering Ape, and I wasn't going to be late for him. Even if kissing him never materialized.

I could hear the avatar hiss. The foot traffic was light in the tube, just a few drunken lovers laughing at the mega-cobra as it tried to catch up to me. The previous year, in an effort to curb truancy from the Chartering School for Young Telepaths, they'd switched from a lumbering golem-type creature to a giant cobra for patrolling the tubes between the space stations. They thought it would be "scarier," instilling fear in our young hearts. Whatever. The avatar was pokey, which was all that mattered to me.

Just as I was losing my breath, I finally saw the friendly confines of the Flowering Ape. I smelled it too. Hot taffy. Surface-distilled vodka. A perfume called Crushed Dreams. My monthly pass grafted to my pinky, I extended it and jumped inside the barrier, the door whisking me through. The cobra reached the door a couple of seconds later. Knowing it would be repulsed, it growled (a flaw in the gene design, I guess) and turned away.

I sighed, looking for Kathy, kind of glad to be there but also a little desultory. Despite its alleged function as an amusement park and semi-illicit hangout, the Flowering Ape wasn't very amusing. Its glass slides and rafters, curved with transparent spacescapes, were full of centenarians floating to the observation decks, dictating now-memoirs to their off-world agents. A lot of them were alums of the Chartering,

where I was learning how to meld with the shepherds. I hadn't had the privilege of that experience yet. Sometimes it took time, my teachers always told me.

So instead of thinking on all that was troublesome, I instead found an empty pod for two and waited for my lover, Kathy. Or rather, my "lover," Kathy.

Kathy was late. He was either late or he never arrived at all—and yet which do you think I would rather have had? Waiting, I daydreamed about Kathy kissing my neck in a corner of the Ape. Maybe I'd kiss his neck too, and touch that sensitive spot on his left knee that he was always talking about. Maybe we wouldn't have gone any further—we weren't technically a couple, after all—but it would have made me happy for a time, being close to someone, especially someone who seemed to like me. Maybe we'd have a drink together if we weren't too tired afterward, and talk about what telepathy all meant, and what the shepherds meant to him, to me.

Bored, I slid my pod upward, with little poofs of the anti-gravity jets, while the alums jostled their pods, racing them vertically. Shepherds swam in the vacuum above me. I saw their diaphanous edges shift around. The aliens—the reason I was in school in the first place—were powerful hypnotists, even though they really didn't mean to hypnotize. They (and we, the telepaths) made interstellar travel happen. A shepherd, with a telepath's guidance, enveloped a spaceship and sent it on its merry way across wherespace to the other planets of the Parameter.

It was a very convenient form of space travel.

I hadn't been chosen by a shepherd yet, and seventeen years old was kind of late for that kind of choicelessness, but I couldn't do anything about it happening until it *happened*. Kathy liked to talk about his shepherd Bazzarella all the time. He treated shepherds like horses, and made up names for them, and called them "boys" and "girls," though shepherds didn't have any boy or girl parts.

"Well, they reproduce, don't they?" I could hear his voice in my head, but it wasn't really him (the telepathy's only with shepherds, not with people, after all), but rather a kind of mental image I kept of him. I wasn't sure if keeping that image in my thoughts made me creepy. I wanted to argue with this Kathy-thought-projection that the shepherds weren't either boys or girls. How could they be? But then, speak of the Devil, Kathy was actually at the base of the windtunnel entrance. (He was a senior, and had no curfew. He might have petted the cobra on his way to the Ape.) It was really him, pointing up at me, and I didn't feel like arguing with my own thoughts anymore.

Kathy was in a black and silver dress and his beard had tons of prised jewels embedded in the wiry hairs. The dress was slinky, I guess, but not fitting him particularly well. He waved. It was possible he was looking up my own slinky dress through the translucent pod bottom.

He waved again. I opened my mouth to shout something out at him (why did I suddenly want him, the stooge? Was it his beard and blackened dress?). But he turned around and four other students from the Chartering milled around him at the pit of the vertical tunnel, already listless. I already felt like the child keeping up with the larger kids. At the same time, a doddering alum—easily a century and a half old—must have lost motor control, because her pod started to skid down the transparent wall-face. Outside, a shepherd came near the window but darted away again, leaving a vermillion trail. A soothing emergency light bathed everyone's face in red. Kathy's friends laughed at the alum's loss of control.

A little cruel, a little cruel.

As the emergency crews rushed in and began to resuscitate the apparently dead woman, I set the pod down and stepped out into the group—the pack?—of my fellow students that Kathy had brought along. I was disappointed in him; we talked about making out, how that could have been an important portal into a deeper type of

friendship. And I wanted some privacy and solace with him, if he had any to provide. Apparently he didn't, because he'd brought along those fellows.

They didn't really seem like fellows. Their gazes treated me askance, if they treated me with looks at all. I recognized them, of course—the school wasn't that big—but at the same time these people seemed to me to be as weird as shepherds, maybe moreso.

Yet they waited for me. I couldn't tell them apart, at first.

Kathy took the crook of my arm.

What made me stick around, what made me not blurt out a stupid excuse and slip away, was that Kathy sometimes said truly profound things, and I would realize weeks later that he was actually trying to be tender to me, profundity only being an afterthought. "Your hair is like a cauldron wrought from air," he said once, touching my red ends. I was waiting for a moment like that from him then, but it was pretty clear he didn't want to go any further; at least, not with me. It was pretty unclear whether he ran into this pack in transit or whether this was the plan all along.

"We're going," Kathy announced, "to ride one of the shepherd ships. I thought you'd be game." I decided that it would be a good thing to nod, so I nodded. Default smirks arrived on the faces of the others.

I realized that part of that glaze on their faces was a shepherd-gaze, that each was paired with their own shepherd. I was the odd fellow out.

"Let's go," Drexley said, hugging his fish-scaled arms. "It's cold in here. And boring." I knew his name was Drexley because his name tag said so. Below his name was a disclaimer that only FRIENDS could use his nickname "Drex." Below that was a ledger showing his exact net worth at that moment. It was lots of boon. Drexley started laughing. His voice pierced. Other names were given to me in hasty introductions: Lund, Zenith Marie, America.

This group that Kathy brought to me, then, had punctured through the barrier of telepathy and were tied to shepherds. I hadn't. How could I have said no?

I didn't want to say no.

Drexley called his shepherd Thousandhorse. Lund called his shepherd Anatolia-Blossom. Zenith Marie called her shepherd the Boxer. America called her shepherd Jackie. Boy, girl, boy, girl.

These weren't the names the shepherds gave to themselves. The gang wouldn't reveal those names to a semi-interloper like me.

We walked in a cluster, a closed fist of bodies out of the Flowering Ape. I tried to mimic their easy gait, and in the corridor, I noticed the wide eyes of the old alums, gripping drink bulbs and probably wondering, who are these people, who breathe the same air as me, so young, so very young?

And that, I had to admit, made my toes warm.

We walked to the docking bay, opposite the school. There were no cobras waiting to pounce on me there.

Along with his fishscale arms, Drexley had a fake lazy eye. Lund's teeth were coated with a substance that made them shimmer like shepherds. Zenith Marie wore a heavy belt around her thin hips (which held up pants that were like custom-made battle armor) that attached to a knot in her long coarse hair, ensuring proper balance. America had infrared sensors on the tips of her fingers. These were cultivated nuances. I guess mine was that I had no apparent quirks, no set-design to call my own.

Yet it was still hard, despite how strange they were to me, to tell the four of them apart. It was easy to notice that Kathy craved the pack. He wasn't quite a full member; apparently, he would have to ignore me a lot more to get there. They were assessing him, and so he acted louder, laughed at mild jokes a half-second too quickly

and a half-second too long. But in some secret part of himself that he wouldn't let anyone see, he was shriveling, a wilting boy in a beautiful dress.

That probably made me a . . . sidekick, then. A familiar. A creature not-yet-with-shepherd summoned.

It wasn't until I was actually on one of the docked rockets that I realized they were—I mean, we were—not supposed to be there. We were trespassing and what kind of shit was Kathy getting me into?

It was a small ship, shaped like a dart, coated in mock-quicksilver. The smallest class of rockets. Outside the bridge, a couple of shepherds loomed, slowly swirling around the ship, which was called the *Gray Freighter*; now that was a good sign. The shepherds' colors were vivid and all over the place. Then a third shepherd shot forward. Kathy's face got all scrunched, like he was concentrating on something inside of himself but also at a point, say, between his big toe and second toe. Like there was a coin or a little toy there.

Then I realized he was talking to his shepherd, the one who had just come, Bazzarella. Soon there were five shepherds swirling around the docked ship. They were all assembled like the humans were: Thousandhorse and Anatolia-Blossom and the Boxer, and you, too, Jackie, shepherd of America. What was going to happen next? The air on the bridge smelled like ozone, as each made connections with their shepherds. I kind of felt sad for the shepherds and I shuffled my feet. If shepherds had emotions (hypothetically), I was sure they wouldn't have appreciated telepaths ascribing false identities to them, including the whole boy-girl divide.

It was a divide, wasn't it? I didn't know where I stood on that divide. Or maybe I was in the middle, falling into the chasm.

I wanted to know the shepherds' secret names. I didn't ask, though, and no one noticed my shuffling and moping. After about three minutes of this concentration, America whispered (grunted really): "Which of you will bait-take?"

Kathy began to cackle. He spun around and around, and the others didn't seem to mind. They let that display of emotion by the neophyte pass. "Bazzarella will hitch with us."

"That's fantastic," Drexley said, unenthusiastic. Kathy touched my shoulder; a familiar but at that point vague gesture. He craned his head up and said—maybe to the vacuum, or the Parameter itself, certainly not to any of us—"What do you think my girl wants?" *Girl* being his shepherd. I stifled saying something to Kathy and instead gazed at all those assembled, and looked in each telepathy-occupied eye, and asked out loud what the hell was going to happen next.

They noticed me for the first time, really noticed me. Fine. That shouldn't have been that surprising. They really didn't make formal introductions in the first place. But the fact that their faces were exactly the same as before was a little disheartening. They wanted me to believe shepherds overwhelmed normal discourse for them, which was bullshit. My professors conversed with shepherds during class while chiding us to pay more attention—did we realize how important we were for the well-being of the Parameter?—and they didn't bat an eye.

America's eyes twinkled. "It's spontaneous. Everything needs to be spontaneous. We can't predict what will happen next."

"What?" I said. I looked around the bridge of the *Gray Freighter*. Kathy was shuffling toward the control crux. His shepherd was blotting out the light of the others.

"Someone's . . . one of us has stolen a series of passcodes," Zenith Marie said. "I'm not telling you which of us, because that would get any one of us into trouble. Not the least of which you." She bent her arms back and Drexley put his arm on her shoulder. He was the only one truly serious for a few seconds, and that too passed. "So

we're . . . what's the word?" Maybe Zenith Marie had a dictionary implant. She tousled her blond hair and said, "Joyriding."

"I don't know," I blurted out when the cordon around me faded. They wandered around, like blissful zombies. Lights and spherical grids engaged and started humming. Spaceship-type things began to happen. I didn't move. I supposed that running away and alerting authorities would have been a strong, morally upright choice. My parents, any one of them, would have been proud of such a decision. A virtuous nectar would form on the tip of my tongue.

However, nothing of the sort happened. I downcast my eyes and gave a smirk, but stayed inside the confines of the bridge.

After we launched (my sixty-third time—I kept track of such things), Lund, up to that point silent, leaned over the makeshift couch toward me and said, "What were you smirking about before? Right before we left."

His eyes were blue. He was cute and I hated, at first, thinking that.

I said: "Because we're going to be in so much trouble that it's not worth worrying about," and that, at least, was not bluster.

We accelerated to 10 percent the speed of light, the shepherd around the ship got brighter, and we were in wherespace, which no one could ever really see that well, because the shepherd always kind of blocked the view.

Then it dawned on me: wherespace was pretty boring. Unless you were the telepath whose shepherd surrounded the rocket, of course. Then it was all colored waterfalls of the mind and tangled nuances of shepherd-speak—not that I would have known. But for passengers without any particular place to go, well, it was like riding a planetary elevator ferry just for the sake of the ride.

The *Gray Freighter*, for a rocket, was pretty crummy to begin with. The walls were molded with scoured antimon residue, and the air felt full of atrophy. Or at least bacteria. The square windows were tiny, barely wide enough for me to view the shepherd aura protecting and transporting the ship through wherespace. The colors were pretty pretty, scampering yellows and mauves, but it was like being locked in a hostel with the Wang Wei Falls outside the window, with five kilometers of falling, graceful water just out of reach.

Drexley told us that it would take about three days, through some astrolabe sixth sense of his, I didn't know, to reach the Blake system.

Five hundred light years away. Whatever. More importantly, the gang forgot to pack much food. Now that was bright. Some crackers, some ten-year-old dehydrated gelato in the crawlspace that functioned as the "pantry."

The group of us sprawled on the curved couches at the edges of the bridge. I settled down slowly on my own couch, crossing my legs and straightening out my dress. Kathy was the only black sheep, because he had to be, in order to pilot us. This was his hour of no small glory. The shepherd-link shone in his face. The jewels coating his hair fractured and resonated, no doubt triggered by the contact with the shepherd pricking his mind, and the mind was attached to the skin and therefore his hair, wasn't it? It was all connected.

"Good girl," he kept muttering, annoyingly.

In this environment, the pack of people let some measure of their guard down. The angles of their sprawling were still artful, don't get me wrong, they were always artful. But a layer of varnish peeled off. I was always observant about other people's varnish.

America yawned and put her infrared sensor hands under the couch, as if there was a laser missile under there. Her hands, which once seemed breathtaking, now seemed vaguely stupid. But I didn't blame her much for her hands; maybe her parents insisted on them. Parents were always insisting on accessories. Zenith Marie

played with the belt attached to her hair. "This is so fucking boring. Lund, tell me why we did this again?"

"We thought it would be violatory." Smart boy, he had brought a megazine to read and watch, a Persian woman reading infernokrusher poetry.

"A violation of what? Drex? Any answers?" Zenith said, crossing her arms.

Drexley stared off into the bridge crux. "What?" he said. "Yes, exactly as you said." Drex was staring at Kathy in this really unreasonable way. Kathy was off in his own world, of course. It was if Drex was sizing up whatever Kathy had to give him. And it scared me to think of what Drexley might have needed.

America bit her lip and leaned her head back.

It was a maelstrom of nothing.

What did I expect, running around the halls and tagging the walls with expletives and feedback alphabets? I wasn't twelve, I was seventeen.

"Well, the least someone could have done was to bring some drugs." The voice was mine, but it didn't feel like my mind constructing these things to say, then ordering my jaw to say them. Not at first.

"If there's no drugs, you know," my voice continued to say, "to help with staring at the shepherd, kind of like lava flows, then what's the point? Why am I here?"

And I didn't even *do* drugs or secrete them.

They all stared at me. Kathy giggled from the bow, but not at me. America smiled, not toward Kathy but at me, and I knew I had moved myself from the void to some place not quite a void in some of their eyes.

"I'm going to take a walk to the engine room," I said. "And then find the standard issue gelato, and try to cook something." My hands were on my hips and they were looking at me with some inner awareness of their own condition. I was like a lens. We all have the potential to have that effect on everyone else; all it takes is a bit of practice in front of a mirror.

"Things get weird near the engine room," Drexley said, still staring at Kathy, who wasn't paying attention to any of the subtle shifts in autochthonic power structures going on, the bastard. I wanted him to be proud of me. I still didn't quite feel comfortable enough to nick Drexley's name to "Drex." "The walls are thinner there. Wherespace pours in there."

America stood next to me, stretching her arms and clapping once. "But that might be *interesting*. Come on, Drex." She was speaking to Drex, but put a hand on my shoulder. It was cool, almost cold. Drexley, instead of consenting with our constitutional, remained still. But that was fine, the way a thin bandage was fine. Lund and Zenith Marie arose too. There was a mission, however simple, and I led them into the heart of the mission, however childish to Drexley's eyes.

Crawlspace. Humming walls, shit-brown supply boxes. Motivational etchings. Very erratic gravity in places. Zenith Marie bit her lips.

What was left to discover?

It became clear that the *Gray Freighter* wasn't particularly spaceworthy. More of a training vehicle. I was a trainee, of some sort.

There was that to discover.

The engine room was a misnomer, imagine that. It was mostly an empty room. "Shepherds provide the interaction between anarchy *and* panoply," one of my teachers had told me. I finally understood what she meant. Rooms changed properties during wherespace. And Drexley was right—things could get weird in the engine room. A wire birdcage was on the floor, as if forgotten there by ornithologists. Its small hinged door was open. The three who came with me weren't talking, but I at

least was included in that silence. I wanted inclusion. Lund wiped his nose, which made him look a lot younger than he probably was. America, out of breath, pressed her reddening hands to her face. “Hello?” Zenith called out, expecting an echo, receiving none. Everyone had done something sardonic and/or intriguing in the engine room, all except me.

Then I realized they were staring at me. The air was hot and thick and I wasn’t sure if it was from the wherespace leaking in or from having their eyes on me. A point right below my collarbone started to tingle.

“What?” I said.

America leaned toward me by a few millimeters. There was a hairline crack in the air above me, and a shimmering hem of purple, and I knew that was from the wherespace or the shepherd, which meant that the air was literally hotter simply from their staring, and that was a pretty interesting trick of time and space.

“Can I, I mean we, see your, um, parts?” America was quiet and all vulnerable sounding, but with a suddenness of a door being thrown open, perhaps never to be closed again.

“Parts?” I said. Inklings of their talk-context floated inside of me, but not to be grasped.

“How do you say it?” Lund said. “Look, you’re intersexed, right?”

That word, said in front of my face with great infrequency in my life, was formulated even less in my own head. I started laughing, trying not to make it sound harsh—it was hard to know how these newfound peers would misinterpret it.

“What?” America said.

“You want to see them?” I said. Guidance counselors from Li Po—I mean, from my hive on Li Po—told me that, yes, people would find my ilk strange, perhaps a little lewd.

Well, tough, I said at the time, but sex rarely came up at the Chartering, as I kept my distance from pretty much everyone. Except with Kathy, of course, and I did desire him—or at least I did before I stepped on the *Gray Freighter*. But even he didn’t ask me too many questions about “the parts” in our lunch study sessions and fencing lessons. Now, as he was lost in shepherd-thought, guiding the ship, did he even see me at all?

These three were scrying me, that was for sure. America’s bare shoulders had a damp glisten on them. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she said in a whisper.

“I’m not. Maybe . . .” I trailed off and turned my head to the empty birdcage, which was a metaphor provided by Kathy’s shepherd to show how the ship’s propulsion worked. It was the shepherd’s totem. Maybe I expected it to have a bird, but then I thought that an empty birdcage was probably a better metaphor for me. “Maybe it’s strange that I don’t think I’m strange.”

“You’re not strange,” Lund said, and I realized that all three of them—and probably Drexley too—were scared, and lonely, and not really glamorous at all. Except for perhaps a small, inner glamour, and anyway, we all had that. They wanted me to be the comet streaking across their vision, giving them a portent of something inside of them. I knew this. It didn’t upset me. It only made me wonder whether these people could have been comets for something inside of me, or whether they were actually inert and lackluster at the core, and tricking me.

Somehow, the patterns of our breaths were all matching.

Then the ship rocked and for a half-blink, everything inverted. The space between us shrank to millimeters, expanded to kilometers, and then resumed some semblance of normality. Whatever “normal” was in wherespace. Although everyone looked a little dazed, no one said anything about it. So I didn’t either. And besides, it happened right before the good parts.

What was a little cosmic flux, right?

"Well," I said, gathering myself again, "I'll tell you what. Why don't we switch clothes? Why don't I wear what you're wearing, Zenith?"

"Me?" Zenith said, hand to her heart, and why was a fetching girl like that acting demure all of a sudden?

"You and you and you. All of you. Why not? Switch off. Here, you can wear my dress, Lund. It seems like a fair trade. And you can stare at me all you want when I'm changing, I guess."

America shrugged and raised an eyebrow at me. Halfway into the phrase "I guess," she was already taking off her tunic top and tossing it to me, her whole infrared body glistening. I smiled and peeled off my gossamer dress and chucked my sandals toward Lund. Clothes flew everywhere off bodies, arcing across the engine room. Zenith unhooked her belt from the tips of her hair. Her heavy black clothes could have stopped fragmentation bullets; they were like something from a Panoptikon agent's battle wardrobe. It smelled like her skin. When I slipped and strapped them on, the inner shell warmed and melted and conformed to my body.

"You look pretty mean," Zenith said, laughing, but not unkindly.

The wherespace was in the room like incense. In some ways, the space-time continuum acted like a drug, releasing the inhibited from our chains of shyness.

In a minute we were all changed up. Breathless, I realized it was possible that they had never seen each other naked before in unison, that they were shier than I was about flesh.

A strange thought.

A stranger thought: I wasn't really aroused by any of this.

Still stranger: they didn't seem to be either. This, then, must have been truly novel for them, this role reversal and this restraint. I stopped worrying about whether they liked me or not and took in the slow pulse of the moment.

They were just clothes, after all.

We looked at each other. Lund had his hands crossed at his stomach. My opalescent silk dress reached to his mid-thigh. Glimmering tattoos of mythological beasts—unicorns, hippocrits, extinct orcas—pranced up and down both of his legs.

"Cute tattoos," I said. He blushed but smiled.

We were sitting on the floor, leaning against the walls, careful not to jostle the birdcage. "Where did you grow up?" Lund asked me.

"Li Po," I said. "In the City of the Sextant." I had brief visions of home: my family of forty renting a swan pond for the day, the vendors who sold cinnamon gelato (God, how I craved gelato at that moment!) along the cross-hatched boulevards, the earnest prime schoolteachers who didn't know what to do with me.

"Were you born . . . this way?"

"Yeah, my parents are intersexed too, it's a colony of them. I mean, us." Detachment from my upbringing.

Zenith Marie's body was turning indigo. Perhaps she was imagining my family as being a continual circus. I could have assured her, just because we were equipped differently, there was nothing that unusual about us.

Then, just as I was going to ask them about their lives, because I was dying to, Kathy strode into the room with a hurt look on his face and a limp, with Drexley a few steps behind. Zenith's body cooled a few shades.

"What do you think my girl wants?" Kathy started shouting, voice cracking, tears streaming down his face. The shepherd must have still been crammed in his head. He hopped on one foot, sashaying his disheveled dress, trying to put on a show. But he was in pain, from something I couldn't see. I assumed, at first, it was a "shepherd thing."

“Girl?” he incanted. Everyone was silent. “Girl?”

He clutched his head, tried to seem playful. His words slurred. It scared me. He really didn’t know how he sounded. Twirling, he was desperate for notice and not given notice because of the desperation itself.

Hello, Kathy, I know you’re in there, I wanted to scream at him. *I know it.*

The birdcage appeared to be larger, though I could have been imagining it.

Drexley also ignored Kathy, though he turned away with an almost tusk-like sneer. “What’s going on?” he said. His face was beaded with sweat. “Why the hell are you wearing each other’s clothes?”

“We’re going on,” Lund said, a little defiant, crossing his legs. “Why don’t you relax and stay awhile, Drex?”

“No. No. I want all of you to wear what’s yours and go.” His eyes grew colder. “Swap and go!” And then he looked at me for an instant, his eyes searing me. The three others stood, and I did reluctantly as well. Kathy continued to prance while everyone else remained motionless, almost hunched underneath Drexley’s gaze. America found some gum from a tooth implant of hers and chewed it. She was beautiful. All of them were beautiful, each caught along the edges of their own quirks. I wanted to tell them that, as some way to commemorate that moment, but instead I decided to nod at Drexley’s leering face. Everyone else kept their heads down, the moment gone. As Kathy sidewinded backward and forward, Drexley put a hand on his shoulder, clenched like a talon. He thought he had control of Kathy. And if he had control of Kathy he had control of the ship.

“What the hell are you looking at?” he asked me. He spat at the ground toward me.

The ship buckled again, and I snapped. When he started to turn away, certain in his subduing, I tackled him from behind. The dimensions of the engine room shifted. The birdcage that was behind us was in front of us. I could *feel* Kathy’s shepherd in the room. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling as we fell to the ground. I had caught Drexley’s body totally off-guard, because he was woozy for a few seconds. Zenith’s body armor increased in mass—maybe wearing such professional-grade gear had made her feel safer—and I knocked the wind out of him. The birdcage had quadrupled in size, and before Drexley could blink, he was inside the cage. I shut the door.

Everyone was speechless, except for Kathy, who screamed, and ran back toward the bow of the ship.

I was breathing hard, doing my best not to run after Kathy.

“Let’s go,” I told everyone, “before he wakes up.”

Everyone nodded, eying the cage.

I think a lot about how I came to the Chartering “rescued” because of latent telepathic ability. In some people’s minds I was saved from a hovel of the intersexed! Elders at the Chartering kept telling me my cognitive scores were excellent, that it was not a problem that I had no shepherd yet, that some of the best telepaths in the history of the Parameter were tardy with their shepherd-bonding. As we ventured back to the bow, I thought for the first time that maybe a few of them internally linked my latency with the fact that I had a penis and a vagina. Which was ridiculous. But no more ridiculous than my peers giving horse names to shepherds.

I also believed that Zenith Marie and America and Lund didn’t feel like they knew me until we’d traded our clothes, and this had nothing to do with telepathy—that awesome, frightening ability gave no connection. The only person on the *Gray Freighter* engaged with telepathy at the time, Kathy, was out of our orbit entirely. Thinking about those cruel orbits gave me headaches, and sucker-tackling Drexley didn’t change the fact that I wanted telepathy with a shepherd of my own so very badly.

Drexley shouted at us all to let him go shortly after he came to. I told my new

friends—for we were friends, after what we had shared—that I thought Drexley was dangerous, and would hurt Kathy if he had the chance, and definitely me, and who knew who else on the ship. No one was safe. And I wanted to think that Kathy's shepherd, in that engine room, had *wanted* Drexley contained there, that in a primordial way it was trying to protect Kathy from whatever anguish Drexley had inflicted upon him.

We took turns trying to feed Drexley the gelato we scavenged, but he refused. He must have had an endo-hydration and food source that he had kept secret.

Explaining why I felt like I needed to keep Drexley locked up to the others took a while aboard the *Gray Freighter*, but hearing Kathy sobbing in his quarters was the real proof. I also laid out to the other three why naming shepherds things like Appaloosa and Jackie was chic yet astoundingly dumb. By the time we came out of wherespace a couple of days later, and a cordon of police rockets had surrounded our drop-point in the Blake system, they had ended up agreeing with me.

And as the customs agents bound our hands and led us roughly to a holding ship, I wondered: would all of us move in the same spheres at the Chartering after this?

Still, when they booked us, we were all grinning. That had to count for something, right?

And that was that. It wasn't, however, quite as that-was—that as I thought it would be. There were a couple of other stories intertwined with this one, but none quite as important as my last story.

I could talk about the struggles of keeping Drexley hostage for two more god forsaken days in wherespace, until he finally, barely, settled down. I'd tried to talk with Kathy in wherespace, but he was distraught and doing his best to keep the wherespace journey intact, so I didn't want to bother him too much.

I could talk about my time in the prison at Zigurrat Station, charged with Commandeering a Parameter Vessel without Licensure. They put me in solitary and frisked me for state secrets and fed me split pea soup.

I could talk about how it finally happened: a shepherd coming to me in the middle of the night of my second day of prison, as I was sucking my supper from a tube, and how my brain expanded sideways and elliptically. Just like they said. The shepherd gave its name (which shall remain nameless). I kept true to my word, and didn't give the shepherd a pet name of my own devising, or call it boy or girl. It was "just" a shepherd.

I could talk about how Chartering shocktroops rescued me from the jail (even though the jail was following strict Parameter penal code) and cleared my charges and whisked me back to the Chartering. There was no more precious commodity in the Parameter than people like me, and I needed care and constant attention during my first week of shepherd-bonding. It trumped everything, even Commandeering a Parameter Vessel without Licensure. When my prison guard gruffly protested, the black-vested Chartering officer (a part time phys-ed teacher at the school) sighed and snapped the guard's pinky finger. I was able to eat lots of gelato at the Chartering upon my return.

I could talk about my year-long fling with America and Lund, but . . . no.

Now here's something. I could talk about how Drexley tried to shoot his head off with a zun gun. They were able to reattach his mouth, and he's rehabbing on Mirabai very well, I've heard, but there's no happy ending there. His family ensures that.

No, it has to do with Kathy. It's taken me a long time to realize that people are organisms, and are more mitochondrial than they want to believe. People bend, break, accrete with others in new forms. The rest of my time in the Chartering was uneventful in a kind of good schoolboy kind of way. I kept my nose to the screens,

had a few, um, aforementioned affairs. But Kathy flat-out dropped out of the Chartering and disappeared after he was released from prison. I tried in vain to find any trace of him. Traces were supposedly easy to follow in the Parameter, but not his. He was gone in all senses of the word, and though I was guilt-ridden about the disaster of our joyride, I'd been plunged into adjusting to my new life with my own shepherd, with everything inflected and charged and changed. Kathy felt like an odd footnote from my not too distant past.

This last story happened three days before graduating from the Chartering. I had obtained a residency aboard a medical trawler on a Mirabai-to-Earth route. Not lucrative but not shabby either, which fit me pretty well. I decided to trek off grounds by myself and head to the Flowering Ape, for old times' sake—

I couldn't believe it, but I was already starting to sound like an alum. The curfew avatar had been banned; a few months before, I'd led a petition to the regents regarding that quite vigorously.

The place was mostly empty, but it was smaller in actuality than my memory had constructed it from two years before. I had to use the toilet, as I was the owner of the Parameter's smallest bladder. As I moved to the toilet, and passed under a big statue of the arms-crossed ape, I saw Kathy. He looked like he needed someone to talk to, preferably someone with professional training. His beard was long and scraggly, his dress a taut snakeskin that made him look ratty. His face was smeared with make-up, a terrible loosestrife blend. I imagined him putting it on in front of a mirror, hands slipping, crying, trying again.

When I sidled next to him, and he looked up—not at me, only at my movements—I saw that he was Rended. An untouchable among telepaths.

His shepherd had left him.

It was rare, but not unheard of, for a person on the brink of dissolution to lose that bond with a shepherd. In a way, it was worse than dying. Telepathy required sharpness, openness, acumen—three traits Kathy didn't possess anymore, it seemed.

His head rose up. "Hey you," he said, mumbling. He didn't recognize me. He reeked of illegal ethers.

"Kathy. Hey. How . . . how you've been?"

His eyes focused for the first time—on me, on my white, gleaming jumpsuit and my white teeth and the white lock of hair I'd braided in on a whim. I was embarrassed at how well I was doing. "Just wonderful," he said, without much conviction. He reached for a vodka juicer and squeezed the nozzle into his mouth. For all intents and purposes, it looked like he was attacking a nipple. I wasn't helping, I know. I wasn't helping. I watched a desultory duo of kids—Chartering prospects, no doubt—take the pods up and down the air shaft. Li Po, that green-pink pearl, was in full incline from the viewport of the Flowering Ape.

It occurred to me that, when Kathy gazed up and beckoned me down from a pod two years ago, his life was ending. He didn't know that; how could anyone ever know the precise moment when things would start to go downhill? When finally realized, it was usually too late. People back home in the colony write me and think I have some great foresight or wisdom because I can communicate with a shepherd, but nothing could be farther from the truth. On that night two years before in the Ape, I wanted nothing more from Kathy than a quick, sloppy kiss in the corner and some friendly inclinations. Now, our lives had changed—what could he have possibly wanted from me? Except, perhaps, to tell me to get the hell out of his life, you've already done enough damage.

If his life waned from that moment on, mine waxed. My mind shot out for a few nanoseconds to my shepherd, who was languidly orbiting Li Po. There, there, shepherd. Good shepherd. I didn't want to imagine losing my shepherd.

After he slurped and set the bottle down, I asked him, "Kathy. I need to know. What went on when we were on the *Gray Freighter*? What happened between you and Drexley?"

His eyes welled up with moisture, and he grabbed my hand, turned it as white as my teeth. But he didn't say anything for a minute, until he finally whispered, "What was going through me? A lot of pain from Drexley. I wanted to call him Drex so badly. He told me—" He started to choke up, and gave each word a phlegmy inflection.

Kathy let go of my hands and buried his face in his own. The kids in the pods above us stared. Who was this emotive man in a dress, they probably wondered.

"He told me that I wasn't good enough to take us into wherespace. That my shepherd wasn't good enough. He tried to have his own shepherd take over. And I liked him. I wanted him to like me. But he kept harassing me. He told me that I was worthless, my shepherd was worthless. And now . . . it's true." He turned his head from me.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" I whispered, trying to focus on the past instead of the present, because the present was too painful.

"I was too stressed just to keep the ship on course. And besides, I was worried that . . . that everyone would turn on me, even you, because they liked Drexley more than me."

"No, Kathy, they all hated him. Sure, they might have been scared to show it, but . . ."

I trailed off. I didn't know how much I could have offered to him. Kathy was my friend at one brief, hot point in my life, but what did that mean? Crudely, violently, I thought I had "solved" the problem by tackling Drexley. But Kathy was too ashamed—or too damaged—to confide in any of us. Then he'd blinked out of everyone's lives.

How clumsy of me, that I didn't figure out the hints of the confrontation myself—the fluctuations in the engine room, Kathy falling apart in front of my eyes, Drexley's erratic control mechanisms—and then do something about it besides attacking the perp.

"I thought I belonged," he said suddenly. "I thought I belonged with something better than myself."

I needed to compose myself, needed to be "strong" for his benefit. "Why didn't you report it when you got back to school?"

"Drexley's family filed a preemptive slander order against me. My words wouldn't have meant anything. The slander spiders would have eaten up all traces of me, so I didn't try." He gazed at me with a hopeless, feral look. So that was why I was never able to track him down—Drexley and his lawyers made sure that I didn't. That no one did.

I took his hand. He was trembling. "Kathy, I am so sorry. I really, really am." My bladder was about to explode. Clear thought was becoming increasingly impossible, and Kathy needed clear thought. "Kathy, I need to use the toilet. But don't go anywhere, okay? Promise me? I'll be right back, and we can talk about this some more."

He weakly nodded and slumped over. A bad Mirabain song laced through the speaker ether, a popular tune about loving and caring that never sounded more empty to me. "I'm here for you," I said in his ear, softly, so only he could hear. I stroked his long, coarse hair, and got up.

Splashing cold water on my face after I urinated, trying to control my breathing, pure panic spread through my body. Maybe it was a telepath's intuition—who knew?—but as I ran, and before Kathy's table was in sight, I knew it would be empty.

And it was. His vodka pouch was tipped over on the floor. The kids resumed their pod racing, laughing. He was gone, and I was sure I'd never see him again, and do you know what? I haven't.

I really haven't. O

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Objectifying Faerie

1.

I Am the Apple

I am the apple
dappled by sun,
polished by rain,
burnished by galls,
cut by the witch,
stitched by her hand,
injected with poison,
suspected by none.

2.

I Am the Spindle

I am the spindle,
winding the yarn,
prepping the spinning
that brings you much harm.

I am the prickle
disturbing your sleep,
leaving your mother
and father to weep.

3.

I Am the Red Cloak

I am the red cloak,
redder than a cardinal on a branch,
more rouged than a whore's lips,
pinker than a virgin's cheeks,
more crimson than a rose in snow,
more brilliant than the sunrise, sunset,
more final than heart's blood
spilled across a sheet.



5.

I Am the Pea

I am the pea,
under the bed,
the itch, the wish,
the sound in your head,
the uneasy question,
the dream that you dread,
the royal pain carried
until you are dead.

4.

I Am the Bridge

I am the bridge,
over the spume,
over the river's rush,
over the womb,
over the cataract,
over the fall,
over the grave.

There is always a toll.

6.

I Am the Glass Slipper

I am not squirrel fur, from under the chin,
nor kid's leather made from belly skin,
nor alligator slashed from the tail,
nor snake skin hung upon a rail,
nor pony's hide stretched taut and fine,
nor mink's fur: soft priceless shine.
I am the glass unforgiving,
meant to cut your feet to ribbons.

7.

I Am the Book

I am the book,
open I lie;
closed, revealed
to the naked I.
Truth in telling,
truth behold.
I am the book
if truth be told.

—Jane Yolen

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THE WIDDERSHINS CLOCK

Kali Wallace

Kali Wallace was a geophysicist before she decided she enjoyed making things up more than she liked being a scientist. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Lightspeed*. Kali lives in Colorado. Her engaging tale about a missing grandmother and an enigmatic heirloom is her first for Asimov's.

My grandmother disappeared on a Sunday afternoon in 1953. It was late May, sunny and warm, and a soft breeze carried the scents of cut grass and damp soil through the open windows. I was ironing and folding laundry in the living room when the telephone rang. My husband answered, listened for a moment, and passed the phone to me. His glasses were crooked and he smelled faintly of mimeograph ink, and it took me a moment to notice his worried frown.

"It's Agnes," he said. He always called my mother by her first name. "Something's happened." Five minutes later I was on my way to my mother's house in Stanley's Chevrolet. She was waiting on the front porch when I arrived.

"I didn't hear her leave," Mom said. She spoke quickly, the words tumbling over each other. Her mouth was pinched in a frown, and under a blue silk scarf her graying hair drifted about her face in untamed wisps. "I called her down for lunch, but she was gone. She didn't say she was leaving. I didn't even know she went out. Did she mention any plans to you?"

I had spoken to my grandmother after breakfast, as I did every Sunday. She had called, we had argued, and I had hung up without saying goodbye.

"No," I said, my throat tight. "She didn't say anything."

We spent the afternoon driving up and down every street in the neighborhood, asking everybody we passed if they had seen an old lady in a pink housedress and blue slippers, with thinning silver hair and spectacles as thick as glass bottles.

"She's an old woman," my mother said each time, apologetic and hopeful. "You know how it is."

But nobody had seen her.

My mother called the police at sunset, and a young officer came to the house. I had known Officer Davey Harris and his brothers in high school. In the few years since I'd last seen him, he'd grown to look so much like his eldest brother, the one who had died on the banks of the Nakdong River three years earlier, I wondered if

his mother's breath caught when she looked at him, if she sometimes called him by the wrong name.

Davey asked careful questions and recorded painstaking notes, and before he left he said to my mother, "We'll put the word out, Mrs. Siwicki. Don't you worry. We'll find her."

It was nearly midnight by the time I returned home. Stanley was still awake, still working in the kitchen. His fingers were smudged with ink and his lecture notes were covered with equations, neat lines of letters and numbers, integrals curving like earthworms on pavement after a storm.

"She's probably visiting friends," he said. He rounded the table and kissed the top of my head, rubbed my shoulders gently. "She forgot to tell us, that's all. Tomorrow she'll be home and laugh at us for making a fuss."

My grandmother's world was small. She was fond of walking, but her hips pained her and she couldn't go as far as she used to. Most of her friends were dead. I had accompanied her to three funerals over the winter, and she had counted out their deaths on her fingers, made it into a song: "Heart, heart, lungs. Heart, heart, lungs, what a way to go." She had outlived two husbands and two wars, crossed an ocean with nothing but a baby girl and a broken clock to her name, remade her life again and again, and all she had now was a room in her daughter's house and tired old joints that carried her as far as the duck pond in the park, but no farther.

I had been washing the breakfast dishes on Sunday morning when my grandmother called. I could just reach the sink with the telephone receiver tucked against my ear and the cord stretched taut from the front hall. My grandmother was telling me about an article she had read about a man who was a physicist, or a spy, or both, but I was only half-listening, thinking instead about the potatoes I had forgotten to buy and wondering where I had put the jar of clothespins. Stanley was hunched over his notes at the kitchen table, shuffling pages and scribbling.

Then my grandmother said, "I wrote to my friend at Cambridge, the professor of mathematics. I told him about you."

A glass slipped from my hand and splashed into the suds, clinked against the white porcelain.

"Grandma," I said. I turned the water off and gripped the edge of the sink. The kitchen window looked into the neighbor's yard; children in church clothes hurled a baseball back and forth with violent exuberance. "We talked about this."

"Don't be ridiculous, Marta. It was only a letter." My grandmother's accent grew stronger when she was defensive. During the war the neighbors had muttered behind her back, not caring that she was Swiss rather than German. "He does a great deal of work with dynamical systems. I know how you love your determinism, all those neat steps falling in line."

"Grandma, don't."

"That husband of yours won't mind," she said. "Is that what you're worried about?"

"I'm not worried about anything," I said. Behind me, Stanley was still and quiet. I knew if I looked he would be watching with worried eyes. "I don't want you to ask. I want you to stop trying to change my mind."

"But you could do so much," my grandmother said. "I only want you to see what you're giving up. You're not like Agnes, you shouldn't have to—"

"I have to go, Grandma," I said. I was named for my grandmother, but I was nothing like her. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

I hung up. Stanley said, hesitantly, "Is everything all right?"

I said, "Of course."

He went back to his notes, and I went back to the dishes.

* * *

On Monday morning, I drove Stanley to the university at the edge of town, where rows of houses gave way to fields of corn. Young men in white shirts and dark trousers shuffled between exams, books under their arms and sharpened pencils in their pockets. I stopped the car in front of the brick mathematics building.

“If you need anything,” Stanley began, his hand on the door.

“Go,” I told him. “You have enough to worry about today.”

He leaned across the seat to kiss my cheek. “You’ll find her,” he said. “Let me know when you do.”

Before we married, when I had been taking classes at the university and Stanley had been tutoring for extra money, I had daydreamed of the cramped, overheated office we would share, sharp with the smell of chalk dust and old books, surrounded by blackboards scribbled edge to edge with equations and proofs. We were enamored of Poincaré that summer and spent lazy afternoons beneath a black walnut tree on campus, arguing about Euclidean space and irrefutable logic, relativity, and recurrence. Under blue skies and green leaves, warm with soft touches and sleepy promises, I had believed it would go on forever. But the professors began to say, “Why does this interest you? You’re going to be married,” and my friends began to say, “You won’t have time for a hobby once you have a house to keep,” and half a dozen faculty told me, politely but firmly, that there was very little need for a woman to teach mathematics. Every question was a stinging paper-cut through my skin, every refusal a dead end in which zero equaled zero. The bright plans I had made grew dimmer and smaller, curling in on themselves in dull gray defeat, and only my grandmother cared to remind me of what could never be.

A swarm of students swallowed Stanley as he went inside.

I drove to my mother’s house. When I let myself in, she stood in the kitchen doorway, twisting a dishtowel in her hands.

“Marta,” she said. “There you are.” Her eyes flicked past my shoulders to the empty porch, and she took a quick breath, pressed her fingers to her lips.

“It will be okay,” I said. “We’ll find her.”

I went to her and gave her an awkward hug, and we clung together until my mother sniffed and pulled away. “Have you eaten?” she asked. “Of course you haven’t. I’ll make toast. Go wash up.”

Upstairs, I washed my hands with soap that smelled of lavender, then stepped across the hallway to my grandmother’s bedroom. I didn’t know what I expected to find. Morning sunlight fell in a bright square on the wooden floor, and the single bed was neatly made, its lone pillow squared against the headboard. There was a stack of books and a radio on one bedside table, and on the other stood three photographs: my mother as a toddler with blonde ringlets, and two wedding pictures. My grandmother was very young in the photograph of her first wedding, just sixteen and glowing with happiness beside a thin, dark-haired man on the steps of a church in Bern. In the second she was older, her smile more restrained, and Grandpa Lyle grinned behind a trimmed beard.

On the wall above the photographs, there was a pale rectangle of off-color paint. My grandmother’s clock was missing.

The clock had been a wedding gift from her first husband, who had been a clock-maker in Switzerland before he became a German soldier. After he died in a muddy trench in France in 1916, my grandmother had carried the clock and her young daughter across the Atlantic to begin her new life.

“Heinrich tried to patent it,” she had told me once, when I asked about the clock and why she kept it. “He went to the patent office every day, but the clerk was so disorganized he lost the paperwork every time.”

"But it's useless," I had said. "It doesn't even work."

With a wink and a grin, my grandmother had replied, "Is that so, Marta? And how do you know which way time flows?"

I had never seen the clock run properly. It was beautiful, carved wood around a veined marble face, but its hands rotated backward in fits and spurts, counting down the hours with twitching unpredictability. My grandmother was forever taking the clock apart and putting it back together, spreading gears and springs over the kitchen table in scattered mess. Sometimes I tried to help, but my grandmother would nudge my hands away and say, "Not yet, my dear. It is not always wise to play about with things you don't understand."

The missing clock was the only thing wrong with my grandmother's bedroom. Everything else was as it should be: the white sweater hanging in the closet, polished black shoes side by side on the floor, fingerprints in the dust on the picture frames. I imagined my grandmother sitting on the side of the bed and wondered what she had been thinking, if she had known where she was going and why, if she was sick or lost or scared, or if she had simply decided to leave and did not care how much we would worry.

I reached over and switched on Grandpa Lyle's radio. Music with too much brass clashed from the speaker and I turned it off again, my heart racing. During the war, my parents and grandparents had gathered around the radio every night to talk about the news, about Churchill and MacArthur, Hitler and Mussolini, Normandy and Pearl Harbor, London and Dresden and Berlin, names as familiar to me as the children in my school, the streets in our neighborhood.

The night the newsman's voice stumbled over the unfamiliar syllables of Hiroshima, the arguments fell silent and my mother's knitting needles lay still in her lap. When I asked what was wrong, my father put his hand on my hair and said, "Not now, Marta."

The next day, my grandmother and I had walked to the park as though everything was normal, as though the world hadn't changed. She told me about friends she had known, physicists in England and Denmark and scattered American universities, and the letters they had written and ideas they had exchanged before their governments called them to war.

"You can see what sort of person a man is," my grandmother had said, "and you can see where he is going, but sometimes it is difficult to see both at the same time."

We had been standing beside the duck pond at the edge of the park. My grandmother had leaned over and ripped a handful of grass from the ground, let the blades fall through her fingers and brushed her hand clean on her skirt, and she said, "Let me tell you about the atom."

My father and grandfather had died within months of each other, years after the war ended, and my mother and grandmother were two widows alone, with their wedding photographs in smart frames and their mourning dresses packed away. I looked at the wall where the backward clock had been, at the nail jutting from the plaster, and I thought: if Stanley died, if I joined my mother and grandmother in their widows' house, the final component in a three-body problem of carefully chosen memories, very little about my life would change.

I went downstairs to eat the breakfast my mother had fixed, then left again to search for my grandmother. It was noon before I made it to the park, and the playground was deserted except for one woman walking alone along a gravel path. I cut across the patchy grass and down to the pond, hidden as it was in its depression of mud between a grove of cottonwoods and a fallow field. The last time I had been there, three or four years before, an old man had been churning up that field on his John Deere tractor. He had lifted his hat and I had waved, and the tractor had rumbled by like a lazy beast creeping home.

The pond was smaller than I remembered, and the water smelled stagnant and green beneath the insects skating on its surface. As a child I had passed countless summer afternoons building castles in the mud and braiding cattail reeds, and plunking rocks into the murky water when I grew bored.

“Look at the waves, Marta,” my grandmother would say, her face crinkling as she smiled. “Why do they spread out in circles? What happens if we throw two at a time?”

She spent those afternoons perched on a fallen log, swatting mosquitoes and reading; there was always a book or journal tucked under her arm or opened on her lap. When dusk fell red and orange across the sky, we walked home, our shoes heavy with mud, and my grandmother would tell me about what she had read: light and gravity and electricity, stars forming in nebulae and dying in supernovae, the entire universe stretching from the tips of her fingertips, beyond the treetops and clouds and endless sky.

“I envy you, Marta,” she would say, as she took my hand to cross a street. “I envy you the things you will discover.”

My grandmother wasn’t forgetful, and she wasn’t senile. She remembered the song that had been playing on the radio when the station interrupted with news of Archduke Ferdinand’s assassination. She remembered reading Einstein’s paper on the photoelectric effect to her first husband over breakfast and sketching equations in the margins of a newspaper. She remembered the name of every flower her mother had planted by their cottage near Adelboden, the French curse words she had learned from an English student at the polytechnic in Zurich, the songs she had learned from American sailors when she left Europe behind. She wouldn’t have wandered off. She wouldn’t have gotten lost.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

I started and turned. The woman from the park had picked her way down the slope and stopped beside me as though I had invited her company. I hid my annoyance and tried to smile.

“Yes, it is,” I said.

“This used to be my favorite place to play,” she said, “before they built the playground. I had a fort in the mud over there.” She pointed across the pond to where reeds choked the shore. “I was so serious about it, always worried about any stick being out of place.”

I nodded but said nothing. A hot, sour taste teased the back of my throat. I had played in the same place, with the same rocks and twigs. I remembered the feel of mud on my hands, gritty and slimy and cool, and the simple delight of rubbing a cattail until it burst into a cloud of white down. My grandmother had always laughed with me.

“Life seemed so simple then,” the woman went on. She shaded her eyes and looked up at a cottonwood shivering with new green leaves. There was something familiar in her smile; I wondered if I had seen her walking in the neighborhood. She was about my mother’s age, but she wore her hair in a long braid more suitable for a young woman and dressed in peculiar, masculine clothes: blue jeans and boots, a plaid button-down shirt. “I wish sometimes I could go back and tell that child not to worry so much. It’s impossible to predict where our decisions will lead us, but we don’t have to be afraid that everything is so . . .”

The woman hesitated. I waited.

“So very chaotic.” She laughed to herself, as though sharing a private joke she knew I wouldn’t understand. “I must apologize,” she said. “I didn’t mean to intrude on your day.”

“It’s no bother,” I said. “I have to be going.”

I felt her watching as I walked away.

* * *

The week passed, and my grandmother did not return. Every morning I drove Stanley to the university and spent the day with my mother, checking hospitals and police stations and the homes of everybody we knew, around and around until every question became habit, every answer apologetic.

It was Friday before I thought to visit the cemetery where my father and grandfather were buried. There was no sign that my grandmother had been there, and I hadn't truly expected one, but I felt a bitter pang of disappointment beneath the aching worry.

After my father had died, my grandparents had taken me to his grave every weekend when the weather was good. Grandpa Lyle was already sick then, with only months left to live, and he had spent the time wandering amongst the gravestones, his lips moving as he read the names and dates to himself.

My grandmother had held my hand and told me about the stars.

"When I was young and living in Bern," she said one day, her face mottled with shadows from the trees overhead, "Heinrich and I met an old woman who told us about the universe."

She had looked across the graveyard at Grandpa Lyle. Her smile was soft and sad.

"That was in 1905," she went on, "before we were married, but after he proposed. That was the year Heinrich was trying to file a patent for his clock and that arrogant young clerk made things so difficult. Heinrich and I were walking through the city on a warm spring day, and we met an old woman on a bridge." My grandmother had looked up at the sky, and shade from the cemetery trees dappled her face. "She was such a strange woman. She was wearing the funniest dress you ever saw, with big pink flowers and lace, and shoes that scraped along as she walked. She greeted us like old friends and she said, 'There are two ways of looking at the universe.'"

My grandmother told me about the old woman's two theories and the physicists in chalk-dusted suits who still argued, more than forty years later, about which was right. Some of them, she said, believed the universe was always creating itself anew, every second of every day, with no beginning and no end, only the unbroken continuity of bits and pieces of matter forming out of nothing everywhere in existence.

But others, my grandmother had said, believed that everything in the universe had existed since the very beginning of time. My grandmother and me, my father in his grave beneath the settling soil, trees and clouds and stars and tears, all of it had formed in a single instant in the distant past, and though it changed, and became unrecognizable from what it once was, it never ceased to exist. A star might become a planet, a planet an animal, an animal a flower, but that was only the rearrangement of atoms.

"We were the dust of stars once," my grandmother had said, "and we will be again."

I was seventeen years old and hollow with grief. I had spent my father's last days at his side, reading from his favorite books while my mother watched and pretended not to cry. One day, I had closed a well-worn paperback novel and said, "Grandma and I have a theory about how John Carter found his way to Mars. We think we can explain it with Schrödinger's equation."

And my father had laughed and said, "You can tell me about it tomorrow."

The next day I had come home from school to find my grandfather waiting with tears in his eyes, and I had smelled the hospital on my skin ever since.

"Which do you believe?" I had asked my grandmother that day in the cemetery, beneath the blushing autumn leaves.

"I haven't decided yet," she had said. "That old woman, she was so very peculiar."

I stood before the two granite headstones and remembered the feel of my grandmother's hand in mine, the gentle cadence of her voice. I thought about how a sharp

old woman might vanish from her own bedroom, there one moment and gone the next, with nobody to hear her leave.

And I wondered if this was how I would spend my days all through the summer and into the fall, looking until I forgot to look, until the flowers wilted and the leaves changed and my heart no longer jolted with hope at every flash of pink, every tangle of white hair, every glimpse of a slope-shouldered old woman shuffling along the sidewalk.

I filled the afternoon with the chores I had neglected all week: mopped the kitchen floor, shook out the rug on the porch, washed Stanley's shirts and hung them on the line to dry. We had lived in that house for only a few months, and everything was barren and clean, every wall white with fresh paint. Most days I still felt like an intruder in a stranger's home.

I picked up Stanley at five o'clock, and he sat at the kitchen table marking exams while I warmed dinner.

The telephone rang as we sat down to eat.

"Marta!" my mother said. "Marta, the police will be here any minute. I don't know what she could have been thinking. I don't even know—"

"They found Grandma?"

My mother's voice was unsteady and breathless. "They're bringing her home."

I said, "We'll be right there." Stanley was already reaching for the car key.

There was a police car parked outside my mother's house when we arrived. I slammed the car door; the noise echoed down the block, quickly fading, and curtains twitched in windows as the neighbors pretended not to watch. My mother and Davy Harris were on the front porch.

Davy explained, "We got a call from George Klimpton, over on Iris Street. She got lost and wandered into his garden, that's all. She's not hurt," he said quickly, as I opened my mouth to ask. "She's fine."

My mother crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm going to talk to Officer Harris and get the whole story." There was a sharp, trembling edge to her words, relief and anger twined together. She pointed into the house, down the hallway to where light blazed from the kitchen doorway. "You try to get some sense out of her. Maybe she'll talk to you."

My grandmother was sitting in the kitchen. Her pink dress was limp and her slippers had tracked a sprinkling of mud across the linoleum, and she looked small and grubby against the white cabinets and yellow curtains. The backward clock was on the table, a handful of gears and springs and cogs beside it.

"Grandma," I said, dizzy with relief. I sat down and folded my trembling hands together. "Grandma, where have you been? What on Earth were you doing in George Klimpton's garden?"

My grandmother nudged the clock's long hand with one finger. "Oh, that," she said. "I didn't mean to end up there. I hope I didn't startle him too badly."

"That doesn't answer my question," I said. My voice was sharper than I meant it to be, and too loud in the bright kitchen. "Mom was worried sick about you. I was too. Where have you been?"

"Here and there," she said. She nudged the clock hand again, her finger long and crooked, and did not look at me. "You don't need to worry about me."

"Of course we worry, Gran." I took a breath to steady myself. "Won't you tell me what happened?"

"Maybe some day." Then she was smiling, as though teasing me in a way I wouldn't understand, and it only made me angrier. But before I could reply, she pushed the clock toward me and said, "I want you to have this. I don't need it anymore."

"I don't care about the clock," I said. Her smile only grew wider; I sighed and shook my head. I wanted an explanation, a justification for her absence and the worry she had caused, for the sick fear I had carried all week, for the tears my mother had shed and hidden. I thought of a dozen questions I might ask, a dozen ways I might press, and I felt, for a moment, she might even answer. But the clock sat between us, dismantled and silent, and I hesitated.

Then the front door opened and closed, and my mother and husband came into the kitchen, and the chance was lost. There were tears and hugs, arguments and supper, and no matter how many times we asked, my grandmother refused to tell us where she had been.

Before Stanley and I left, I leaned over to give Grandma a hug, and she pressed a single metal gear into my hand.

"Take it," she said. "It's yours now."

"I can't," I began, but stopped myself. The metal gear felt unsteady against my palm, too warm and almost alive, like a sleepy bumblebee trying to escape. I thought of the stories my grandmother had been telling since I was a child: a young woman in love, a man who built clocks to understand time, an old woman on a bridge who told them about the universe. I thought of summer days by the pond and a little girl playing in the mud.

I dropped the gear into my pocket and picked up the clock, collected the rest of its dismantled parts.

"Thank you, Grandma," I said. I kissed my mother's cheek and bid them both good night, and promised to visit the next day.

Stanley and I drove home in exhausted silence. I cleaned the dishes and packed away our uneaten supper while Stanley sat down again to grade exams at the table. I put the clock in the spare bedroom but kept the one gear in my pocket, its weight solid and warm through the fabric of my skirt.

After the dishes were washed and dried, the counter wiped down and the towel folded neatly on its bar, I sat beside my husband and said, "Let me help you."

Stanley looked up. His hair was mussed, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "I'm almost finished," he said. The stack of unmarked exams by his elbow was two inches thick.

I reached for the papers and said again, "Let me help." I smiled, felt myself waver, and lifted my chin. "Which course is it? Ordinary differential equations? I know this as well as you do."

A moment of hesitation, and Stanley shrugged, plucked a pen from his shirt pocket. "There will be sixty-five more on Monday. This term can't end soon enough."

I uncapped the pen and got to work. O

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MISSIONARIES

Mercurio D. Rivera

Despite being born and raised in New York City, Mercurio D. Rivera (www.mercuriorivera.com) has sold his fiction primarily to British markets such as *Nature*, *Black Static*, *Murky Depths*, and *Interzone*. In 2011, he was nominated for the World Fantasy Award in the short fiction category. His stories have been podcast at *Escape Pod*, *StarShipSofa*, and *Transmissions from Beyond*. In the author's first story for *Asimov's*, humanity's attempts to communicate with the enigmatic aliens that live at the galaxy's core have proved futile for over a century—with one perplexing exception . . .

I teeter on the edge of the precipice. The yawning gulf is so vast, so dark, it's like an infinite black sea.

The alien hovers in front of me. Released from its shell, it's too beautiful, too hideous for me to fathom.

"Take the leap, Cassie," it says/thinks/sings.

I extend my trembling foot forward and breathe deeply, but I can't do it. I'm afraid. "No!"

I turn and run.

Shhhh.

The ritual requires us to approach the outpost on our knees, crawling across a frigid, rocky terrain. The thin band of light that skims the horizon creates the illusion that the sun has just set. Except there is no sun here. Even in my safesuit, my back aches and my legs burn from shuffling forward in the kneeling position. God give me strength. My tongue is sandpaper-dry. Bodhi Bendito had directed us to turn off our suit's hydration system at the commencement of the Crawl. "Challenging tasks lie ahead of us," he had said. "Our agony must prove worthy."

I can't see him, but Bodhi's mantra pipes over the commlink. I try to focus on his humming and to contemplate God's plan for us but my mind wanders instead to Mom and Dad. What would they have thought if they could see me now? How would Thomas have reacted to the sight of his twin sister scrabbling across an alien landscape?

As we drag ourselves over a ridge, a valley opens up below us and the outpost comes into view. It shines so brilliantly against the backdrop of the tar-black sky that I have to blink away tears and tint my helmet-plate blue.

Behind me, the Saved One floats in its lead-lined sphere, basking in a cloud of Bose-Einstein condensates. It seems unfair that it can't share in our physical pain. At least

I don't think it can. During the months of this mission the Saved One has produced an increasing number of gurgles and grunts—and occasional piercing screams—through the sphere's voice-generator, but since landfall it has lapsed into an ominous silence.

"It's glorious," Nicolai whispers over the commlink. He shuffles on his knees to my left.

And next to him, as always, crawls his lover Antonio.

Their silver safesuits gleam in the light of the outpost. The station's phosphorescent polyplastics cast a bright orange glow that fools my brain into believing, if only momentarily, we are on the shore of a beach rather than the dry terrain of a rogue planet that millennia ago escaped *Cancri 55*'s orbit and now roams the universe in perpetual darkness.

"Mind-boggling. They exist in places we could never even dream of," Nicolai says. "Isn't that right, Saved One?"

The Saved One floats silently.

Antonio opens up a private link with me and Nicolai. "Couldn't Bodhi have landed us a bit closer? Maybe downhill? This is beginning to smart."

"Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of the Crawl?" I say.

"You think?" Antonio says. "Lighten up, Cassandra. I'm kidding."

I have to admit that my sense of humor isn't what it once was. The extended pause that follows makes me think that he and Nicolai have continued their banter over a private commlink.

Bodhi's mantra stops.

Two specks emerge from the outpost's docking doors. They wave us forward, flashing beams crisscrossing in our direction. Their red suits identify them as members of the exploration team that discovered this hotspot, this free-floating planetoid where aliens like the Saved One lurk.

Mom and Dad call us into the kitchen and break the news. Thomas and I are taking a year off to travel—three Jovian moons in one whirlwind trip—before beginning university next year. They think this is an opportune time for a family vacation.

"We booked tickets on the lunar shuttle for next week," Mom says. She pauses. "The *Reverie* departs to the A'burain Shrine on Monday."

"A pilgrimage?" Thomas throws his hands up.

"And I don't want to hear any whining about it!" Dad adds, just as I'm about to voice my own objection.

I can't believe it. Mom has been a Savior for as long as I can remember, but she's always been discreet about it. The last thing I need is for my friends to think I'm religious too.

"Look, I'm financing your road-trips over the next year," Dad says. "The least you can do is show a little respect, and give up one week of your life for something that's very important to your mother."

Mom puts her hands on Thomas's shoulders. "Open your mind, Tommy. Every able-bodied person should expand their horizons and go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lives. Don't you want that unique experience? To feel that you're part of something that's bigger than all of us?"

"That's right," Dad says. He nods his head vigorously as if he believes every word of Mom's nonsense. Even though I'm sure he finds the idea of a pilgrimage as silly as Thomas and I do, he always makes it a point to support Mom's beliefs, which I've heard him describe at different times and in various states of sobriety as "quaint," "adorably earnest," and—this I really didn't need to hear—"mysteriously sexy."

"What if my friends find out about this?" Thomas says. "I'll never live it down."

"Do you have to report your every bowel movement to your friends?" Dad says.

Great. Dad's familiar "bowel movement" remark means that he's serious about this. So we're going on a pilgrimage to the A'burain Shrine on the dark side of the moon, where visions of the Virgin Mary, Mahatma Gandhi—and probably Santa friggin' Claus, for all I know—were all said to have appeared at different times to oxygen-deprived believers searching for the meaning of life in the lunar debris.

"And what do you have to say, Cassie?" Mom says to me.

I run through a laundry list of smart-aleck responses before settling on, "Should I bring my bathing suit?"

Mom smiles and gives me a hug.

I slip into my black tunic and pantaloons and run a towel over my bald scalp. My knees still ache from the Crawl and my lower back throbs. The cancer has spread to my spine so I'm supposed to avoid physical exertion. But God will protect me.

I'm tracing my index finger along the jagged purple scar that runs down my right cheek when a knock on the door startles me. A doctor enters the changing room. He's in his mid-twenties, with a toothy smile and the dark complexion of someone who's grown up far away from here. Something about his grin reminds me of Thomas. He pulls out a water canister from the pocket of his white lab coat. "Here, drink some more. You've been through quite the ordeal."

I rub my sore knees. "I've had my fill, thanks."

"Dr. Michael Byars." He sets down the flask and extends his hand. From his sideways glance at me, I can tell that he's trying not to stare at the scar on my face.

"Cassandra Quiles." I hold onto his hand for a bit longer than I should and say, "You've got a lot of faith in your decontamination showers, I see."

He stares at his open palm for a long second and chuckles, taken aback by my joke. Not what he expected of a Savior, I'm sure. Antonio would be proud of me.

"Bodhi Bendito and the others are finished with their chem-showers. If you're ready, I can take you to them."

He doesn't mention the Saved One. Outpost security had demanded that it remain in a lead-lined holding cell, though in truth there's no way to know whether anything could stop it from escaping if it wanted to. I have no doubt they are running every conceivable scan on it. No matter, it won't make a difference. Teams of astrobiologists, linguists, and physicists have spun their wheels for years trying to communicate with its kind at Sagittarius A, the black hole at the center of the Milky Way.

Yet we'd managed to break the aliens' century-long silence in just a few days, prompting the Saved One to splinter off from its kind and join us. In the process, we'd made a name for ourselves. The outpost's interstellar signal inviting us to this rogue planet referred to us as the legendary "Saviors of Sagittarius A."

I follow Dr. Byars out of the changing room.

"Are you sure you've had enough water? Dehydration isn't good for someone in your . . . condition," he says, and I feel the air rush out of me as if I've been sucker-punched. He knows my medical history. That means he's read all about the accident, about Mom, Dad, and Thomas. My hands turn into fists. I suppose it makes sense that they'd researched our personal backgrounds given what we'd accomplished with the Sagittarians.

As I trail him, the ache in my left knee intensifies and I limp slightly.

"I should take a look at that."

"Let's not waste any more time," I say.

Dr. Byars's smile fades and he escorts me through a web of corridors until we reach a large circular door that irises open. We step onto a balcony overlooking the station's ground floor, which extends a quarter mile across and teems with activity. Thousands of monitors glow green and red inside an endless catacomb of cubbyholes.

In an open area in the center of the floor a massive telescanner points up at the glass-domed ceiling. Bots scurry about and scores of workers in red jumpsuits tinker with an array of metal pipes that stretch hundreds of feet from floor to ceiling. The nearest workers stop what they're doing to observe us.

I'm relieved to see Bodhi waiting for me with Suri Chandra, a short squat woman who is the head of the outpost. I'd read about her. Once we'd come through the worm-hole-stretch, the outpost's decades of datafiles streamed into our ship's computers and became accessible to us. Nicolai and Antonio join us a few moments later.

"Welcome," Chandra says. "Shall we get started?" The wall behind us shimmers into transparency, revealing that the outpost sits on the edge of a great, bottomless gulch. I suppress a gasp. The canyon spans so many miles that the other side isn't visible. It's a bottomless pit. A precipice to infinity.

"We discovered them here about five years ago," Chandra says. "Invisible, intangible, detectable only by the faintest traces of radiation and the familiar etchings they leave on baryonic matter."

Etchings? And then it occurs to me. The great gulch. The Sagittarians have *sculpted* this vast global canyon, just like they had shaped the dust clouds that orbited the black hole of Sagittarius A into planet-sized pyramids and octagons and endless geometric designs.

Chandra continues. "Their radiation signature is identical to that of your 'Saved One.' And they've ignored all our entreaties, just like their kind did at Sagittarius A. It's as though we don't exist to them. We've tried every conceivable strategy to get their attention without success: laser pulses, radio transmissions, nanobeams. Yet they did show an interest in you at Sag-A." She wears a mask of befuddlement, as if she's been contemplating this particular riddle for years and the answer now lies within her grasp. "How? How did you do it?"

"You've uploaded our files. You know precisely how we made contact," Bodhi says.

"Yes, prayer," Chandra says. "Rituals." There's a desperate edge to her voice that makes me think they've tried replicating those rituals without any luck.

"We would like to open a dialogue with them, Bodhisattva," she says.

"As would we," Bodhi says with a smile. "But to be clear, my brothers and sister and I have traveled all this way for a very specific reason. The same reason we went to Sag-A. To help the Sagittarians commune with God."

"I see." Chandra purses her lips. "And has the 'Saved One' lived up to its moniker? Has it benefited from the wisdom of your teachings?" Just for a microsecond, her mask dissolves and she and Dr. Byars make brief eye contact, exchanging a dismissive and contemptuous look. I'm not surprised by her condescension; we're under no illusions. We're just a silly cult in their eyes, a remnant of the final gasps of organized theistic religion from Planet Earth.

"Well, I suppose that remains to be seen," Bodhi says.

"You haven't been able to communicate with your so-called 'Saved One,' have you?"

"We don't understand it, true," Bodhi says. "But who's to say whether it can comprehend us?"

Chandra paces along the railing, staring into the great gulch. "I know that your order holds certain . . . beliefs about a supposed personal deity. Which is all fine and good. Who am I to judge? But we've sought a dialogue with the aliens for almost a century now. Most everyone has given up hope."

A century? I keep forgetting about realtime and relativity. We'd lost nearly eighty years during our mission to Sagittarius-A.

"We want to learn about their culture, their science," Chandra says, "while you want to save their 'souls.' I believe we share common ground. We both need to find a way to communicate with them if we're to achieve our respective goals. And since

you've already had some success in drawing their attention, and the environs here, harsh though they may be, are less hostile than at Sag-A, it might make sense to pool our efforts."

Pool our efforts? I'm tempted to remind her that they're the ones seeking *our* help, but Bodhi has counseled me to be tolerant above all else, to avoid reacting, so I keep my mouth shut.

Bodhi bows his head. "We would welcome your assistance."

I awaken with a start, sitting up and gasping for air. I've just had a nightmare that I can't remember. I look around me. Where am I? It hurts to breathe. My arms and legs are bandaged.

My bed has safety rails and dimmed fluorescent bulbs light the room.

I surrender to the panic as if I'm a little girl again, and scream.

I expect Mom and Dad to come racing into the room, but instead a man enters. He's bald and wears teardrop earrings and a black tunic cinched with a red belt. A Savior. I recognize him. He had come to me a few days ago, when I was drifting in and out of consciousness and had requested, of all things, religious counsel. What was I thinking? What had happened to me? I couldn't remember.

Long pink scars brand his forearms like tattoos. His face is smooth and clean-cut—he can't be more than thirty years old—and his eyes have a warmth in them that instills immediate trust. His soft voice and gentle manner immediately calm me.

"It's okay, child." He sits on my bed and pushes me back down. "It's okay. I'm here."

"Where am I? Where's my mother, my father?"

"You're in the Armstrong Hospital on Luna. Don't you remember the accident?"

The memories flood back. Hysterical passengers stampeding through the *Reverie's* corridors in search of lead-lined bunkers. Bodies trampling me. Chaos. Across from me, a woman calmly staring out the plexi, a beatific grin plastered on her face, welcoming death. I couldn't breathe.

"A solar flare," the Savior says. "The ship's shields failed. I'm sorry, Cassandra. Your parents and your brother are dead."

"No!" I whisper. "No!" The whisper grows into a sob.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, child."

I don't want his sympathy. I want my parents; I want Thomas. I slap his face and claw at his chest. I try pushing him away but he holds my arms tight. Then he pauses and releases them and allows me to strike him again and again until I press my face into his shoulder and shriek and shriek until the nurses arrive and administer a sedative.

We sit at ridiculously long tables with over fifty members of the outpost's exploration team, including Chandra and Dr. Byars, for our final meal before commencement of the fast.

Nicolai and Antonio sit across from me, Dr. Byars to my left, and Bodhi to my right.

Bodhi had insisted on the Saved One's presence for the meal—not that it could eat or speak or do anything but hover in its sphere and emit an occasional gurgle or bloodcurdling scream through the voice generator. From her expression it is clear Chandra does not approve of the Saved One's presence. I find it ironic that someone so desperate to communicate with the Sagittarians can disapprove of sitting down to dinner with one of them.

Bodhi asks for a moment of silence while we pray. We clutch the medallions of truth that dangle from the end of our beaded necklaces. Soon our murmurs become a mantra. When we finish, we leave our seats and crouch low to the ground while facing in the general direction of Earth.

I catch a glimpse of Dr. Byars and Chandra from the corner of my eye, pity and disgust etched across their faces.

When we return to our seats an awkward silence follows. Bodhi says warmly, "You've prepared quite the feast for us. We're grateful."

Everyone begins to eat. Knives and forks clank against dishes and I direct the bots to fill my plate with stewed spinach and broccoli. All eyes at the table are fixed on the Saved One, which hovers at the head. Its silver ovular shell sparkles in the bright lights. Its center band remains translucent, the churning gases within visible.

"So it's never spoken to you?" Chandra asks, raising her chin toward the Saved One.

"Only occasional sounds," I answer.

"What exactly is inside the sphere?" Dr. Byars says.

"Don't be coy, doctor," Nicolai says. "Surely you've run your scans by now. They're Bose-Einstein condensates, sodium atoms so cold that they can slow a beam of light to a fraction of its velocity."

"Don't look so surprised," Antonio adds. "We're astrophysicists, Nicolai and I. We met on Southern Titan at Singleton."

"I'm well aware of your credentials," Dr. Byars says. "I was just surprised—"

"That men of science could be so foolish as to go on a religious mission?" Nicolai says.

"Is there much of a difference between science and religion?" Antonio says. "At the quantum level, I mean. Even at the macro level, we live in a universe with physical laws fine-tuned precisely 'so,' to allow life to exist. Some might consider the Big Bang a—"

Byars raises his hands. "There's no need to be defensive. We're all religious people here."

I'm taken aback. When I left Earth, religion was condemned as the reason-killer, the root of prejudice and narrow-minded thinking. Had the pendulum swung back in the other direction over the past eighty years?

"Oh?" I say. "Religious scientists?"

"Well, perhaps not religion as you know it," Chandra says, smiling. She sips a glass of wine. "We're Quantists. Closely knit communities that explore the mysteries of existence together. Hardly *mystics*."

"Quantists?" I say.

Dr. Byars smiles. "You've missed a lot."

"So you believe in God?" Bodhi says.

"Not in the simplistic way—I'm sorry, no offense intended, Bodhisattva—that you do. We don't believe in a personal deity, but in a unifying theory of reality, rooted in quantum phenomena beyond our ability to understand. Something we call the Creative Force."

"You have proof of this . . . Creative Force?" I say.

Chandra laughs. "It's not something that can ever be definitively proved. But we have absolute faith in its existence. And through our exploration of the universe and an immersion in physics we hope we can grasp a tiny piece of that Creative Force. Doing so as part of a community. It drives home the fact that we're part of something larger than ourselves."

"Well, at least on that we can agree, Doctor," Bodhi says.

"Even if we can't agree on . . ." Chandra struggles for the word. "A 'God.'"

"So the B-E condensates worked to attract the alien?" Dr. Byars says, changing the subject.

"We know that the Sagittarians are a form of dark energy," Nicolai says. "A self-aware aspect of the quintessence field concentrated in complex patterns we never thought possible. We also know that they can interact with matter. So it made sense to provide them with a medium that would allow them to slow down to a level where they might be able to communicate with us."

Dr. Byars crunches on a large carrot. "We have about a hundred chambers on this station filled with every imaginable type of B-E condensate. Yet no alien ever jumped into one of them."

The Saved One shrieks. It's a bone-chilling howl that reminds me of a dog caught under the grav-field of a transport vehicle.

Several workers drop their utensils and a half-dozen jump up and flee the table. I struggle not to laugh at their reaction. I suppose I've grown accustomed to the Saved One's sporadic wailing and burbling.

"What the hell . . . ?" Dr. Byars says.

"Why does it do that?" Chandra says.

"We don't know for sure," Nicolai says. "Personally, I think it's experimenting with the voice generator, trying to learn human language."

"It sounds like it's in agony," a red-bearded man at the far end of the table says. He's standing, ready to run at the slightest movement by the Saved One.

"Show me a life with no suffering," Bodhi says, "and I'll show you a life not lived to its fullest." Bodhi looks at me out of the corner of his eye when he speaks these words, one of the central tenets of our faith.

"In that case, I'm not so sure I want to live life so . . . fully," Dr. Byars says with a smile. Several people laugh softly and others take their seats again.

"What about you, Miss Quiles?" Chandra says to me. "You're the most recent member of this clique, aren't you? Do you believe in this philosophy of suffering, of communing with a personal God?"

I gulp down a string bean and meet her stare. Then I roll up both my sleeves and show her my other scars.

When the doctor enters the room accompanied by Bodhi Bendito, I know the news can't be good.

"I'm sorry, Cassandra," the doctor says. "As with the other survivors of the *Reverie* disaster, you have terminal cancer . . ."

I'm only able to register random phrases after the word "terminal": "Nanotherapy can help. . . . Another year and a half, two years perhaps, if you're lucky. . . . Other experimental treatments are in development. . . . A positive attitude is important."

Bodhi Bendito walks past the doctor and puts his arm around my shoulders. "You're not alone, child. I'm here. The Saviors are here."

After the oncologist leaves, I sit cross-legged on the floor with Bodhi for a long while without saying a word. When he speaks again, he says, "Your personal agony is beautiful, child. With every ache, every jab of pain, you're *living*. Never forget that." And then he rolls up his two sleeves and displays the scars on his arms. They start at his elbow and run all the way to his wrists, overlapping purple marks, hideous upraised tissue in lieu of normal skin. "There have been so many times in my life when I felt . . . inconsequential. There's nothing worse than that. Pain is God's way of reminding us that we matter, child." He runs his index finger across each scar and I wonder how many other wounds are hidden beneath his tunic. "My father was a Savior priest, and his father before him. They taught me about the Prophet Merkel's moment of enlightenment atop Olympus Mons, about his great vision of truth. That our suffering allows God to take measure of our sacrifice and bestow his blessing on us. It is a great honor, Cassandra, to take on that pain. It's perhaps the greatest honor a person can know."

"So by hurting yourself, you think you're helping others?" I say. He sounds insane, but I have no doubt about his sincerity, his kindness.

He laughs softly. "I know so, child. I believe it with every fiber of my being. And my father and grandfather also understood this truth. At a point in both their lives, each of them undertook missions to commune with God."

Missions? My heart skips at the word.

"My grandfather traveled to the ancient colonies on Southern Mars, and my father to the domed cities of Titan to spread the Prophet's message. I've reached that juncture in my life, Cassandra, when I too need to go on my great mission. I'd been planning this for some time when I was called to the hospital to help you. So far there are three of us in our conclave. I believe you are destined to be our fourth, Cassandra."

I'm struck by the irony. Mom also dreamt of a great trip, a pilgrimage. I miss her so much. And I think about dying alone in a hospital. It isn't fair. I haven't had a chance to do something important with my life.

"Where are you going?" I say.

"It's an ambitious mission, Cassandra. We're traveling to Sagittarius-A, the center of the Milky Way, to commune with the aliens."

"The aliens?" I was seven years old when the discovery of the alien "sculptors"—a form of living, sentient radiation—had shaken the world to its foundation, finally proving once and for all that humanity was not alone in the universe. They were said to live at the center of the galaxy in a dust cloud that swirled on the edge of an event horizon, and they had ignored all our attempts at communication.

"This mission will allow us to spread our teachings to other beings." His face glows. "Join us, Cassandra."

It all sounds crazy. But I could spend my final days doing something Mom would approve of, something of consequence. I think again of how little time I have left, of being alone.

"There are Savior conclaves visiting human colonies across the cosmos," Bodhi says, "trying to make them remember what it is that makes us human. What they've lost amidst all the so-called advancements. The sense of the sacred. Of being part of something. Something greater than ourselves. God teaches us that suffering shared is suffering assuaged."

Something greater than ourselves. Like Mom said. And as he sits there and brushes a strand of hair out of my eyes, I tell him that I'm not sure about any of this, but I already know that I'm going with him. Mom would have wanted me to. I do want to be part of something bigger than myself in the time I have left. I need this. But most of all I need Bodhi.

Chandra and Dr. Byars have agreed to allow us to proceed with our ceremony. We prostrate ourselves in a central room that faces out into the great abyss through a plate-glassed window. Each of us sleeps on the cold metal floor and we pray all day and night. Three times a day we drink from a tin cup of water that washes down the stimulants that keep us awake. We eat nothing.

Within two hours, my back aches from lying on the floor. On the second day, I don't feel hunger any more, just a constant vertigo that makes it impossible to stand. By the fourth day, I don't know whether it is the advancing cancer or the effects of fasting, but I feel weaker than I ever have before. I can only pray silently, though strangely the Saved One makes more noise than usual, squeaking and buzzing and hiccupping. Nicolai and Antonio place a second sphere next to it, hoping this will invite another of its kind to join us.

On the eighth day of fasting, Dr. Byars intervenes. Two bots move me onto a gurney and lift me out of the room. My fellow Saviors protest, but there is nothing they can do in their weakened state.

I try to object, but the world spins so furiously when I attempt to speak that I have to close my eyes, just for a second.

I empty out the drawers and pile Thomas's clothes in a big stack along with Mom and Dad's. Bodhi plans to donate them to the poor.

Antonio activates the autovacuumers that scuttle back and forth, sucking up dust.

"Do you need any help over there?" Nicolai says. He has thick blond eyebrows and dimples that magically appear when he smiles. As a result, ever since I met him I've found myself trying to make him laugh. He's about twenty years too old for me—even if he weren't married and gay. Maybe that accounts for Antonio's acerbic humor. He always manages to find a way to get the usually taciturn Nicolai to muster a smile.

"If surrounding me with handsome men is Bodhi's way to get me to join the Saviors, I have to confess it's working," I say.

Dimples appear.

"Do you have everything you need?" Antonio says.

All I care about is the dataspeck I carry in my earring, which contains family photos and videos.

Thomas kept a jar full of holodots from the performances we'd attended, and as I pull them out one at a time and activate them, the title of each play rotates in the air and music gently echoes. I think of all the Thursday nights we'd spent at the theater together. He was born exactly four and a half minutes before me, but he always treated me like a much younger kid sister. I trigger another holodot and a mournful ballad from *Delightful Introspection* plays. I recall the time Thomas and I ditched our skimmer and ran through the traffic in a heavy downpour, just making the curtain call. I open another one and remember the time we'd stayed in our seats debating the ending of *The Epiphany*, and whether it was intended to be literal or metaphorical, until the ushers shooed us out of the theater.

I squeeze the holodot and don't want to let it go.

Nicolai puts his hand on my shoulder.

Antonio pulls open the disposal drawer and I tilt the jar so that the holodots spill over the edge and disappear into its gullet. There's no room for extra possessions on our upcoming mission.

When I finish, Nicolai takes my left hand and Antonio the right. I pray, the way that Mom used to. I pray for the strength to get me past this. For the clarity of vision to see the new path that lies before me. For the fortitude to commit myself fully to the Saviors on our upcoming mission to Sagittarius-A.

And then, after a lifetime of denying God, after weeks in the hospital mourning my family, I finally open my heart and let Him in. I thank Him. I thank Him for the support, the love, afforded to me by my new family.

When I awaken, I'm in the infirmary, a cutaneous nutrient patch attached just below my left clavicle. Dr. Byars sits at my bedside and offers me a cup of juice. "Here, drink this. You've been unconscious for the past forty-eight hours, Cassandra."

I slap the plastic cup out of his hands.

"What did you do? You've jeopardized our mission!" I say.

"And you were jeopardizing your *life*. You said that the Sagittarians had previously responded within seven days after you started your little ceremony," he says. "I waited until the eighth day. In your already-weakened condition you were in serious danger."

"I'm dying! Who are you to decide how I choose to live my final days?"

"Listen to me," Dr. Byars says. "Listen carefully. In the time that you've lost in interstellar travel, there have been advancements, Cassandra. The form of cancer you developed from the solar flare is treatable now."

I'm so surprised, I don't know what to say.

"Chandra didn't want me to tell you. She didn't want to do anything that might undermine your . . . commitment to our project."

There's a long pause. I've become so used to the idea of dying that I still can't process his words.

When he turns around, he has a square, black tablet in the palm of his hand. "These will eradicate the cancer from your system. A steady dosage can cure you in about thirty days."

I stare at it. I'm at a loss.

He grabs my hand, places the tablet in my palm, and closes my fingers over it. "Whatever hold that man has over you, it no longer exists." He leans closer. "I know the way his kind operates. Lurking in hospitals, seeking out those who are sick and most susceptible to his unique propaganda."

"You're wrong."

"He's exploited you. He's preyed on your vulnerability to get you to join his cult."

"You don't know what you're talking about! The Saviors go to hospitals because that's where we can help most. It's where people are hurting, where they need the comfort of prayer, where they most need God. Yes, 'God.' Do you have to flinch every time I say the word?"

He shakes his head and smiles sadly. "The concept of a personal God is silly, Cassie. Primitive. The Creative Force that shaped our universe, that reveals itself through quantum phenomena. That's real."

"Can't you even conceive that there might be a different way of viewing the universe?" I say. "That we might play a bigger role than that?"

He pauses. "Have you had sex with him?"

I slap him hard.

He raises his hand to the red mark I've left on his cheek. "You need time away from the man, Cassandra. After you've undergone treatment, if you still want to roam the universe saving alien 'souls,' that's your prerogative."

"You have no right—"

"On the contrary, I have an ethical duty to treat you given your diminished mental capacity. You're staying here."

"Damn you," I say. But even as I curse him, I stare at the bottle of black pills he's left on the stand next to my bed and wonder whether this man has saved my life. Maybe God doesn't intend for me to die yet? Maybe I'm not meant to spend my life with the Saviors. I push away the thought and silently curse him again, this devil who has poisoned my heart with doubt.

I must be hallucinating.

These can't be dust clouds! They're too magnificent, too wondrous, to be real. Planet-sized sculptures: triple-helixes, an electron orbiting an atom, honeycombed concentric circles like a bull's eye, a replica of the Pillars of Creation! The endless designs are staggering, and they stand out starkly against the absolute darkness of the black hole.

"How can they maintain those elaborate shapes while in the orbit of a singularity?" Nicolai says.

Antonio focuses on navigating the ship while Nicolai tends to the various instruments that measure radiation and gravity.

Bodhi continues humming, like he has for so many days. His throat must be raw.

Our ship streaks in the direction of five pyramids—the first the size of Jupiter, and each subsequent one double the size of the preceding one. Along the sides are etchings of patterned geometric shapes, decahedrons, rectangles, circles, and occasional mountain-sized protuberances along the base that resemble fingers.

Antonio and Nicolai have placed the B-E sphere in the center of the praying room and Bodhi and I sit cross-legged to one side of it. The top hatch of the sphere is open.

We're all weak from hunger. Bodhi runs the sterilized blade into his forearms and thighs, slicing through scar tissue. He grits his teeth. For a moment I don't know whether I can go through with this. I hold a lancet in my shaky hand and look over to Bodhi for reassurance. He nods.

I plunge it into my left arm and split open the pink skin, which gushes blood. The excruciating pain almost makes me stop the mantra.

He pats my shoulder and then I stare into his loving eyes. Blood is splattering onto the holy mat we'd laid down beforehand.

My head is spinning. I lean into Bodhi and kiss him. He returns my kiss for just a second and then puts his hands on my shoulders and pushes me away.

I'm too embarrassed to even mutter a response. He stares at me more intensely than anyone ever has before in my life. "Saying no to you, Cassie . . . now I know what it is to suffer. Now I truly know agony."

His gaze holds mine and with my heart bursting with love, with total devotion, I run the blade from my forehead to my right cheek causing blood to stream down my face.

Bodhi flinches.

"There's an energy fluctuation," Nicolai announces. "The radiation signature matches that of the Sculptors."

"It peaks further ahead. I'm taking us five kilo-kliks closer to the event horizon," Antonio says.

"We'll lose significant realtime," Nicolai says. "Decades."

"Just for a few seconds."

"Careful, Toño, careful . . ."

"We're in," Antonio says. "Ten seconds, fifteen seconds . . ."

The ship shakes violently and the lights blink and all at once the B-E sphere shudders and glows. A loud static emanates from its speakers. It sounds at first like a soft groan, then like the agonizing scream of childbirth.

I leap to my feet and wipe the blood out of my eyes.

Bodhi stands shakily, totters toward the orb, and seals the top hatch.

"Contact!" Nicolai says. "We've made contact! Get us the hell out of here, Toño."

A woman sticks her head into the room. "Can I have a word, Dr. Byars?"

"What is it?"

"We have a situation. One of the missionaries, the one called Antonio, donned his safesuit and went outside."

"In his weakened condition?"

"Yes, and . . . we can't be certain . . . but it appears he's taken his own life. He hurled himself into the great gulch."

What? Vertigo hits me again.

"The other one, Nicolai, has also left the outpost and is following the same path. The Bodhisattva is talking with Chandra. He's preparing to go after them."

Dr. Byars turns to leave, then stops at the doorway. "I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I find out."

I hear the security guards racing in the same general direction as Dr. Byars.

The minute the footsteps recede, I drag myself out of bed. My head still spins but I know that my safesuit is stored separately from the men's suits not far from here.

I chase Thomas around the acacia tree, and he stumbles and falls and scrapes his knee.

He's sobbing, pressing both his hands against his right leg. Fat tears roll down his cheek and he's blubbering.

"Shut up, Thomas!" I hiss. I look around. No sign of Mom. "Don't be such a baby!"

He bawls more loudly.
“Shut up! Shut up! *Shut up!*”

Bodhi breathes heavily through the commlink. He trails far behind me as I sprint ahead, the outpost’s glow lighting the terrain. My safesuit targets Nicolai about fifty meters in front of me. There. In the distance. He stands at the very edge of the precipice.

As I close ground, Nicolai turns to face me. Then he leans back and drops over the side of the cliff.

“No!” I scream.

I run to the gravelly ledge and lean precariously over the side. It is as if I’m dangling off the edge of a flat world, over an infinite abyss. There’s no sign of him.

Then I hear it. A voice. A voice that echoes all around me and penetrates the marrow of my bones.

“Cassie? Can you hear me?”

My heart stops. It’s Thomas’s voice.

That’s when I see it hovering over the void.

A blur, a micro-rip in space and time that fills me with both dread and wonder. Although my mind can’t make sense of it, I instinctively recognize it, even outside of its shell.

The Saved One.

Although it floats directly ahead, the voice it’s using, Thomas’s voice, comes from all around me, from inside me. It resounds in my temples.

“You can speak?” I say.

“Not really. But what’s important is that you can finally hear me.” He giggles. “I was rescued by another of my kind who noticed my pain and lifted the veil.”

“The veil?”

“Yeah, silly. *The veil*. You know, the substance in here.”

“The Bose-Einstein condensates?”

“Uh-huh. I decided to experience life as you do, in this slow, limited manner and sort of lost myself in the process.”

I still can’t believe I’m hearing Thomas’s voice. But it’s Thomas’s voice from when we were much younger.

“Why are you . . . here?” I point to the yawning chasm.

“Your kind is, well, crippled, Cassandra. But don’t you worry, I’m here to help.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Precisely!” He titters. “See, you’re unable to grasp reality. Your senses are warped, kiddo.”

“What did you do to Antonio and Nicolai?”

“They’ve seen the light, so to speak. I saved them. Transformed them.”

I take a step back. “You’re scaring me.”

“Don’t be afraid, Cassie. Hmm, how can I put this so you understand? You know how a light particle flits around in a fuzzy state, everywhere at once, until the moment you observe it?”

Yes, basic high school physics. The uncertainty principle. The observer effect. Any particle, until observed, exists in all possible states simultaneously. But what does this have to do with anything? I’d once overheard Nicolai and Antonio discussing the wave function of photons and wondered what that concept might mean to aliens that consist of dark energy.

“Open your mind, Cassie.”

I stand in front of the full-length mirror dressed in a black tunic with red slippers and Bodhi Bendito hands me the shears. I cut off my ponytail at its base. And I keep

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on cutting until I have only half an inch of hair shorn close to the scalp. I hand the shears back and he places the electric razor in my other hand. I push it down the center of my scalp, leaving a wake of white flesh.

“Imagining a possibility is enough to collapse a wave function, to cause a reality to fluctuate into existence,” the Saved One says, only now it sounds like a more mature, teenaged Thomas. “You see, there is no actual, objective universe, Cassie. There is no physical reality, at least not in any meaningful sense, without consciousness, without observation.”

I’m standing in front of a mirror again, but I’m not me. I have a different face. I’m taller. My hair is honey-brown and falls past my shoulders.

Who am I?

My very being is the end product of uncertainty. I’m the outcome of a random spermatozoa—one of millions—fertilizing an egg. Random genes in a random combination. I embody uncertainty.

Dr. Byars and Bodhi lean over the edge of the precipice as my body plummets. Bodhi’s outstretched hand reaches for me.

They aren’t listening to the Saved One. The man of science. The man of faith. Both too afraid to take the ultimate leap.

Have faith, Bodhi! Jump!

His eyes widen and he takes a step back from the edge.

“The flow of time isn’t real, Cassie.” The Saved One laughs. “Your perception of the ‘past’ and ‘future’ is generated by the filter of your unevolved senses. You delude yourselves into believing that the individual moments you experience come and go, swept away in an endless stream of such moments. But in actuality, Cassie, the sea of time is frozen and every instant that has ever been or ever will be, every ripple, every wave, stretches out before you forever preserved, right here, right now.

“Do you follow?”

We’re dodging traffic, racing through the streets in the heavy rain. Thomas is holding on to my hand, and pulling me along. I’m laughing, out of breath. My hair is drenched.

“The fundamental truth is that the universe didn’t create life. It is life that spawned the cosmos. You’re both the particle *and* the observer, Cassie. Do you understand? Do you?” It sounds excited.

“Yes, I—I think so.”

I allow myself to fall backward over the edge into the abyss. Wasn’t I already falling? No.

I never stepped off the precipice. No one did.

I rejected Dr. Byars’ nanomeds and embraced my faith.

Nicolai sits at my bedside. My entire body feels numb. I can’t speak. I reach up to touch my face and I trace jutting cheekbones and eye sockets.

Antonio anxiously faces out the window of the hospital room as if he can’t bear to look at me.

Nicolai reaches out and holds my claw of a hand.

I try speaking but the only sound I can generate is a raspy inhuman moan. I’m struck by the fact that I sound like the Saved One, trapped inside the B-E sphere.

"It's okay, Cassie. It's okay. We're here."

And as I take my final breath it dawns upon me with the last electrical impulse that courses through my grey matter: it isn't suffering that brings us closer to God; it's compassion. But how can there be compassion without suffering?

"Why us? Why did you choose to speak to us?" I say.

"Because your pain, Cassie, is so pure, so sincere that it shines like a beacon, beckoning for compassion."

"So then God exists?" I say.

"Everything and nothing exists! Haven't you understood what I've been telling you? When you conceive of Him, you collapse a wave function and make it so. God is real. And you created Him."

"I didn't know. I couldn't know," I say. "Your people . . ." I'm so overwhelmed I start to cry. "Your people must truly care about us."

A pause.

The Novikov Self-Consistency Conjecture from "The Official Guide to Time Travel"

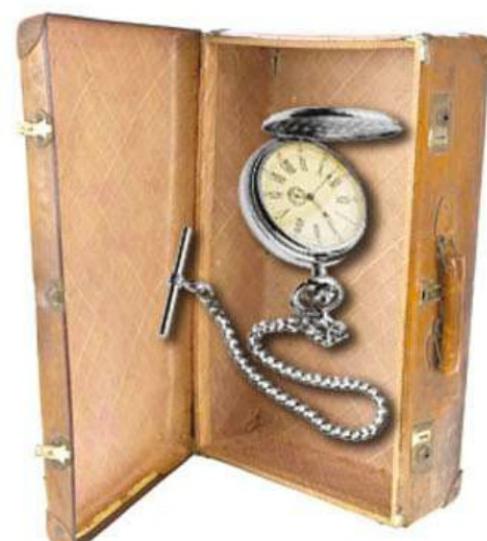
self-consistency allows that
computations when projected back
through time are filtered
stacked into a result that must
be correct 100%
thus events
on a closed temporal curve
are allowed to exist
without a twist

the sign over the door:
"no paradoxes allowed"

or with a smidge of irony:
"time travel risk-free
(if you can travel at all)"

—Robert Frazier

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June 2012

“My . . . people . . . no, they care nothing about stunted life-forms like you. But *I* felt the need to help you. *I* felt the calling to ease your suffering and open your minds to the light. That’s why I came to you when I sensed your pain. To bring you the truth.”

There’s something so familiar about its words. And that’s when it hits me. The Saved One.

My God, it’s a missionary.

Thomas stuck bubble gum in my hair.

Tears run down my cheeks as Mom pours oil onto the brush and pushes it through my hair. It catches and pulls, and I sob more loudly. “Shh, it’s okay, sweetie. I know it hurts.” Mom holds my hair at the roots and brushes the tangled ends with quick strokes. “Shhhh.”

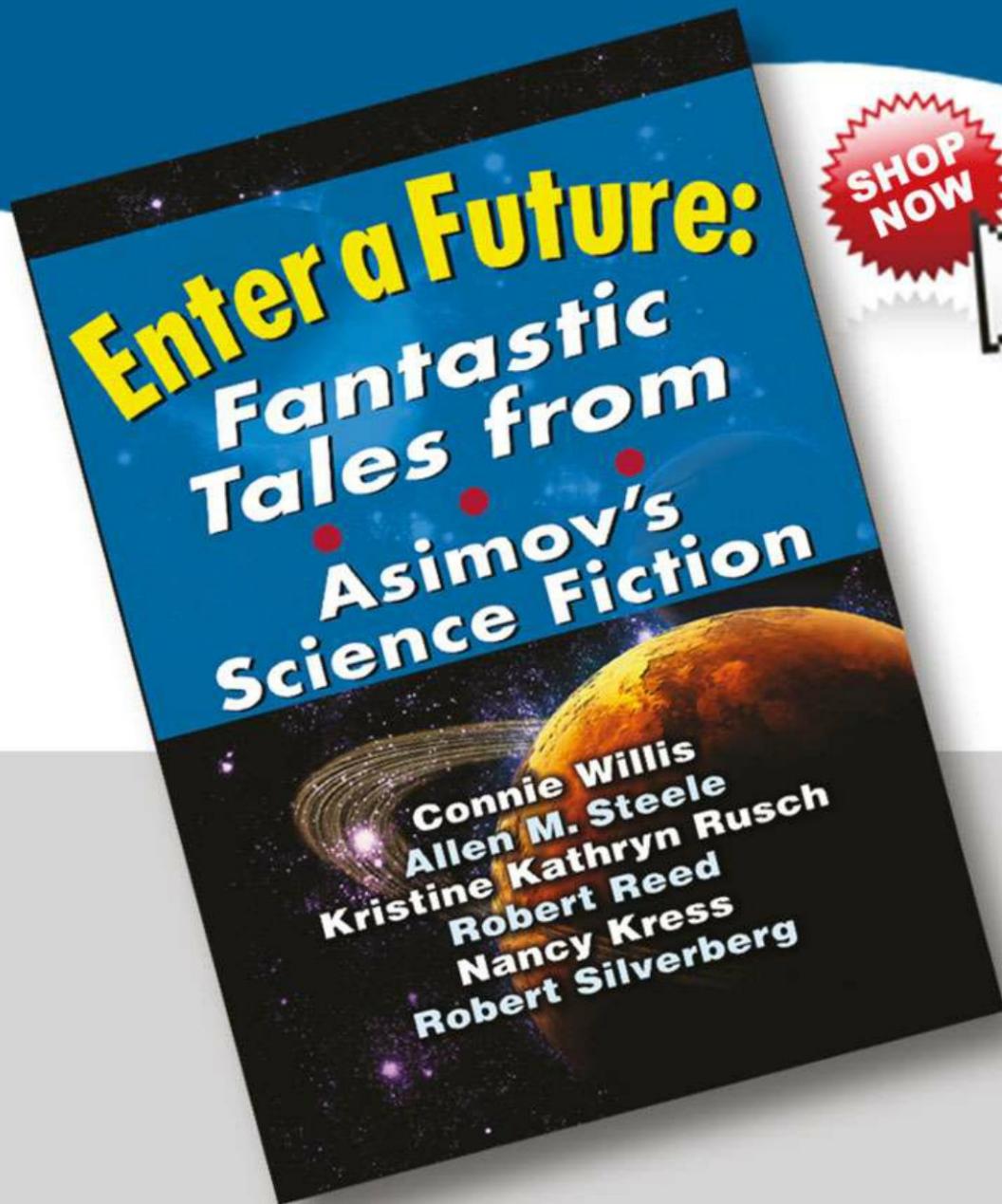
Epiphany. Transcendence.

I was. And I could be. I am. And I will be.

“It’s okay, Cassie. It’s okay,” Dad says. “We’re right here. We never left.” ○

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FREE RANGE

Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister now lives in the heart of Orange County, California. "Although the owls here," he reports, "are not as big as the ones in this story, the great flocks of escapee parrots from God-knows-where sit on the neighborhood phone lines all day, spitting magnolia seeds and clucking loudly, as if waiting for an alien invasion." The author's 2007 Hugo finalist, "Kin" (*Asimov's*, February 2006) has been optioned by Marshall McAuley and his team of filmmakers for an FX-driven short film. Bruce is working on that tale's sequel—short story or novel, he's not sure which—and, for breathers, takes his dog to the nearby creek to look for dinosaur bones and UFO fragments.

After she lost interest in the green eggs—yes, green chicken eggs (taste the same, look dyed, so what's the point?)—my neighbor Johanna started raising black chickens. Yes, black ones. They're popular in China for reasons ranging from nutrition to superstition, and she'd gotten three hens and a rooster from a guy in Chinatown—in exchange for the last two green-egg chickens she had.

"Green is good now in China," he said. "Helps make a man's pole longer."

"Right," she told him. "Don't need to kill rhinoceros and go to jail for long pole anymore."

He knew what she meant and nodded vigorously. They were standing in the middle of the Buddha of the Missing Tooth Square, and she'd had enough man-pole talk. She could do that with me—we were an item—and we were, as it happened, overdue for a quiet, leisurely discussion about man-poles that weekend. She left him standing there with the cage—chickens and man—under the gaze of the gap-toothed Buddha.

"How did you find him?" I asked over our favorite Cuban food in our county—Orange County, California.

"There are dozens listed in the Chinatown *Pennysaver*. In English. Black chickens are the hottest thing in Asian poultry."

"Why?"

"They're immune to avian flu, among other things."

"What other things?"

"The flesh tastes different."

"As in 'black' different?"

"Yeah, it's black—well, actually a kind of purple. The feathers are black as night, the skin dark purple, the meat a little lighter. It still tastes like chicken. . . ."

I stared at her. I always stare at her. No makeup (none needed) and that long jet-black hair with a paisley headband. The Last Hippie of Santa Ana, as my buddies put it—smitten, too.

And her boyfriend (that's me)—third-generation stoner-housepainter from Orange who never can get all the paint out from under his nails. Still taking community college classes ten years out of high school while she, with her talent and her art degree from Cal State Fullerton, actually makes a living as an artist—Photoshop, a website (“Johanna Edwards—Fine Graphic Designs”), hi-res attachments, *everything*.

The Real OC . . . except for two small details. I've got my mother's Asian eyes (my father met her in Japan during the Vietnam war), and Johanna's got her father's Apache cheekbones, nose, and dark complexion. Not exactly traditional poster children for this county. Maybe in twenty years? In the meantime, we are “The Millennial Couple,” as my favorite prof at the college likes to put it.

“Of course it tastes like chicken,” I say at last.

“—but it's sweeter.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is it sweeter?”

“I don't know. . . . Yes, I do. You have to feed them fruit along with grain, and there's fructose in the fruit, so maybe—Hell, I don't know.”

“Is that why the Chinese like them?”

“The sweetness?”

“Yeah.”

“In the restaurants, sure; but in the villages, it has something to do with the night.”

“What?”

“How safe you are at night.”

“Safe from what?”

“The owls—the ones the size of small bears—that come for your children at night.”

“Right. We've got that problem, you and me. Children to worry about. And big owls.”

“I'm serious, Michael. That's what they believe.”

“The more black chickens, the less likely an owl will take your kids?”

“Stop laughing.”

“What kids are you trying to protect, Johanna? Something you're not telling me?”

“I'm trying to protect Mignon.”

Mignon was her cockapoo, and I knew that right about now she was regretting the name.

“From the owls?” I asked.

“From whatever it was that tore a hole in my roof last night.”

I didn't know what to say, so she said, “Want to see it?”

I nodded, still speechless. Had she lost it? Too much ethnic food? Hallucinogenic virus from her chickens? Allergy to green eggs? Bad vibes from her healing crystals, which were everywhere in her two-story Victorian “fixer” on Almond Avenue?

But there really was a hole in her roof. You could see it standing in the attic, and it looked like the hole a piece of jet would make—*Donnie Darko*-fashion. But there wasn't a hole in the attic floor, and no piece of jet. Instead, there were *marks*. . . .

I stepped over to them, squatted down like my Vietnamese friend Pham would, and squinted. It looked like a very big dog or a pack of coyotes—flying coyotes—had worked frantically on the floor, trying to claw through it.

“What's below this?”

“You know.”

I did. It was her bedroom, where she and Mignon slept.

“When did this happen?”

"You mean, did this happen before I decided to get the black chickens?"

"Yes."

"It happened the night I decided—the night I called the guy and we talked for forty minutes, him in his broken English and me in no Chinese whatsoever, and toward the end, when I asked why Chinese villagers liked them, he said, 'Because of the owls.' That's how I found out about the stories—the census data. He knew all about it. He'd grown up in one of those villages and he remembered the day the census takers came—actually, they came six times. They couldn't believe what the villagers were telling them. That night I heard the wings."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. That's how I know what this was," she said, gesturing up at the hole, blue sky and sunlight.

"Add the claw marks and I have absolutely no doubt," she added.

"There must be other explanations," I said stupidly.

"Maybe, Michael, but I'm not interested in hearing them. I know what I know. I've got four black chickens and I am going to breed more. Now that I've told you the story about the owls, you may need some, too."

I tried not to smile, but it was hard. "Kind of like *The Ring*, you mean? Now you've heard the story about the giant owls, they're going to come and get you. Within seventy-two hours probably. Can your chickens lay eggs and hatch them that quickly, Johanna?"

"Screw you," she answered, and what bothered me most wasn't the two words themselves but that she said it without any real anger—because she had better things on her mind than *us*.

Like the chickens.

And an owl that might very well come back.

I never handled things quite right with Johanna. I had no trouble with one relic of the sixties—weed—but she has this natural ability to keep everything about the sixties alive. And everything Millennially New Age, too. I couldn't keep up. I couldn't take it all seriously. I laughed when I shouldn't—which wouldn't have been so bad if I didn't love her, which I did. One month it was cartons of milk inside a cardboard pyramid she'd tried to build—one I tried to help with—to keep them fresh. She said she'd read about it in an old article. Another month it was an Archangel named Gordon she was trying to "channel." I couldn't help with that. She thought he might be able to help her find out how her mother, who'd passed over the year before, was doing. A friend from college had found Gordon useful with dead relatives. I smiled at the wrong time—Johanna's voice had gone real low, like she was suddenly a man, and she was saying, "Your mother is happy—happy as a clam, Johanna—so don't you worry about her"—and I did it. I smiled. She looked up at me, caught me, and it wasn't Gordon. It was Johanna, and I'd hurt her feelings. When her feelings get hurt, she gets cranky. "If you're going to laugh at this," she said, "leave! I loved my mother, Michael. She made me the woman I am. Can't you understand?" There'd be no man-pole discussion that night, but that's not why I felt like shit. I *loved* that she loved her mother. That's Johanna. She loves *everyone*, and I love that about her. Why couldn't I keep my damned smile under control?

Pham, who'd become one of my best friends—maybe because my dad served in Vietnam and really liked the Delta Vietnamese he'd worked with there—was much more respectful of Johanna's hippie episodes. He was a Buddhist, very devout, and, as I just said, very respectful. Whatever a person believed, whoever that person was, if it was positive or joyful or kind, he respected it. I wanted to be more like that myself, so I'm sure that was another reason—a reason we were friends.

"I hear more clucking today at Miss Johanna's," Pham said as I hand-watered my plumeria. My house, four down from hers, was an ugly fifties stucco thing, but like everyone in OC, I had lei flowers growing in my yard.

"Yep. Johanna's got four new chickens. Four *black* chickens."

"Ah," he said. "She's been hanging up with Chinese folk."

Sometimes he got his idiom right, sometimes not; but I'd never correct him. He didn't look a year past fifty, but he was at least seventy. He had to be. After the war he'd survived twelve years in re-education camps, where he'd nearly died more than once. Then he'd come to the US, which he loved and admired, and gone to college *again*, and that was years ago. Idiom was a very small thing in a very big universe when you thought of a life like Pham's. I was in a constant state of humility around the guy.

"Yes, she has," I said.

"She is worried about owls?"

I actually dropped the hose.

"You know about the owls?"

"Who does not? They are a problem in China, and, because Vietnamese are Chinese in their blood too—from long ago—it is sometimes a problem in Vietnam, though the regime denies that owls of such magnitude are possible, just as they deny many things that cannot be otherwise . . . how do you say it, 'buried'?"

I just stared at him. Everyone knew about the owls except me. Was I smoking too much dope these days? Was it all a dream, or did the entire world know about the owls and in my haze I'd just missed it?

"Will the black chickens work?" I heard myself ask.

"Excuse me?"

"Will the black chickens keep the owls away?"

"Why do you ask, my friend?"

"Because Johanna thinks one of them—one of those owls—has put a hole in her roof?"

"This is true?"

"Yes, this is true, Pham."

"May I see her hole?"

Let the plumeria fry in the heat. Pham needed a tour of Johanna's roof. "She's there, I think. Let's go see it, but you still haven't answered my question."

"It depends," Pham began in his professorial voice. He'd been a superior court judge in Vietnam, had resigned because of how capital punishment was being used by the country's then-president, and might have even run for the presidency of Vietnam himself on a Buddhist-populist platform had the war gone differently. He'd been a very loved man, I knew—which was the only way to explain why the regime hadn't killed him, but instead stuck him in the camps. Of course I'd had to find all of this out from his Little Saigon relatives, piece by piece, one Tet celebration after another (to which he always took me). No Buddhist ever broadcasts his "stature" because "stature" can't possibly matter—in the larger scheme of things, I mean.

"It depends on the loudness of the chickens and—how to say it?—how 'lacking in coordination' the owl is."

"You're kidding. The owls are clumsy?"

"I am not kidding," he answered. "It is not unlike a war with the Chinese—one that took place during the Dai Viet, year of 1273, when with the 'rectification of names,' Ty Long, a monk, returned to the world to lead our army as its general . . . and twice . . . and with the clarity and consequent physical coordination of a holy man. Clumsiness is a state of spirit, as is loudness. Body but expresses soul, Mr. Michael. The chickens are higher beings, even if stupid."

He was on a roll. His crazy mix of Buddhism and Confucianism made him the

brave, gentle soul his people loved. But I didn't want to hear it just now. Just the idea of "the rectification of names"—which he'd tried to explain a dozen times—had always made me car-sick.

Brightly as I could, I interrupted: "Pham, let's go see *how big* the owl was!"

Johanna liked Pham, but didn't want to see us at that moment. She was sweeping and mopping, and I noticed that Mignon, yappy as ever, wore a collar with spikes on it.

"Good God," I said.

"The man at Petco assured me it would help if something grabbed her around the neck."

The spikes looked dangerous. What if Mignon, who was plagued with nervous dermatitis, tried to scratch her own neck?

"I think he meant another dog. Owl claws don't care about spikes," I ventured.

Johanna glared at me.

"But maybe the owl will laugh itself to death—" I added, kicking myself as soon as I said it.

Pham felt the tension and, mediator that he was, said gently, "Miss Johanna, I feel deep concern for you today. May I see your roof-hole?"

I expected to see her at least fight a smile at this—Pham's gaffes always made her laugh—but she was in Dead Serious Mode. Mignon's life was at stake, and there were chickens to breed—and quickly—and a big house (one I never helped with because—well, because we weren't to that point yet, I guess) that needed cleaning. The last thing she needed was two guys with nothing better to do dropping by.

"Please, Miss Johanna."

Johanna sighed and led the way.

Back down in the yard, after inspecting the hole, we watched the four black chickens—that acted like any other chickens—peck at the dirt. Pham sighed, too, and said:

"Yes. A large owl."

I waited.

"So what should we do?" I prompted.

Pham continued to stare at the chickens, as if they might have an answer for him.

"They're not happy," he said at last.

"Who?" Johanna asked.

"Your chickens."

"You can read their thoughts?" I asked.

"Only because they wish it."

When he seemed determined not to say anything else, I poked again:

"You've had black chickens yourself, Pham?"

"Yes."

More silence as he stared, head cocked like a dog's. I wasn't accustomed to the sight. It unnerved me.

"You know more about them than you're telling us, don't you, Pham?"

He sighed again.

"Yes, Mr. Michael. I knew such chickens in the Mekong Delta. They saved my second cousin's progeny and his two potbellied pigs, which were of great value to him."

At this point I was wishing I was stoned. The Honorable Pham Nguyen could hear the thoughts of chickens? This would *not* have helped his campaign for president.

Or would it?

"How many people in Vietnam believed the story?"

"Concerning the chickens and the owls?"

“Yes.”

“A large number.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was hoping it was not an owl who produced Miss Johanna’s hole.”

“And now you think it was?”

“Without a doubt.” Then he added:

“Miss Johanna needs more chickens.”

“Why?”

“Because that is why these four are unhappy. They say they need more number, that they cannot do what they must without more number, that the Owls from Beyond the Fifth Star have become stronger, and so—”

The Owls from Beyond the Fifth Star?

This was not at all the Pham I knew. I was worried. If he was indeed 70, was this the start of dementia?

“The what?” I asked.

“All I know is what the chickens tell me, Mr. Michael. They are not from this planet. Neither they nor the owls are from this planet.”

To make matters worse, Johanna jumped in, saying:

“I thought so!”

Of course she did. Crazy Johanna. Last of the Hippies. Queen of the New Agey. Indigo Children and Greys and crop circles that, when viewed the right way, spell out “Yo, Earthlings!” Of course she believed in giant owls from Tau Ceti.

I stood there. Maybe it was *me* and not them. Was it possible to have a psychotic break without forewarning? Or moldy bread—with Saint Vitus Dance hallucinations? Or was this a temporal lobe epileptic seizure, like the ones they say the great science fiction writer, Phillip K. Dick—who’d once lived twenty minutes away—had? Was I about to see, as he had, the face of a very nasty Jehovah alternating regularly with a kindly, smiley-face God? Also, didn’t mental problems often occur around thirty? I was there.

“What do we do, Pham?” Johanna was saying.

“We get more chickens.”

“How?”

“I have a friend in Little Saigon.”

Of course you do, Pham.

In two hours Pham had a truck—an immense twenty-four-footer U-Haul. Stick shift, too. I didn’t even know he knew how to drive one. In his apartment in Fountain Valley he had pictures of his ancestors in a little shrine—a Minister of this, a Minister of that—an influential family that had started out in the North and moved to the Delta during the French war. Law school, judgeship, but when you’ve survived a war and camps, you probably know how to drive a stick shift. How stupid of me.

“Isn’t this overkill, Pham?” I asked. Pham was driving because, as he said, he was “the responsible party.” Johanna was between us, with Mignon on her lap. The cab smelled like dog.

“Overkill what?”

“That’s an expression, Pham. Isn’t this truck a little big for what we need?”

“No, Mr. Michael, it is not.”

He said nothing more, but when we pulled off the 5 and started our long trek up Westminster to Little Saigon, he added, “Chickens need room to dance.”

Johanna and I—even Mignon—fell silent. What do you say to something like that?

When we got to his friend's chicken-ranch-in-a-warehouse—which was about as close to "free-ranging" as you can get in an urban environment—the chickens weren't exactly dancing. But they were moving.

We stood just inside the door to the warehouse, watching. It was the kind of warehouse that by the hundreds cover so much of SoCal in light-industry sprawl. Pham had found the place like a prairie falcon and parked in a lot behind it. There were five other cars, none of them fancy.

Our mouths were open, of course—Johanna's and mine—and we weren't blinking. Even Mignon—a dog that should be on valium IV drip her entire life—was mesmerized. What yappy dog doesn't bark at poultry?

The vast floor of the building was covered with what looked like rye grass—a great, neatly mowed *lawn* of it—and the aroma was a charming mix of lawn fertilizer and chicken poop. Sprinkled throughout the buzz-cut grass you could see something that looked a little like chicken feed, but even more like a cross between pumpkin seeds, Chex Mix, and raisins.

The chickens were black all right, almost shiny, their heads bigger than they should be, feet bigger, too. Hens and roosters both. Most of them were moving—some fast, some slow—in *circles*, concentric circles, six or seven circles per design, each circle moving opposite the next, and anywhere from a dozen to a hundred chickens in each circle, depending on the circle's size. Like some weird square dance. *Do si do*.

Those that weren't moving in circles stood in the grass, pecking, legs apart, as if someone or something might at any moment try to push them over, so they needed to keep their balance. Some of these stopped pecking and looked up at us, clucking once or twice.

The cluck was weird. A cluck with a supersonic dimension—like a dog whistle you could hear.

The chickens making the circles didn't stop. They were resolved, highly committed. Nothing was more important than their circling. I'd never seen animals do anything like this, though, as I watched, I thought of Discovery Channel specials I'd seen as a kid—a Native American dance, Navajo maybe, where people danced in concentric circles, one moving opposite the other, all of it a symbol for eternity, the universe, birth and death and re-birth. And "roller pigeons" rolling in mid-air, unable not to. And bowerbirds making pretty round designs for their mates. And baboons circling and circling a leopard until it dropped from exhaustion and dizziness and they could dispatch it.

I was wrong. Fifty wouldn't be enough, Pham said. So he bought a hundred of them from his friend, who was quite happy—on a Sunday, the cars parked outside belonged to employees, not customers—to sell that many, and he didn't seem surprised at the number. He was even tinier than Pham and kept nodding in that respectful way—something I wanted to learn how to do some day—and looking back and forth between us and the dog in Johanna's arms, as if he knew why we were buying them. Which was crazy.

For a moment I had a vision of hundreds of backyards in Little Saigon all a'cluck with thousands of black-as-tar chickens dancing in sacred circles to protect all the innocent children and small animals.

"Lordy," I muttered and, though Johanna looked at me, didn't try to explain.

"Will they be okay in the back?" Johanna asked. Getting them into the truck had been easy enough. Pham's friend had produced a coach's whistle, and when he blew it, the nearest chickens had stopped and stared at him. When he blew it three more

times in quick succession, they followed him up the ramp into the truck, nodding like chickens, but with no clucking.

"They sit in darkness now, waiting," Pham answered.

What the hell did that mean?

"So they're okay?" Johanna asked again.

"Of course. They know that they must undergo this."

"They *tell* you this, Pham?" I said.

"Of course. They will tell you, too, if they need to. If you are important enough."

I wasn't important enough?

Pham knew what I was thinking. It didn't take telepathy.

"You and Miss Johanna are important to *me*, Mr. Michael. The chickens have other matters on their minds."

Johanna was looking away. She knew Pham wanted us to be together, a couple—and it made her self-conscious. She loved Pham, but didn't like pushy Cupids. But Pham's declaration of affection made *me* feel better. No one wants to be dissed by chickens.

Would there be enough room in Johanna's backyard, big though it was? Would we need to plant rye grass and fertilize it, mow the entire quarter acre and put in a sprinkler system, for God's sake?

Apparently not. The chickens marched down the ramp without needing poke or whistle, made their way along the path to the back gate—which Johanna opened at Pham's prompting—and into the yard, where they began immediately, like all chickens, to peck and cluck.

"I believe that it will return tonight," Pham announced.

We knew what he meant, even if we—or at least I—still didn't believe it. You can go along with something strange, something unreal, even if you don't necessarily believe it. I'd learned that as a kid in Orange County, where there were enough strange events daily to last a thousand lifetimes.

"Why?" Johanna was asking.

"Because you have more chickens now."

"The owls come because of the chickens?" she said, frowning.

"No. The chickens know when the owls are to come, and so they make sure, by using willing people and big trucks and two-story houses like yours, that they are present when they do."

This sounded like chicken-Zen to me. "The future calls you to become what you already are but have forgotten." "There is no causality—only simultaneity." That kind of thing. But if Pham believed the owl was going to come again, who was I to argue? There was a hole in Johanna's roof above where Mignon slept, and claw marks too big for any dog or hawk or ordinary owl. I might not love Mignon, but I loved her mistress, and I didn't want giant owls around my woman.

"May I sleep tonight on your sofa?" Pham said, and both Johanna and I stared at him. The Pham we knew would never propose such a thing. He visited my house often because we were friends and because, aside from meditating and praying and reading at night, he didn't have a lot to do in his tiny apartment. But to ask to stay at Johanna's? How strange.

"Of course, Pham," she answered.

We got Chinese takeout on Tustin Ave and ate it on the little bench in the backyard, watching the chickens be chickens.

"Why do the owls take kids and small animals?" I asked. There were so many questions.

"Because they are not big enough to pick up adults."

"No, I mean why are they *here*?"

“They are . . . invading. They are invading your planet.”

I took a deep breath.

“They’re taking over our planet kid by kid, dog by dog?” I said.

“That is what chickens say.”

“Could the chickens be lying?”

“No. They are a truthful species. It is also what is in their heads, what they are thinking, Mr. Michael, so it could not be a lie.”

“I see your point. And the chickens—why are *they* here?”

“They do not like what the owls do.”

“They’re from the same planet?”

I couldn’t believe I was asking these things, but what else was there to ask? It had become a very different universe in just a day.

“No. But they have known the owls for a—how do they put it?—a ‘heavy eternity.’ They find the owls annoying. They—”

“Annoying?” Johanna interrupted, Mignon wriggling in her lap, ready to chase a chicken or two because we were talking about them. “Just ‘annoying’?”

“Maybe the owls tried to take their eggs once,” I joked.

“You are correct, Mr. Michael. They did try. The owls are not very good at stealing, but they are tenacious, aggravatingly so, the chickens say.”

“Our helpers are willing to die for us?” I said. “They let us eat them for the chance to save a human kid or pet?”

“You know chickens. . . .” he answered with a beatific smile.

“Yes, not very smart. I know. But smarter than the owls.”

“The chickens think so. They also believe it is worth it—to die for us. They have their reasons, Mr. Michael. All creatures have their reasons.”

I was trying to accept it, but it was hard. “This is *not* what we imagined an alien invasion would be like, Pham. So *slow*, and . . .”

“The word you want is ‘incompetent,’ Michael,” Johanna said helpfully.

“Forgive me, Mr. Michael, but you do not know invaders very well.”

He was looking at me kindly, but I’d seen that faint Laughing Buddha look before. “Often,” he added, “invaders take a long time and are quite clumsy.”

When he saw the little hurt in my eyes—after all, he knew we’d meant well in his country, and he did appreciate our years of trying—he added, “I do not like the communist regime. ‘Invaders of the angry heart,’ we say. You know this. If I allude, it is to the French and to the Mandarins long, long ago. I allude not to your father or your country, Mr. Michael, to which I am grateful.”

“I know, Pham. . . .”

Johanna’s face had that wonderful squinty look it gets when she’s thinking overtime, like her hardball-attorney father, not just drifting blissfully on the flower-child head-songs of her mom, who had been an acupuncturist.

“Why China? Why start there?” she asked.

“Lots of people,” Pham answered. “Many villages. Great distances. Very difficult to complain.”

“Fine, but why the Vietnamese, too?”

It took him only a second, but he said:

“Because we look like little Chinese.”

It sounded more like a question than a statement, and, when I looked at his eyes, I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not.

I asked how they got here—how they reached us across the stars. Chickens weren’t very good at eye-hand coordination and owls were only a little bit better. I couldn’t imagine either on the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*. He answered, “Not that way. You will see.”

Then Johanna asked: "What do they do with the kids and pets?"

"The chickens do not want to think about it."

"Because it's so horrible?"

"No, Miss Johanna. Because it is silly. They keep them in abandoned buildings and abandoned villages, but the children—the older leading the younger—escape, and so do the pets. They are brave and determined. In one village the children—how do you say it?—'grabbed command'—ordering the owls around until the owls developed stomach disorders and the children left in disgust."

"You're serious, Pham?"

He knew the expression.

"Yes. It is what is in the heads of the chickens."

"You said that."

"Did I also say that the owls are stupid?"

"Yes. You did."

We sat in silence, the four of us (Mignon, too), for quite a while. When the sun went down, the chickens huddled together on the cement-slab porch, under its overhang, and I knew Johanna was offering a little New Age prayer that they were potty-trained or at least preferred grass to cement for whatever solids and fluids needed release.

We watched TV together—Pham joining us out of respect—and then it was time to say goodnight. I thought briefly of joining Pham in the living room, taking the floor for propriety's sake, but Johanna told me with a look that she wanted me with her and Mignon in the bedroom. She got no argument. If Pham was right about tonight, I wanted to be with them.

Somehow Johanna fell asleep. Mignon whimpered in puppy dreams, so I was in and out of sleep until something slammed the house at two A.M.

As the house shook, I half-crawled, half-ran to the wall switch, hit it, and saw why Pham had said, "Do not fix hole. Waste of money."

The thing was back and, encouraged by the hole it had made, was trying again. Same place, but now its claws were through the ceiling above us, plaster flying, the dust like a Mojave sandstorm, legs flailing in some insane sign language.

Mignon was barking like crazy, completely unaware—as all small dogs are—of the weight discrepancy between her and what was coming through the drywall for her. Johanna seemed to be shouting, "Protect poor Mignon!" but maybe was just screaming incoherently and I knew her well enough to know what she meant.

The barking just made the claws more interested. A full yard of each leg was showing and the claws were grabbing air in Mignon's direction. Mignon's "direction" was unfortunately also Johanna's—since she was holding her.

My right eye was blind from plaster—a piece was stuck in my left nostril—Johanna and Mignon looked like ghosts from the dust—and an insane part of my brain (the one in all of us that loves denying we're in a crisis) was thinking: *Johanna is going to have a lot of sweeping to do...*

Then a voice shouted from the stairs, "I come! Do not abandon hope!"

And then—just as the owl fell through the ceiling and landed in all of its two-hundred-pound, clipped-wing, greasy-feather (if they *were* feathers—which I doubted) glory on the edge of Johanna's bed, three feet from my woman and her dog, its claws trying to gain purchase so that the creature might stabilize itself, rise, and grab at last what it wanted—Pham entered with the chickens.

He was wearing bright boxer shorts and nothing else, something I'd never have imagined a superior court judge from *any* country in; and he was walking toward the owl as if it were nothing more than a chunky gopher and he a seasoned pest control

technician from Santa Ana.

I remembered the camps Pham had been in, his escapes and re-captures, his wife's mysterious death, and his ability to detach from the world ("We have our bodies until we no longer need them, Mr. Michael—that is all that death is"), and Pham's bravery now seemed much less surprising than the jockey shorts, which I believe to this day had lotus blossoms on them, and which I know he did not purchase at Target, his favorite store.

"Get off the bed!" he shouted at Johanna.

My thought exactly, but Pham had another reason.

Johanna jumped off the bed, eyes glaring in mother-wolf mode at the great bird that may or may not have been a bird. As she did, the owl's weight tipped the little bed almost upright, and the owl slid off with a thunderous plop.

With the owl off the bed, the chickens—who had been milling around Pham till now and clucking with that increasingly annoying whine—could do their work.

They ran like any chicken runs, head down, legs like Roadrunner's in the cartoons, and, a hundred strong, they surrounded the creature in no time and began to make their circles-inside-circles.

The owl was standing now, seven feet tall, oily-looking even with a half inch of plaster dust on him, but, try as he might, he couldn't grab a chicken with a claw because when he tried, he lost his balance.

The chickens knew they had him. They were running so fast now that they looked liked rings of spinning engine oil. Their clucking had become the highest, loudest whine I'd ever heard, higher and louder even than the air-show jets I'd loved when I was a kid, when my dad took me to them.

All would have gone well—speeding chicken mandalas and a crescendoing whine that was obviously going to do something and soon—if Mignon hadn't decided, all twenty pounds of her, that she needed to protect us, chickens included. But I understood: The more things you have to protect, the more *important* you are, right, Mignon?

She shot like a fat bullet toward the creature, and at first I was sure she'd latched onto one of the claws. The claw was trying to get free of her—that's what it looked like—but then the claw had her. They say that a Labrador retriever can carry an egg in its mouth without breaking it. That's what this claw could do, but on a grander scale. It wasn't here to kill Mignon—only to take her away to one abandoned village or another, for a final ex-patriation to the stars decades or centuries down the road. . . .

The owl had her and knew it, and the short wings—there were four of them, not two—why do we not see these things at first?—had started flapping. Maybe not flapping, but moving up and down like the wings on those early flying-aircraft experiments—the ones that never quite took off but instead fell off cliffs or just tipped over.

The wings were gathering speed, up and down, and seemed to have their own sound—a thrumming. The bedroom looked like some government experiment gone awry ("You can't play with Mother Nature and not pay, Professor!") in a low-budget horror flick.

The owl was levitating. How this was possible, I had no idea, but I was sure the flapping of the wings—which had become a drumming blur—wasn't doing it, and the whine was.

Pham was shouting, "Chickens cannot finish with dog!" This made no sense, but I leaped forward, grabbed Mignon's back leg with my right hand, grabbed the long bird leg that was attached to her with my left, and felt the other claw—free in levitation now—hit me like a mace.

I held on, deathly afraid I'd pull Mignon apart if I didn't do more than just pull, so I did what any dog in his right mind would do: I bit the owl's leg.

I bit it hard as I could, tearing at its scaliness with my teeth as I knew Mignon

would if she could (I'd wanted to be a Doberman when I was five—I need to mention that), and Mignon was inspired. She began thrashing like a fury, and the more she thrashed the wilder I bit—and vice versa.

Was someone laughing somewhere in the room? I hoped not. I'd rather believe it was Pham shouting—which he was:

“Let the chickens finish!”

Somehow this made sense, and as the claw whose leg I was biting opened just enough—out of pain or mere annoyance—I pulled Mignon free, held onto her tight, and fell back onto the dusty floor, looking up just in time to see—and hear—the chickens do what they were there to do.

Their whine, even higher than the owl's, was peeling paint off the walls. Their counter-spinning circles were making a vortex of the plaster dust and pulling at our clothes, even Pham's boxers. The owl was caught in it.

All of a sudden the whine stopped. The chickens, too, stopped dead, as if their overly large feet were nailed to the old oak flooring.

The owl was gone.

The vortex had taken it.

I looked at Johanna and Johanna looked at me. Mignon struggled in my arms, offended now by the intimacy.

Pham was saying, “See? Easy. But must have circles, and if you want dog to remain, must remove dog. Chickens give good instructions.”

The chickens were wandering around the room just like chickens again, pecking at the plaster. To my left Johanna said:

“My hero. *Jaws*.”

“What did Pham say to you when I left?” Johanna asked.

We were standing in the yard, the flock of black shadows free-ranging for the strange feed—which Johanna had purchased from Pham's friend, too, and which was expensive—the kind of expense that, like the chickens themselves, two people should be sharing, not just one. The roofers were coming to fix the hole on Tuesday. In the meantime, Johanna would sleep on the sofa (she hated my house and so did I), and I'd take the floor. According to Pham—or the chickens in his head—that owl wasn't going to come back. Even with their wormhole-teleportation abilities (which, unlike the chickens', weren't innate and needed the technology left in a time capsule on their home planet by overly optimistic aliens millennia ago), it was pretty involved getting here, coming this far, jump after jump, and there was a chance he might not even, dumb as the owls were, remember the coordinates. He might also—without revealing embarrassing details of his failure—pass the word along to his comrades about which house on Almond Avenue to avoid.

“But now is not,” Pham had said to us before he left for his favorite Buddhist shrine in Brea, where he wished to give thanks for our victory, “the time for getting rid of your chickens. They have become fond of both of you. ‘Such courage!’ they say about you, Mr. Michael. Biting owl like that with your beak.”

I sighed. “He didn't say much, Johanna. When I complained *again* about the quality of our alien invaders, he asked me how *we* would do—and he meant all of us, human beings. And he's right: We can't even get off this planet, let alone invade another one. We can't even invade each other very well. . . .” I paused. “He was talking about human beings as a species, not specific countries. . . .”

“I know, Michael.”

I was thinking about how well the Hawaiian-shirt-wearing surfer-dopers I knew would do—joining up for “off-world” adventures for the surfing chance (“Can you be-

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lieve the breaks in that methane cove, Mark?”), but ending up too stoned for efficient invading.

I was stalling. “I can think of two guys I work with—surfer-housepainter-types—who’d forget why they were there. . . .”

“Speak for yourself, Michael.” She knew stalling when she heard it, and she knew mine well.

“I am. Speaking for myself, I mean. I’d be terrible at invasions, Johanna. But I’m also trying to tell you something. . . .”

“I figured.”

We stared at each other for a moment. Pham would be arriving in a couple of hours for the dinner we owed him for saving Mignon (and maybe every other pet and smaller elementary school student in the neighborhood).

“How about I start sweeping some?” I blurted. “In the house, I mean.”

“Right now?”

“Sure. Why not? Pham won’t arrive for a while, and there’s still a lot of plaster upstairs.”

“Just today?”

“No. Every day. I may have to move in to get it done.”

“Hmm.”

I was waiting for a smile, but she wasn’t buying it.

“And feeding the chickens?” she said. “And gathering up all those eggs? There are way too many already, and they taste terrible. But I’d feel bad throwing them away.”

I sighed. “Sure. Feeding. And eggs.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I mean it, Johanna.”

“And walk Mignon twice a day?”

Mignon and I’d had our special “moment,” but I had my self-respect.

“No,” I answered.

“Didn’t think so.” She paused. “Okay,” she said at last. “We’ll try it. And you’ll help me make dinner for Pham, of course.”

“If I can smoke a little first. Cookbooks make me nervous.”

“Of course. I like you stoned, Michael—sometimes anyway. . . .”

I knew which times she meant.

The way she was looking at me told me I’d won: *I’d taken her planet. I’d been the stealthy invader, and she didn’t mind.*

And then the chickens at my feet, clucking like Little Engines That Could, said to me—in a voice not unlike Pham’s:

The owls should recruit you, Mr. Michael.

And:

Miss Johanna may throw the eggs away. It is okay.

I jerked back, nearly stepping on one of them, but I was grinning.

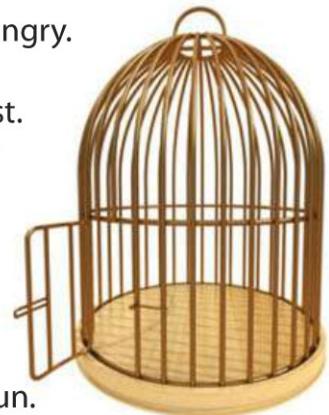
Hell, I was important now. O

—for Hieu Nguyen, bodhisattva

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Care and Feeding

"They may sulk," it said, "when first let out of the cage.
But if you throw the ball directly at their faces,
they'll catch it, never fear. And let them get a little hungry.
Then they'll go for the sugar lump on the string.
That's right; drag it across the floor, just a little too fast.
See? He's interested now. And let him have the sugar
after a while. The young ones are the most fun.
They like to run free; the cage constricts them.
Exercise them daily.



"Don't let them interact too much with each other.
Make them depend on you for companionship and fun.
Keep them healthy. Sugar is okay for a treat,
but give them mostly primate chow.
It has all the nutrients they need,
though some of them go on hunger strikes
out of sheer obstinacy. Then you might have to offer
maybe a piece of fruit or possibly a dead animal.
But don't spoil them.

"They do make pitiful noises, possibly mating calls.

I tried to teach one to talk awhile ago.

It had trouble with real speech sounds, but it was cute.

If you find that sort of thing cute. One of them hung itself awhile ago.
Bored, I think. That's their great weakness, boredom.p



"So we need to catch more, or breed them
or maybe offer a more stimulating environment.

I'd suggest chasing them across the plain
throwing rocks at them,

or maybe using them for laser target practice.

They always come back, with their wonderful sense of direction.

"Because after all, where would they go?
Their little blue planet is far away, and before we arrived,
they really never ventured beyond their moon."

—Mary A. Turzillo

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SCOUT

Bud Sparhawk

Bud Sparhawk is a Nebula-Award finalist and the author of nearly a hundred stories. Many of his tales were first published in *Analog*, but he has also appeared in numerous other magazines and anthologies. Bud is the author of one novel, *Vixen* (Cosmos 2008). His first story for *Asimov's*, "Bright Red Star" (March 2005), was about aliens so ruthless that we know virtually nothing about them other than the total destruction they wreak on human colonies. Bud's new tale is set in the same milieu and offers us a glimmer of insight into the merciless behavior of the implacable Shardies.

Captain Sandels came in during prep. "Falcon," he said, but softly, as if he didn't want to disturb the techs working on squeezing me into the bomb casing. I twittered our channel and winked: *Kind of busy right now. Something come up?*

"No," the captain responded, again so softly that I knew he definitely didn't want the techs to overhear. The only reason I could hear him was that my acoustic enhancements were so sensitive that I could hear a mouse fart from a klick away. "I just wanted to wish you luck."

For making it back? I answered. *Not likely.*

"That's brutal," he replied and I heard his pain. "I thought that, after all we..." I stopped him there. *I'm not Falcon; just a revised edition.*

"So it's just goodbye, then?"

Sure. I closed the channel before he could say anything else. What I didn't need was some damn puzzling reference to a history that no longer concerned me. Better not to dwell on the past. Given humanity's precarious state, sentiment was dangerous. Besides, I had to concentrate on my scouting mission. We had to learn more about the aliens on the planet below.

I shut everything but the maintenance channel as they began oozing the cushioning gel around me. Its plasticity enfolded me in a warm, soft embrace that crept into every crack and crevice, sealing me off from sight and sound and every sense save an assurance of my own humanity. My form might have been much reduced, to be sure, but nevertheless I retained my inherent humanity.

"We're closing the lid," the tech reported over the maintenance channel.

It was time for sleep. Landing would wake me up.

The idea behind the drop was dramatic and simple. Three attack cruisers would carpet bomb the area where the aliens landed. The drops consisted of ten burrowers, thirty sweepers, and twenty HE bombs from each ship, all distributed to randomly bracket the target. The third, eleventh, and nineteenth bomb of each pod were slow-fuse HE duds, except for the one that contained me.

I woke as soon as the bomb slammed into the ground on an oblique angle. I was not quite fully awake by the second bounce but fully aware as my container rolled down some piece of bumpy geography, stopped, and rocked for a moment before finding a stable orientation. I pushed up to pop the hatch and got out, dripping gel over the dented casing of the faux bomb.

I quickly scanned the area around me. Apparently I'd tumbled down a steep cliff to come to rest at the bottom among assorted rocks that had fallen from the eroding slope. I could feel the shock of exploding ordinance through my feet as the delay fuses fired. That told me that I'd landed near the center of the distribution.

My empty casing still packed a punch—enough to fool a casual inspection into thinking it was just another delayed bomb—and the clock was running. I moved away to put as much distance as I could between me and the bomb before it—WHAM—exploded and threw me tumbling ass over teakettle. Shit! The techs had set the fuse's timer too short. Well, nothing I could do about that now, but I check my systems to be certain and find that no harm was done. I am hyper-alert to my surroundings and take note of insect sounds, random wind action on the sparse vegetation, small animal movements, and the trembling ground beneath my feet to establish a baseline of whatever passed for "normal" on this planet. So far, everything agreed with the data the former colonists had provided.

Every ten meters I stop to feel the ground for approaching footfalls. I am continually sniffing the air for any unusual smell, listening for any sound, and watching for anything that might be artificial. At the same time I'm "listening" on every radio channel. All normal.

The ground ahead of me levels the further I get from my drop site, which makes movement easier, but means I have to dodge from rock to rock to remain hidden. Proceeding across open ground increases the certainty of detection.

I didn't expect to run into any aliens until I got closer to the town—about a dozen kilometers away from my current position, where we hoped the alien gleaners were still scouring the town. Their presence gave us an opportunity to find out what they were doing and learn how they behaved. From my scouting reports command might even be able to guess the why of their attacks.

Thus far the aliens hadn't held any colony after they wiped them clean and moved on.

Closer to my objective the terrain slowly changes from rock-strewn scrub to more ambitious bushes that later become a grove of spiky trees with upright branches and needle shaped leaves. They remind me of upside down Christmas trees. They are spaced widely enough that I have no problem wending my way through the grove.

I start to feel a slight vibration through my feet, like approaching footfalls. I hunker down with every sense alert. Is my camouflage sufficient? Will my coverings really prevent detection of any stray electronic emissions? Have I been detected and is this the search party?

There are two sets of vibrations that feel like a pair walking in step; bipedal for certain, I realize, as the steady pad-pad, pad-pad continues for seconds. Then, when I sense they are a few meters from my position, I feel another set of vibrations, more pronounced and faster: Thump, thump, thump! Then the other set resumes, but faster this time; pad-pad, pad-pad, thump, thump, pad-pad, pad-pad, thump and WHAM!

Silence.

I listen to the sounds of something tearing and feeding for a long time as a coppery smell wafts by me. When the feeding noises stop I hear something chirping contentedly and feel it pad-pad, pad-padding into the distance. Predator and prey, I think and, relieved, resume my progress, certain that the scavengers would soon be drawn

to the kill site. I'd best be far away when they arrive. Something would probably be interested in the disturbance and come to investigate.

It takes me hours to realize that I've drifted far right of my projected line of march. I look around to see another ridge about a kilometer away. I decide to transverse and get back on my original heading. I set off hopefully, every sense alert, as the stars appear overhead. I wonder which of them might be our ship before I recall that it is virtually undetectable. Then I wonder which of them might be the home that I barely remember.

The good news is that by morning's light I am within a few meters of a ridgeline from which I hope to finally spot my objective. The bad news is that there's a sheer, precipitous drop of nearly twenty meters to a jumble of shattered, sharp, and decidedly hard rocks ahead of me. There is no way I want to chance going down the cliff face, despite the ruggedness of my compact scouting form. I have to waste more of my precious time finding an easier route.

A few hours later, at midday, I find a spot where the cliff is less steep, but wait so night will hide my progress. On my second step I hit a loose boulder and tumble to fetch up against a huge tree at the bottom, none the worse for wear.

As soon as I right myself I sweep the area for odd sounds, smells, or sights and feel for any unusual vibrations. There's nothing abnormal so I continue moving forward, taking advantage of whatever cover I can find.

By nightfall I am close to the town. The dark of night on this moonless world is not a problem. The eyes the reconstruction doctors gave me are far superior to the ones I was born with. I can see up into the infrared and down to the near ultraviolet, which is many times the bandwidth of human vision. I'd lost my eyes, along with most of the skin on my face, an arm, and both legs during the evacuation of New Europa. That was an *almost* successful mission, but we still had a horrifying loss.

They told me I was the only survivor of a squad. The only one who thought it worth going through reconstruction to fight another day. The only one who wanted so badly to get back at the bastards who did this to me, to my squad, to my family, and to my . . . The name evades me, which means it was among the many memories excised during reconstruction.

That's the drawback of being rebuilt; the loss of memories. Operating the many sensory enhancements requires so much processing that there isn't room for much else in my brain. I recalled a little, but not much. There were a few warm childhood memories that anchored my humanity, a burning hatred of the aliens for all they've done to our colonies, and the skills I'd acquired from basic training and three years of combat. All the rest, a lifetime of memories, had been washed away like sand castles on the beach.

There were compensations, however. The doctors turned me into the best, most technologically advanced scout in the universe, a form that might let me survive long enough to learn more about our enemies. Hopefully, some facts about how to kill them.

The forest consists mainly of the spiked trees that reminded me of Christmas when I was a kid; a bright memory of wrapped presents, warm fireplaces, and cheerful people bustling about as they cooked far too much food. I recalled with absolute clarity the rich smells of puddings and meats, the stinging aroma of pickled fruits and malty beverages as I played among their feet with my new puppy.

I remember the sounds and smells of guests, even though their faces and names slip by. There were aunts, uncles, and cousins. Each group opening the front door to the wind and making mother's little glass centerpiece jingle as they shout warm greetings. Coats would be flung, shoulders hugged, and warm wet kisses bestowed on every exposed cheek. Chaos would reign, entropy decreasing exponentially with each addition

until suddenly, at some point, order would emerge as everyone found their place, the food would appear, and the pleasant hum of conversation would fill the room.

The Christmas memory was sharp, like every other memory in my much-reduced mind. I couldn't remember whatever happened to the puppy or even my poorly remembered family. Were they still celebrating Christmas or had they been evacuated? Maybe they'd been wiped out by the aliens, or worse. Whatever their fates, they were memories lost and that worried me more than remembering, or so I hoped.

Aside from those clear holiday memories I recall nothing of my former life, former body, or even my former lovers. Is that who Captain Sandels had been?

I estimate that five kilometers remain to be traversed.

I sense the vibrations long before I hear faint sounds of approaching movement. It isn't the same rhythm as the animal I'd run into earlier. This is more of a three part tempo; pad-pad-pad, pad-pad-pad. I mask myself in adaptive camouflage and try to become one with the forest.

At the limit of my hearing there are faint sounds of broken glass that get louder as whatever it is continues to advance. Pad-pad-pad, pad-pad-pad. I don't have to wait for long before the heat signature of a three-legged monster emerges from the relatively cool forest's background.

The alien is easily four meters tall and twice that in circumference. There is one fore leg and two behind that move sequentially. The center of its body flares hotter than the extremities and I notice a halo of some sort around it. As I move across the spectrum from infrared into the near ultraviolet its shroud glows an almost fluorescent blue. This could be an alien in a suit or some sort of robot. Hell, for all I know it could be a vehicle, but that's for Command to figure out later when they analyze the data I'm recording.

The broken glass sounds are more evident as it passes. I can't smell any sort of odor at its closest approach, nor any residue as it disappears into the woods on my left.

As I wait for the pad-pad-pad, pad-pad-pad to recede into the distance I encapsulate the data and bury a timed transmitter, one of several I carry, and smooth the dirt to make its presence undetectable. The little capsule will fire its scheduled burst when, hopefully, the ship will listening.

That is, if it hasn't been detected and destroyed.

Sandels swore as a bright point of light appeared near the rim of the planet. "Could be a ship," the navigator remarked. "Want me to ping?"

"No. Just use optical. We don't want to use any active systems like radar."

The image was fuzzy at first but clarified quickly as the ship passed between them and the dark planet below. There seemed to be little symmetry to the object and from the way it flashed and glittered, it had numerous reflective surfaces. Points projected in odd directions, disappearing from view as the ship rotated on an inclined axis.

"It matches all the descriptions," the navigator remarked. "Definitely a Shard."

The captain had to agree. "Shards" was the way the first observers had described them and the word stuck. The Shardies had attacked the Jeaux colony without warning, destroying everything: ships, orbiting stations, ground-based settlements—anything that wasn't of natural origin. Only a single ship escaped, which the aliens were able to follow and that put every human colony at risk.

No one understood why they attacked with such ferocity. There had been no prior attempts at contact, nor any response to human signals. Nor could anyone figure out what sort of aliens drove their strange ships. The fragments gathered after the few successful battles were nothing but dirty glass—no metals, no organics, nothing that usually indicated technology among the wreckage.

Falcon's scouting mission was an attempt to learn more about this implacable enemy, of these creatures who seemed hell-bent on destroying all traces of humanity. Unless humans learned what they faced, Sandels thought, and hopefully how to defeat them, the human race faced eventual extinction. Fighting was the only alternative.

It was clear that there would be no other choice.

"It looks like it's descending, sir."

Sandels looked again. "Are you sure it didn't just go around the planet?"

"No; it definitely went into the atmosphere. It's moving across the big ocean now. There!"

Sandels checked the time. "Our target's coming up." Down below, the edge of sunlight was racing across the surface. Soon dawn would strike the area where the aliens had landed and put the ship in line with the scout's narrow-band transmissions.

"Listening window open," the comm tech looked up from his console. "Nothing yet, sir."

"Keep listening," Sandels said. "It's been nearly forty-five hours since the drop. We should hear one of the transmitters peep soon."

"Maybe the unit didn't survive the drop."

"Don't refer to Falcon as a damned 'unit,' kid. There's a marine down there; a damn fine one at that. I know Falcon will finish the mission. A marine that tough isn't built to fail."

The tech tried to stifle a giggle at the word "built," but recovered quickly when he saw the captain's darkening frown. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't ever, ever say that again," Sandels growled. But in all honesty, Falcon, or what remained of Falcon after that intense fire, really was an "it"; the built thing the doctors had resurrected from the shredded and fried stub of what Falcon had been just three short years before.

Sandels' mind went back to that fateful morning; the stinging smell of ordnance, the screams of the colonists as they were herded onto the evacuation craft, the cracks of sound as the hypersonic rocks of the aliens' attack split the skies. When some of the weaker members of the squad were moving too slowly, Falcon and four others had raced back to help. This was the last load that would make it to orbit; the others would . . . Sandels didn't want to think about that. War made people do ugly things, but that ugliness was nothing compared to what awaited those who fell into the aliens' hands, or tentacles, or whatever the hell they used.

Then there was an explosion and bodies were flying in ten directions. A fire raged where the squad had been and there were no more slow colonists. Sandels saw half of Thomas, what looked like Ting's head, and Posies' bare ass with little else of her remaining, spread out in a fan pattern. Falcon was the only one that looked reasonably intact but was a human torch, writhing on the ground. Only after they'd quickly rolled the flaming hulk to extinguish the flames did Sandels realize how much of Falcon had been lost. There was still a faint heartbeat and he could hear the raspy wheeze of tortured breathing.

"Medic!" he'd barely screamed as someone rushed up with four "Save-my-ass" bags and a rescue pack. They took one look at the carnage and threw three of them away. They stuffed what was left of Falcon inside the remaining bag and hit the quick-freeze tab. Sandels threw the bag over his shoulder and rushed for the final evacuation ship. Falcon had weighed sixty-five kilos but the bag only held a quarter of that weight. He just hoped enough remained alive until they reached the fleet's hospital.

It had been touch and go, first keeping Falcon's heart going, the brain functioning, and the lungs pumping air. After ensuring that those continued, they worked on kidneys, bladder, and liver. There was little of the skin that hadn't been turned into a

crispy crust, or of the muscles and ligaments that held Falcon together. Only after taking care of those things did they start working on the nervous system. Falcon might have been screaming in pain the whole time, but nobody heard because most of the lower face was gone and the exposed vocal chords were charred nubs.

Falcon had spent nine months in reconstruction, the first three recovering enough to communicate, two more coming to terms with what Command offered, and another four learning a new purpose and destiny.

Everybody hated what reconstruction offered surviving marines, but the exigencies of the war left humanity few options to create what was needed. Ethics, or at least what remained of medical ethics, prevented the doctors from turning healthy marines into tools, even though the military need for superior warriors was so great. The technology to create super soldiers was available, as were hundreds of barely alive potential donors, each of whom was offered an opportunity to serve, each of whom was informed of the consequences. There was no ethical problem converting those who made a clear and informed decision and Falcon chose not to be a crippled hero.

Falcon chose not to die.

"The ship hasn't reappeared," navigation reported. "I think we can assume that it landed somewhere."

Sandels hoped the "somewhere" wasn't where Falcon was heading. Yet, if it was, there would be even more data than they expected; provided Falcon survived long enough, that is.

I encounter no more aliens as I edge closer to Ettiré, where the Shards have landed. A little bit ago a four-legged predator sniffed me, chewed on an edge of my shell, and then trotted away disappointed that I wasn't as tasty as its usual menu. My scouting shape's not optimal for rapid travel, but ideal cover for a human scout—that is, if you consider a ten kilo turtle as human.

The edge of the flood plain, where the settlers' had cleared open fields for their farms, lay before me. The land slopes down toward the town of Ettiré and, beyond that, the sea. Ettiré had been a decent sized place, five or six hundred thousand strong with a flourishing sea trade up and down the coast. Of Ettiré there are only a few ruined brick buildings poking up amidst the rubble.

There are icebergs, or a close approximation, that look to be half a kilometer away. They have to be ships so I record them, trying to capture every detail in high resolution despite the shimmering of the atmosphere from the heat rising from the sun-warmed fields. After a moment's reflection I realize that there's far more heat than a sun-baked field could produce—at least twenty degrees above ambient, I estimate. When I switch to infrared vision I see the entire landscape ablaze in lurid colors, cooler further from the center of town but increasingly warmer toward the middle. The ships also look fiery hot. I bury my second data packet—there's less delay on this one due to the excessive time it took to get here.

There's a shallow drainage ditch nearby that I could use for concealment to get closer and discover why the town is so hot. I've barely begun to move when a large form lurches out of a ship. It's a machine, I think, and hotter than the ships.

The machine has two sets of tractors on either side that have big pneumatic tires. I spot some smaller things beside it and all of a sudden the scale becomes clear. Those smaller things are the three-legged objects I spotted earlier; which means that those ships are a lot further than half a klick away. I have to get closer.

The drainage ditch is scarcely a quarter of a meter deep. It's shallow, but deep enough to hide me. The dirt is so soft that I have to carefully erase any traces of my

passage with my rear legs as I creep downhill. There is enough debris in the ditch to allow my camouflage to blend in and make me look like just another rock.

The pad-pad-pad vibrations start again. Nearby. This time I decide to lie doggo; shutting off everything to go dormant. I want to chance nothing that might let them know a human is here.

My hatred for the Shardies runs deep, and not just because they've attacked without provocation, because they destroy everything humanity has built, or because they are slowly and implacably driving us off our colony worlds as they move toward the Earth. No, that would only be the normal "they're not us" type of hatred, what we used to feel for one another before the Enlightening, the kind of hatred you feel for your brother, knowing that some time in the future you will once again be friends. Not that kind of hatred at all.

We captured one of their ships at Outreach, a hybrid ship as it turned out, and found out what happened to the humans they'd captured and the reason they had been so successful in every encounter. Initially our battles with them were pretty straightforward; they'd attack directly and seemingly indifferent to their losses. Then, over the course of time it seemed that they learned how we would act. Suddenly their ships started behaving like humans, only faster and with greater purpose. Somehow they had gained insights into our very thought patterns.

The captured ship answered the question of how they'd changed so quickly and why they were now so successful.

There were sixteen humans on the ship, or what once were humans. They'd been edited to slugs lacking arms, legs, and most of their organs. Fluids were pumped into brains from which hundreds of glass fibers protruded and extended into the ship's walls. Scans indicated that what remained of the people were still conscious. If they'd had throats and lungs they'd be screaming in pain.

The medics did the only humane thing.

Command quickly came to the conclusion that the aliens were somehow using those sixteen minds to understand human thought patterns—not any knowledge, but accessing the patterns and behaviors wired into each of us from birth, the very things that make us human. The horror was that they stripped those people of their humanity and used them to betray their own race.

It was vile, offensive, and so horrifying that Command went to lengths to prevent any more humans being captured and used. Command went to any length to keep any more people from becoming the meat components of some war machine. Any and all lengths.

My hatred is the burning, visceral presence that fuels my mission.

At daybreak I make a tentative sensory scan of the immediate area. The normality of smells and sounds reassures me. Better, I cannot feel any vibrations that would tell me the three legged monsters are nearby. From further away I sense the heavy rumble of movement. I slowly peer above the rim of the furrow.

The treaded machine was approaching one of the buildings, rolling over the rubble and dirt instead of detouring around them and avoiding the occasional shining, too-hot patches scattered throughout the area.

Its companion tripods scatter in pairs, triplets, or singly and do Gods-know-what. They too are careful to avoid walking into the sparkling patches. I watch for a long while as they move about, understand nothing, and record everything.

The big machine finally reaches one of the remaining buildings and disgorges a flowing carpet that sparkles in the sunlight like a million diamonds. I crank up the acoustic enhancement and hear the tinkling of glass, as if someone were slowly

shaking an intricate chandelier, making each delicate crystal strike another. There is a musical quality to it and a certain repetitive rhythm much like the ebb and flow of waves washing against a shell beach whose outlines I vaguely recall.

The carpet flows toward the building and up its walls, covering it so completely that it becomes a shining tower that radiates like a small sun has been brought to ground. The glare is so intense that it blinds my infrared vision. I filter vision and watch as the building starts to melt like a wax candle. The upper levels become nearly transparent and then collapse inward. The cascading diamonds sparkle across the entire spectrum as they fall into the remaining mass. The dissolution continues, a sight both beautiful and horrifying for the four hours it takes the building to disappear.

As the carpet enters the machine I look for any trace of rubble, but not a single block of concrete or stray steel beam can be seen in the pile of fine sand they've left behind. After the last of the carpet enters the machine it moves slowly toward the next standing building and repeats the process. In the distance, I observe similar operations, all of which I record in a data capsule/transmitter and bury in the wall of the ditch.

Six hours and several hundred meters later I finally reach the town's outskirts and a pile of fine sand, which might once have been a building. The pile is soft and flocculent so I have little difficulty burrowing into its heart and tasting of its composition. The results are surprising; the samples contain nothing but silicates. Even if this building had been a barn there should have been some trace of metals or carbon in the residue. What the hell did those things do when they ate a building? I need more data, so I move on.

The next heap I taste is composed of the same ingredients, or should I say *ingredient*; nothing but sand, finer sand, and microscopic bits of sand. The aliens had definitely been extracting or consuming everything and leaving nothing but grains of silicon behind.

As I start to dig out I detect multiple vibrations but cannot determine their direction. I listen, trying to hear something through the dense insulating sand surrounding me. I feel a rumbling and all the sand around me starts shaking and settling as the rumble goes on and on, getting more pronounced by the moment, and I realize that something very large and heavy is coming toward me.

I pull in my limbs, tuck my head inside, and damp everything before dropping into sleep. I hope I will wake, but now that the data is ready for transmission that's not important.

"Coming up on fifty hours," the comm tech announced as the crew gathered around him. Their clustering was more for psychological need than physically necessary. All that would happen at the mark would be that a little diode might change from red to green, quickly flash amber, and then return to red. There was no need for twiddling dials, no anxious straining to catch a whisper of sense among the static, nor would there be numbers scrolling across a screen, and no clatter of printers or hum of image transmission.

What the winking light signified was the inquiry-response, acknowledgement, sign, confirmation, and redundant transmission of a coded stream in both directions to ensure that the message had been received with zero sum errors—all of which took place as the light blinked red-green-amber-red. In that same interval, processors within the ship reviewed the data, expanded the compressed string into a long chain by raising the first number to the exponent of the second, deciphering the resulting string into its appropriate prime factors, and translating those into sounds, images, and filling twelve sensory channels with data.

The resulting packet, suitably enhanced and encrypted, was transmitted instantly, along with the brief, original feed, to ships hovering undetectably near the star's corona, one of which, the instant a message was received, would wink to friendly skies.

"Thirty seconds," the tech whispered as all eyes focused and each mind strained to will the light to change, to wink, to show that all of the lives, all of the resources, all the effort it had taken to place a single scout within enemy lines had been worth it.

Captain Sandels was more worried than the others. So much could have gone wrong. What if the impact of the drop had destroyed their scout? What if the bomb had gone off prematurely? What if the Shardies had realized the ruse and reacted or if Falcon had been crippled and unable to reach the objective, or maybe got lost in the wilderness, fallen into a stream, dropped off a cliff, been buried under a slide, or, for God's sake, become trapped? What if the life support batteries had been damaged before Falcon had planted a single transmitter? What if, what if, what if? There were too many variables. There was too much left to chance.

Why wasn't the light blinking, for God's sake?

"Mark," the tech said quietly.

I wake and hope that means I'm safe, at least for the moment. I feel for any vibration and, aside from a slight shift of sand against sand, detect nothing that varies from my baseline.

Very carefully I begin making my way through the sand pile, hoping the while that my ever-so-careful digging will not disturb the pile's surface and alert the aliens. Eventually I am able to detect the sound of shifting sand as the pile asserts its angle of repose and know I'm close to the surface. I poke an eye through the last few millimeters of concealing sand and behold wonder.

A carpet of crystals covers the ground in every direction, sparkling and glistening in the bright sunlight. More wondrous yet is that they flow like a glass river that reflects rainbows. And in the middle of the river marches the tripod things that avoid stepping on even a single shard. There is continual tinkling, clinking as the multiple crystals touch one another. It sounds like a symphony of crazed xylophones.

I look at the nearest edge to see how the tripods are pushing them along and realize with a shock that they appear to be mere escorts. Each tiny crystal is following its own path, but maintaining its place in the flow. I can't see any means of locomotion; no legs, wings, or any sort of appendages. Whatever propels them is hidden from me.

There is a cement block ahead of the flowing carpet, no doubt tumbled from one of the destroyed buildings. I watch as the gem-crested waves wash over the block and, as the carpet continues, see that the hump diminishes until it finally disappears. When the trailing edge moves on I see that nothing remains but residual heat.

When I could no longer feel the rumble of the heavy machines nor the pad-pad-pad of its tripodal companions I emerged from the pile. I had to find out more of what was happening.

I am scuttling between piles when I feel a wave of intense heat from an immense iceberg floating above me. It has so many jagged shards and planes that I can't make sense of its shape. Worse, I can't capture its entirety in a single frame and have to pan along the longest dimension. Even that doesn't allow me to record it all, so I resort to a distorting fisheye view, which seems to bring it closer. Only it doesn't "seem." The ship is descending, coming down on top of me!

I panic and race forward, unconcerned with detection in my headlong race to avoid being crushed. The heat radiating from the iceberg's underside intensifies. I look around for something that might insulate me from its flaming touch, but there is nothing in sight. My legs pump as fast as they can, draining my batteries at a prodigious rate. I wonder if I can just get safely beyond the nearest edge of the descending ship.

Escape is another twelve meters away, then ten, eight, and almost six when I feel it touch my back. The pressure intensifies as I hunker lower, hoping that will help. I manage to struggle forward, but it is increasingly difficult with all the weight bearing down on me.

Only three meters to go. My legs dig deep furrows in the dirt, leaving scars behind that I no longer bother to erase. Two, then one meter remains, but the ground is too hard. The heat intensifies, almost more than I can bear. I can barely move, but if I don't I'll be baked and crushed.

I throw all caution to the wind and dig, dig, dig furiously, throwing masses of dirt behind and to the sides with abandon to escape the pressure and heat. But my back leg becomes trapped by a sharp protrusion that slices it away. I try to ignore the intense pain as I stagger toward the forest's edge while praying that the iceberg's huge bulk will shield my flight.

The cool woods offer a brief respite. I detect no pursuit. I am safe for the moment. I have to shut down and let my autonomic systems restore what they can.

I move sluggishly as I wake. My leg no longer hurts, but I am sure my body's stolen sparse resources for repairs. Moving on three legs is difficult and makes me tend to the right. I envy the easy pad-pad-pad rhythm of the tripods. Would that my own staggering was as graceful.

The big ship was hovering and then, as I watch disbelievingly, lifted. There is no sound, no sign of exhaust, no scattering of electronic noise as it accelerates, dwindling in seconds to a shining mote in the heavens, no larger than a firefly above the summer beach. I lose it in the sunlight and then see it flare brilliantly and disappear. Had it activated some sort of drive or had the flare been merely a trick of sunlight reflecting off of its flat planes? Not for me to say. My role was to scout and report. Indications are that I had been dormant for a couple of days. All of my buried reports would have been transmitted and those bursts might have alerted the Shards that there was someone watching. Odds are that they'd have a search party already sweeping the area. I had no doubt that they'd eventually discover the ruse, find my transmitters, and determine my line of march. My careful scrubbing of traces would not hold for long and there would be no doubt of my destination. Once they reached the outskirts of Ettiré they'd find the churned ground of my desperation and, inevitably, the souvenir I'd left behind.

So, with little time remaining before they arrived I have to collect as much additional information as possible. I check my batteries to see how close I am to the necessary reserve that I need to transmit my final findings. There is enough power remaining to propel myself, but not enough for all the enhancements. I can do without the useless radio scanning and shut it down. I pare myself to survival essentials only—motive power, vision, and hearing—the same senses that have served scouts for millennia.

There are none of the tripodal creatures in sight, so I assume that their absence gives me time to get down the slope and maybe analyze one of those strange diamonds before they reach me. I'm certain that knowing more about them will provide vital insights to Command.

The huge ship has left a vast depression that encompasses this field and those on either side. I see pits where the projections had pierced the ground, hummocks where some less sharp protuberance had rested, and long gouges on the slight rises. None of these impede me as I stagger on three legs toward the nearest edge of a glittering carpet.

My first diamond lies within a few hundred meters, a smooth crystalline gem resting in a glassy divot. When I view the interior in the ultraviolet bands I discover frac-

ture planes and splinters of fibers. In infrared there's a slight heat source near the center. I can see no appendages as I record every aspect before I attempt a sample.

The mere touch of the crystal's surface makes it flare a brilliant orange. Instantly I feel the pad-pad-pad of racing feet and see a dozen tripods emerge from the forest's edge. Closer even than that I hear the shattering of a million dishes as the nearby carpet changes course to flow in my direction.

I estimate the time for the tripods to reach me, subtract the charging time for my transmitter, and realize that only by diverting all the power can I be assured that the data will be sent. I begin the transmission and start shutting down to let the darkness take me. The pad-pad-pad vibrations disappear, the smells of fresh earth fade away, my vision narrows to a single bright dot, and I can feel my memories, my thoughts, my very self slipping into dark night.

I feel a sense of intense satisfaction as the transmission is completed and the dot of light fades completely. Only seconds remain when I hear the tinkling of mother's crystal centerpiece as the warmth of Christmas aunts, uncles, and cousins embraces me.

"The unit's terminated itself," the comm tech reported. "Ten millisecond, high power burst."

"I told you that they're not Goddamned units," Sandels swore, but he knew that what had died alone down below was only a fragment of the happy, smiling person he'd known all too briefly. The man he remembered was gone forever, too long for tears; another victim of an ugly war. He'd just have to live with that.

"Prepare the next scout," he ordered, knowing what he'd have to do and say. "We're dropping another string in four hours. Let's hope this one lasts longer."

Falcon was glad when Sandels left. What he didn't need now was some damn puzzling reference to a history that no longer concerned him. He tried to think of something besides the mission as the techs squeezed the warm gel around his body to protect him against what was sure to be a violent landing in his faux bomb. There was nothing else to do so he tried to recall a few memories of his former life, warm memories for the most part, Christmas memories of family and a new puppy that kept him human instead of a cog in some Shardie machine. ○

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

Our July issue features three powerful novelettes. **Felicity Shoulders'** exciting tale of peril and adventure on a distant planet will have you holding your breath wondering who will emerge with their sanity intact after a "Long Night on Redrock"; as technology becomes more complex, growing up won't get any easier, but **Megan Lindholm's** bittersweet "Old Paint" reveals why certain milestones on the road to adulthood will remain unchanged; and **Allen M. Steele** shows us that if you're unhappy living on Earth, as long as you have enough money, you can still be "Alive and Well, A Long Way from Anywhere."

ALSO IN JULY

We've crammed the rest of the issue full of ingenius short stories. **Robert Reed** revisits a chilling encounter with "The Girl in the Park"; **Michael Blumlein** charms us with "Bird Walks in New England"; **Benjamin Crowell** examines why excessive genetic engineering is going to need a "Kill Switch"; and **Steven Utley's** irresponsible time travelers could lead to our ultimate undoing if they neglect to "Zip"!

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's July Reflections takes a look at "Life in the Future" and we'll have **Peter Heck's** pithy On Books column; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our July issue on sale at newsstands on May 8, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com*'s Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com*'s eReader and from *Zinio.com*!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Robert Reed, Bruce McAllister, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Kit Reed, Matthew Johnson, Ekaterina Sedia, Will Ludwigsen, Aliette de Bodard, James Van Pelt, Indrapramit Das, Ted Reynolds, Chris Willrich, Jason Sanford, Theodora Goss, Gord Sellar, Ian Creasey**, and many others!

POSSIBLE MONSTERS

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh is a Hugo Award winner and Nebula finalist whose short stories have appeared in *Asimov's* (where he won the 2010 Reader's Award for short story), *Strange Horizons*, *Interzone*, *Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*, and other venues. His first novel, *Soft Apocalypse*, was released in 2011 from Night Shade Books, and his second novel, *Hitchers*, was released in February of this year. A novel based on his Hugo Award winning short story "Bridesicle" is in the works, to be published by Orbit Books. Will is a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University; in 2008 he became the father of twins. In his poignant new tale, a man's encounter with a strange alien leads to a bittersweet look at the roads taken and not and a gradual appreciation for the creature's mystifying gift.

Mailboxes whooshed by in the warm night air. Cooper was tempted to stick his hand out the window, to feel the pressure of the wind on his palm, to feel *something*, but he didn't trust himself with only one hand on the wheel. Not after four beers. What he didn't need right now was to plow into a parked car.

This whole stupid all-night drive could have been avoided if the night clerk in that rickety hotel hadn't asked what he did for a living. For the briefest instant he'd swelled with pride and opened his mouth to say he was a baseball player—a pitcher. Triple-A, going to be in the majors some day. Then he remembered he wasn't any more. Palm-to-forehead, buddy—you just threw in the towel, finally admitted to yourself that you weren't good enough. That's why you're checking into a hotel halfway between Zebulon, North Carolina, and home.

Cooper yawned hard. Now that the fifteen-hour drive was over and he was two minutes from his parents' house (*his* house now, he reminded himself) he was past sleepy, into that hyper-alert headache state.

He passed his old high school, his skin crawling as the sight fired off unwanted memories. They'd be all over town, his ex-classmates who hadn't escaped this place, working in the auto repair shop where he'd bring the aging Mercedes he'd bought with some of his signing bonus, managing the diner where he'd choke down breakfast once the sun rose, and piled ass-deep at the Moviemail distribution center, the big employer in town for high school graduates who had no marketable skills, but

could put things into alphabetical order. Julie, his ex-girlfriend, was out there somewhere as well, ready to gloat at his failure and humbling return.

Cooper pulled into his driveway, washing the house in white light. It had only been, what, eight months since he'd last seen it? Two weeks spent going through his father's stuff, deciding what should go to the Salvation Army, what went in the estate sale, what he should keep. Good times. About as much fun as he was having now, pulling into his new old home.

As he pulled up to the garage he saw that it was damaged. The wood was bulging and splintered, like someone had plowed into it in a few different spots. Cooper pulled closer, cursing and squinting as his headlights flooded the little space. "What the hell?" Something squeezed out of the splits in the wall. It looked like glass, or ice.

He turned off the engine, got out, and took a closer look. Cursing, he ran his finger along a split. He was afraid to go inside. It looked like something had exploded in there, and he couldn't afford major repairs. Heart hammering, he went to the side door, tried to put the key in the lock, but his hand shook so badly he had to steady it with the other. Yeah, highly coordinated professional athlete. He flipped on the light and turned toward the living room.

"Jesus."

It took him a moment to make sense of it, his heart a wild animal in his chest. A third of the living room was encased in rough, glassy stuff.

Then he realized there was something inside it. It was a tangle of barbs and bubbles and edges, leaned up against his fireplace, which was on the other side of the glass divide. The thing's eyes locked on him. It had eight or nine of them, and they looked like they were a million years old.

There was a ragged hole in the floor in front of the fireplace. The floor was concrete under the carpet, and shouldn't be able to look peeled-up, like plastic wrap someone had poked a finger through, but that's what it looked like. When he looked inside the hole he got dizzy and nauseous. His eyes seemed unable to make sense of what they were seeing in there.

Struggling not to piss in his pants, Cooper ran.

He was in his car, backing down the driveway with no memory of getting in the car or starting it. His cell phone was in his hand. He dialed 911.

"There's something in my house," Cooper said when the 911 operator came on. "I don't know what it is, but it's made like a nest in there—"

"I'm sorry," the operator interrupted. "That's not a 911 emergency. You'll need to contact an exterminator."

Cooper laughed harshly, hysterically. "No exterminator wants anything to do with this thing. It's huge. Bigger than a person. I don't know *what* it is." His lips felt numb.

"Do you mean, like a bear?"

"It's not a bear. It's—I don't know—it's a monster, with all these eyes."

After a pause, the operator said, "Can you give me your name?" The way she said it cleared Cooper's head a little. She was going to send the police to pick *him* up, for psychiatric evaluation.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, and disconnected. He needed to think this through. He needed a *place* to think this through, as slowly and calmly as possible. A hotel, maybe. Which meant he would be sleeping in a hotel after all.

Was there anyone in town he could call? His close friends had all moved away, gone off to college and started lives in Boston, Chicago, Jacksonville. A few of the guys he used to collect baseball cards with were still here. Shug. Stephen. A few of his high school teammates. His ex-girlfriend Julie. He guffawed at the thought of calling Julie and asking if he could crash at her place. *Yeah, there's something in my house. Can I sleep on your couch?*

What the hell *was* that thing? It was like a giant sponge with broken glass and barbed wire tangled in it. With eyes. He pulled into a strip mall parking lot and called Shug.

Shug laughed when Cooper told him there was a monster in his house, but when he asked if he could crash, Shug said, "Sure man, come on over."

Shug frowned mightily at Cooper. "Are you sure about what you saw in there?"

Cooper felt like he was falling into a black pit. The one thing he had was the house. He sighed, dragged his hands down his oily face. He needed a shower. "Yeah, I'm sure. You want to see for yourself?" Cooper could unlock the door for Shug and wait outside.

Shug leaped up and grabbed his hat. "Let's go." He looked like a kid on Christmas morning, waiting to go downstairs and see what Santa brought him. He didn't seem to understand that Santa had brought a nightmare.

They talked baseball cards on the drive over in Shug's old Chrysler New Yorker, how professional grading had ruined the fun. Shug talked about cards, anyway. Cooper grunted occasionally while his palms sweated.

Shug whistled as they pulled into the driveway. "God damn. That's a mess."

"Wait till you see the inside." Cooper was beginning to doubt what he'd seen earlier. Was it just some sort of big animal? A big possum or beaver that built strange nests or something? He prepared himself for the possibility that he was going to feel very stupid when Shug got a look at it. Still, when Cooper unlocked the door he didn't go in. He just pushed it open and waved Shug in. Shug waggled his eyebrows and stepped inside.

Shug shrieked. A second later he flew past Cooper on his way to the car. Cooper jogged after him, afraid Shug would strand him there.

Cooper wasn't sure what to do. Should he call the FBI? The army?

"Don't call the law," Shug said, shaking his narrow head emphatically. "When they see what's inside they'll run yellow *Police Line, Do Not Cross* tape around your house, then the feds will come, and they'll confiscate your house and you'll be fucked."

He suspected Shug was right; as soon as the authorities saw it they would cordon off his house and Cooper would have no say in what happened after that.

"It's got to be worth something to someone. Worth a lot, maybe. Millions." Shug was on his sixth beer. His hand was still shaking.

Selling it would solve two problems, because whoever bought it would have to catch it and haul it away, leaving him with money to repair his house and maybe live comfortably for a while.

"You can't tell anyone else about this," Shug said, eyeing Cooper over his beer. "Word'll spread until it's out of your control and the jackboots come and kick in your door."

Cooper nodded.

"I'll help you figure it out." He motioned toward the door with his chin. "Let's go look at it again."

Cooper gawked at Shug like he'd just suggested they drive off the Menands Bridge.

"I'm serious. I barely saw it last time. This time I'm prepared." Shug lifted his beer, drained what was left in one long pull. "Come on."

Cooper turned the car around.

"So besides selling this thing, what are your plans, now that the baseball thing isn't working out?"

"I have no idea," Cooper said. "I don't really want to think about it."

"You should come work at Moviemail," Shug said, clapping Cooper's shoulder. "We have a pretty good time there." He tilted his head. "I'm buddies with Angela in HR. Put in an application and you'll have a job in a couple of days."

Was that what it had come to? Sticking DVDs in little red sleeves instead of pitching to Albert Pujols? Cooper needed money, and he probably couldn't wait to see if he could cash in on his monster. "Maybe I will. At least to pay the bills until I figure out what I want to be when I grow up."

"Hey," Shug said. "You can get in on the lottery pool. We all kick in twenty a week. There are twenty, twenty-five people in it, so we buy like five hundred tickets and we'll split the pot when we win." Shug held out his palm. "Give me twenty and I'll cut you in this week."

Cooper shook his head, exasperated. "I don't have twenty bucks to throw away right now."

Shug dropped his hand. "Okay, fine. Don't get all pissy." He pulled into Cooper's driveway, cut the headlights, and hopped out of the car like the seat was red hot.

"I'm kind of scared," Shug admitted as they headed toward the carport door, Shug clutching another sixpack.

Scared as he was, Cooper wanted to see it again as well. Already the specifics of it were dimming in his memory. With a soft curse he followed Shug inside.

It didn't look any better the second time. It was eating something oily and black, or at least pushing it into a hole underneath the wide part that held all the eyes. It watched them as it ate. One of the eyes disappeared for a moment, then reappeared.

"Something like that just shouldn't be," Shug almost whispered. "There's nothing like that." He gestured toward the thing with the beer he'd just opened. "It's like an alien, but there's no ship."

"Maybe what it's in is the ship," Cooper said.

They watched it for hours. Cooper drank steadily until his fear was replaced by numb shock. He sat against the wall taking big huffing drunk-breaths and stared at the thing while it stared back.

He woke on the floor, alone except for the monster behind the glass. There was a note on his chest from Shug saying he'd gone to work. The monster was circling the perimeter of its lair, walking on five squat legs that Cooper hadn't noticed before, looking like a grizzly at the zoo. Cooper's head was pounding, and he felt nauseous. The sight of the thing wasn't helping his headache, so he slipped outside.

He needed to call someone to come over and look at this thing, see if he really could sell it. He wasn't sure who might want to buy it. A zoo? Maybe Barnum and Bailey's Circus? He could imagine how those calls would go. What he probably needed to start with was a lawyer.

Standing in his parents' yard, there was nothing he could think to do but drive over and speak to Kenny Stone, a lawyer who was the father of one of his high school friends. So that's what he decided to do.

On the way he stopped at the Moviemail distribution center and applied for a job. They hired him on the spot. Uneasy about the prospect of telling a lawyer there was a monster in his living room, Cooper postponed the visit to Kenny Stone.

Shug took a couple of steps toward the monster, craned his head forward, and squinted. "I guess that glass stuff is pretty thick." He raised his hand, tapped the glass. The monster looked at him.

"Cut it out," Cooper hissed.

"It don't seem to care," Shug laughed, and went on tapping for a moment. Then he

backed off and set his empty Coors bottle on an end table. "We should get going. Work bright and early."

Cooper looked at the monster. Several of its eyes swiveled to look back at him. "I think I'm gonna stay a while."

Shug gawked at him like he'd just said he was planning to marry a goat. "Alone?"

Cooper shrugged. "If it hasn't done anything dangerous by now, I'm guessing it isn't going to. I want to study it, see if I can figure it out."

"Suit yourself," Shug said, his expression making it clear he thought Cooper was an idiot.

When Shug was gone Cooper watched the monster and sipped his vodka and orange. Cooper wondered where it came from. The hole seemed like a good bet. Cooper glanced into it, then quickly looked away because it felt like someone was twisting his brain when he looked. It was like it had burrowed from somewhere.

Part of it was rippling along the floor, like fingers drumming. "You bored?" Cooper asked.

The rippling continued.

Cooper made a cautious trip to the kitchen for more vodka; the thing's eyes tracked him across the room, and were watching the kitchen door when he came out and headed for his spot by the wall. He was sick of sitting on the floor though, so he veered unsteadily and instead stretched out in Dad's recliner.

"How about some TV?" Cooper plucked the remote from the end table and turned on the TV. A Pirates game flashed to life. Cooper immediately turned the channel. No baseball.

The monster pressed up to the glass, staring at the TV. Cooper chuckled despite himself. "You like TV?" He flipped to CNN, which was covering mass protests in Myanmar. Some of the sharp edges on the thing seemed to smooth as it moved along the glass to get as close to the screen as possible. Cooper flipped the channel again, watching the monster carefully.

It watched *Say Yes to the Dress* intently.

Was Cooper imagining it, attributing human-like qualities to the thing? He didn't think so. As a test he tried turning the TV off. The thing turned to look at him, giving him a fresh bloom of the willies. He turned the TV back on, and the thing went back to watching.

Eventually Cooper figured out that when the thing tapped on the glass, it wanted Cooper to change channels. He obliged until he passed out.

A scraping sound woke him. He opened his eyes, not sure where he was, still drunk. An old Western was on TV. Robert Mitchum was shooting cans off a split-rail fence. Out of the corner of his eye, Cooper spied something that looked wrong.

He jolted upright. There was a big hole in the glass. The monster wasn't there. Very slowly, Cooper turned to look around the room.

It was standing right behind him.

Without the glass to soften it, its sharp angles and prickly spines were in sharp focus. The wet parts slid along like they had minds of their own, and the wild wiry parts vibrated like plucked guitar strings. Its eyes were clear and bright; they appraised him with what looked like sadness.

It lifted an appendage, slowly lowered it toward Cooper's forehead.

With a shout Cooper rolled off the recliner. He scrabbled toward the door, but the jointless, jagged appendage chased him, growing or stretching. It slammed into the side of his head. A blinding flash burst behind Cooper's eyeballs, then everything went dark.

When Cooper woke it was light outside. He pulled himself onto all fours and, gasping, cast about the room, trying to locate the monster.

It was back behind the glass. The hole was gone, as if it had never been there in the first place. Cooper rose, his gaze fixed on the scene behind the glass. There was another monster in there, back near the fireplace, peering out the window into the backyard. It looked just like the first.

Eyeing the spot in the divider where the gaping hole had been, Cooper wondered if he'd imagined the whole thing. It hadn't seemed like a drunken vision; his memory of that up-close look at the thing as it hovered over him was remarkably vivid. Cooper shook his head, then headed into the kitchen to get something to drink. His head was pounding. Usually he made sure to take an aspirin and drink a big glass of water before going to sleep when he had a lot to drink, but last night hadn't been a usual sort of night.

He skidded to a halt in the doorway and clutched the counter like he was on a keeling ship.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast. He *saw* himself sitting there, munching on Frosted Mini Wheats. Not a washed-out, wavy mirage, but his completely solid self, wearing a wrinkled white polo shirt.

Cooper opened his mouth to say something to himself, and let out a lone, unarticulated syllable. Was he losing his mind? Of course he was.

"Who are you?" Cooper managed to warble.

His other self went on eating. He turned the Mini Wheats box sideways, finished reading the back and now reading the ingredients and nutrition information out of boredom. That was just the sort of thing Cooper would do.

"Hello?" No response. Cooper crept forward, ready to flee if the situation got any weirder, until he was close enough to touch his doppelganger. "Can you hear me?"

Cooper reached out and let his fingers hover close to his double's shoulder. If he set his hand on that shoulder and it was solid, he was going to scream. If he could feel the other him, he was too far gone; it would mean he would never be able to unravel reality from delusion. His fingers quavered as he lowered them, then disappeared as his hand sank through the perfectly solid-looking wrinkled white shirt, looking like it had been severed bloodlessly at the wrist. His hand reappeared as he drew it out. Releasing his held breath with an audible puff, Cooper realized his double wasn't making any sound; no clink of the spoon against the cereal bowl, no slurp or rustle of clothing. It was an illusion, a hallucination.

It was the monster who was doing this. Of course it was. The monster was getting inside his head, causing him to hallucinate. Soon he'd be wearing aluminum foil skull caps and listening to voices in his head telling him who to hack up with a butcher knife.

Unless the monster was another hallucination.

Shug had seen it, too, though. Unless Shug was a hallucination. He didn't even want to entertain that possibility. No sir.

He ran for his car. He needed to get away from the thing, and stay away, or better still get it hauled far away from *him* so he could clear that glassy shit out and have his house back. Cooper dug his phone out of his pocket and dialed 411. "Yeah, can you give me a number for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus?" He was pretty sure that was still the name of the big one.

The call didn't go any better than his call to 911 a few days earlier. The guy he spoke to quickly pegged him as a nutbag. If he could get someone to come look at the thing, he was sure he could get rid of it, but how to get someone to come? Maybe he should pretend to be a potential big donor to SUNY Albany's biology department and

request someone come to his house. The thing was, he didn't want to go anywhere near his house until the creature was hauled away.

How exactly would they haul it away? What would they do, cut a door in the glass with a chain saw and stick a cage in front of it? Maybe the FBI was the answer. Let them cordon off his house for a few months. At least they'd eventually take the thing away.

Cooper slid his phone into his pocket. Right now he wanted nothing more than to go to work and tear open envelope after envelope and inspect DVDs for scratches and cracks for the next eight hours. The idea of mindless activity was extremely appealing.

In the rear view mirror, Cooper spotted his double cruising along in midair, sitting on nothing, his right hand working an invisible steering wheel. Cooper jerked his own wheel just in time to avoid running onto the sidewalk. He pulled over, let his other self fly soundlessly past.

Cooper looked around at the five or six people on the sidewalk. None of them seemed to notice the guy whizzing by in an invisible car—more evidence that he was hallucinating. Of course he was hallucinating. Though it was such a vivid hallucination.

Cooper followed himself to work. His other self stepped out of the invisible car and headed inside. Cooper jogged to catch up, falling into step just behind himself, just to make absolutely certain no one else saw the double.

No one gave Cooper a second look as he passed.

His double took up residence at his station, a swivel seat at a desk on a factory floor filled with identical desks. Cooper hovered near the seat, not sure what to do as his double reached for the stacks of red envelopes, withdrew his hand holding nothing, and began opening a phantom envelope.

“Hey, Cooper.” Tim Corcoran, his shift manager, gave him a friendly wave. It was his polite way of telling Cooper to get his ass in his chair and start processing envelopes. Cooper considered feigning illness, but he’d just walked in. He hovered a moment longer, then moved his chair two feet to the left so he wasn’t sitting entirely in the same space as the other Cooper.

It was disconcerting when his fingers or part of his elbow disappeared whenever he accidentally brushed up against his double. The double was working with much more focus, going through three invisible envelopes for every two Cooper managed.

“Cooper, why are you sitting like that?” Cooper looked over his shoulder at Tim, standing with arms folded. He unfolded his arms long enough to direct Cooper to roll to his right. “It slows you down when you’re not square in your station.”

Struggling not to wince, Cooper slid over, merging into his double like two soap bubbles joining. His double paused from his work, lifted an invisible cup of coffee and took a sip, then got back to opening envelopes. With Tim hovering, Cooper got back to work as well. It felt like he had four arms; it was confusing, and caused him to fumble as he processed disk after disk.

At three minutes to twelve his double got up and headed to lunch. Cooper waited until he was gone, then followed suit. He prayed his double wasn’t heading to the same restaurant as him.

On his way out of Larry’s Giant Subs carrying an eight inch turkey on white in a plastic bag, Cooper spotted Julie getting out of her car. He’d known it was only a matter of time before he bumped into her, but his heart whomped in his chest as he fished keys from his pocket and for some reason pretended he hadn’t seen her yet.

Julie stopped dead when she saw him. Cooper acted surprised and tried to give her a friendly smile, as if there was nothing awkward or painful about bumping into her.

“Hey,” he said as they stood between the bumpers of two cars in the bleak strip mall parking lot. Maybe he was so nervous because he wasn’t at his best right now.

He was losing his mind and had a monster living in his house. Ideally you wanted to bump into your ex when you're rested and wearing your best suit.

"I heard you were back in town," she said.

"Yeah." He shrugged and glanced back at the entrance to Larry's as if there was something to see there. "I missed all the great restaurants." He held up his bag.

Julie smiled at the lame joke, folded her arms. "I was sorry to hear about your dad. I cried when I heard the news."

"Yeah, me too." He realized it wasn't a very generous response to her offer of condolence and quickly added, "Thanks. I appreciate it."

There were so many unsaid things hovering between them that Cooper had trouble seeing Julie through the haze of them. Now that he was back, the reason for their breakup was no longer even valid, so what kept them from getting back together? For Cooper it was that he didn't want to take yet another step back into high school. Or something like that.

"You still at the bank?" he asked, because he didn't know what else to say.

Julie nodded. "Still there. I got a promotion a couple of months back. I've got my own desk and everything."

"That's terrific," he said, trying to muster some enthusiasm but mostly failing. He considered telling her about the monster in his house, but decided against it.

They stood in silence a beat longer than was comfortable, then Julie said, "Well, I should get going. It was nice to see you."

As Julie turned, Cooper opened his mouth to say something, but he wasn't sure what. He felt like he wanted to cry, but wasn't sure why. He knew it would be hard the first time he bumped into Julie, but he'd expected her to play the jilted girl, maybe gloat over his fall from the pinnacle. He'd almost forgotten who she was, had replaced her with a cardboard cutout of the ballplayer's hometown ex-girlfriend. Most of the ballplayers in the minors had one. He suddenly felt like they'd just broken up; like he was reliving the pain of those first few barren post-Julie days. He headed toward his car.

Julie called his name. He looked over at her. "I'm sorry things didn't work out for you. I really mean that."

The sincerity of her words, her tone, her face, took him by surprise. He paused, almost turned back, but didn't know what he'd say. "Thanks," he managed, and turned toward his car.

For an instant he had the sensation of *stretching*. An extra set of legs popped free below his hips. They stayed put as he stumbled away. He turned, saw himself still occupying the spot he had just vacated, holding an invisible Larry's sandwich bag, his mouth moving soundlessly. His double was back, only now he was wearing the same black polo and jeans as Cooper.

Cooper unlocked his BMW and sped away. In the rear view mirror he saw his double, head down, still talking.

When he got back to Moviemail his double was already working. He was back in the white shirt. Cooper took his seat, flinching as he pushed into the space occupied by his other self.

After opening half a dozen envelopes Cooper rotated his chair to face the other way, hunched over with his face in his hands. He realized now that he'd come to work because some part of him thought the hallucination would wink out of existence here, banished by the hard fluorescent light and the stark drudgery of the work, if not by the distance he'd put between himself and the monster. It wasn't working, and the sight of those extra hands, the four knees clustered down by his lap, was making him feel even more insane than he clearly was.

He stood to leave, just as a third Cooper materialized through the door and headed toward him. This was the one was wearing the black shirt. The double (or maybe it was triple now) sat overlapping the other duplicate and got to work.

Cooper tried to appear calm as he got out of there.

One of the doubles—the one dressed like Cooper—also stayed at Shug's that night. Cooper didn't know where the other had gone, and he said nothing to Shug about the extra Cooper. When his double showered, dressed in a button-down shirt that he pulled out of thin air, and headed out at a quarter till seven, Cooper followed him.

His double drove the invisible car to Broad Street, parked in a spot already occupied by a Chevy Trailblazer, and headed into Manny's Diner. Cooper chose a booth facing his double, ordered coffee and tried not to stare at what to others looked like an empty booth. *No.* Cooper shook his head. It *was* an empty booth. He had to be careful not to think of these apparitions as having any basis in reality. If he started believing in them he'd end up in a padded cell. This was something the creature had done to his mind; he had to figure out how to undo it, if that was possible.

The other Cooper was carrying on a silent conversation with an unseen companion in the booth across from him, and he seemed to be having a good time. From time to time he laughed as he swirled an invisible coffee cup and ate what Cooper guessed was a piece of carrot cake, based on what he knew of his typical Manny's ordering habits.

Cooper's attention was drawn to the window behind his double, where another Cooper whizzed by, his ass three feet off the ground, his foot working an invisible pedal. Cooper dropped a ten on the table and hurried out.

He was able to catch a glimpse of this other Cooper just as he made a right onto Habersham, and followed him to McDonough's Irish Pub. His doubles were having a busy night.

McDonough's wasn't Cooper's kind of place; it was typically thick with smoke, the floor sticky with beer, and, as Cooper pushed open the big wooden door, he discovered it was especially loud on this night. People were screaming at the top of their lungs and jumping up and down out of sync with the music, hugging each other like they were in the middle of a reunion. Cooper recognized a lot of Moviemail employees, including Shug. Shug had tears drying on his cheeks; his eyes were closed, his head thrown back as he howled like a drunken wolf.

"Cooper!" Shug noticed him at the door, raced over with his arms out. "We did it. We fucking won!" He cackled like a loon.

"Won what?"

Shug grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled his face close. "The big one. The lottery. Like *two hundred and something million*, split seventeen ways." He threw his hands in the air and hooted again. "I'm rich!"

Feeling like he was falling from a great height, Cooper tried to smile, to act happy for Shug.

Shug got serious for a minute. "Sorry you didn't come in with us, Cooper. I really am, dude."

Cooper tried to shrug, tried to say, *No problem*, but it wouldn't come. He'd almost reached into his pocket and handed Shug that twenty.

Shug bounced away, spinning in a hug with Lisa, another Moviemail employee who'd evidently given Shug a twenty, leaving Cooper in an empty pocket of space inside the packed bar.

Across the bar Cooper spotted his double, mouth cranked open in a silent shout as he leaped to give some phantom person a very high five. He moved around the bar slapping invisible backs, exchanging invisible handshakes, in a state of utter jubilation.

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The monster came right to the glass when Cooper walked in, as if asking, *Where have you been?* There were six identical monsters in the space with him, but none of the other five paid Cooper any attention. Now he understood why: they weren't actual monsters, they were possible monsters. Maybe one of those other monsters was the track where Cooper's monster hadn't given Cooper the gift, or curse, or whatever it was intended to be, of witnessing the consequences of his choices.

His monster looked at the TV. Longingly, Cooper thought.

"You meant well, didn't you?" Cooper asked. Where the thing came from it was probably normal to see all of your possibilities, all the might-have-beens paraded in front of you. "You were paying me back for helping you channel-surf. A big old thank you." It must have thought, *Look at that pathetic guy, never knowing if he made the right move. Let me help him out.* Cooper retrieved the remote from his recliner and clicked on the TV. The thing's sharper edges smoothed as the screen flashed to life. *Two and a Half Men.* "The thing is, you didn't do me any favors. Now I get to see all my fuck-ups in three-dimensional living color." He tossed the remote down and went to bed. He wasn't afraid of the monster anymore; it would be far more unpleasant to spend the night with Shug and hear about all the things he was going to buy.

Cooper always thought he was going to be the one who was special. The major leaguer who rose from humble beginnings. Now he was less than ordinary—a guy who worked a meaningless job in a small town where eighteen people were millionaire lottery winners.

Cooper spotted one of his other selves pulling up to the pump in the Timesaver. He slowed and pulled in after him, parked in one of the spots in front of the store, and watched through the side-view mirror. This one was dressed in a Dolce and Gabbana jacket, and he was putting premium gas in his invisible car. Probably a Lamborghini. Cooper always thought if he got the chance to sign one of those lucrative free agent contracts he'd buy a Lamborghini, just because it seemed like the most expensive car you could buy that everyone had heard of.

When his lottery-winner self finished and pulled out, Cooper followed. It was the height of masochism, but it was addictive, following a dozen story lines, a dozen reality shows where you're the star.

His rich self went to Venus de Milo's, the swanky new bar Shug owned, one of a dozen lavish new businesses that seemed absurdly out of place in their little town. Ten of the seventeen millionaires had remained in Porterville, and they had to spend all that money somehow. What was the point of having eleven million dollars if you didn't spend some of it?

In Venus, Shug was dancing with a drop-dead gorgeous girl in a short black skirt. Cooper thought of them as Lottery Girls; they started showing up a few days after the Moviemail gang's good fortune hit the news. The rich Cooper was at the bar; he looked like he might be chatting with a Lottery Girl as well. Cooper had been following him more than the others, vicariously absorbing some of the good life he'd missed out on when he decided not to pull that twenty out of his wallet. As far as he could tell, Rich Cooper didn't work. He was often gone, probably traveling to Crete, or Tuscany, or one of the other places Cooper always wanted to go. Chances were he took a Lottery Girl with him.

Another Cooper arrived with his arm around an invisible someone that Cooper knew was Julie, because he'd followed this Cooper to Julie's house a number of times. This Cooper was in jeans and the inevitable polo, and he had dark rings under his eyes like the real Cooper, from nights spent thinking "if only I'd ponied up that twenty" thoughts. But there was something in his face that suggested this

Cooper had made more peace with his missed millions, maybe because he didn't have the same reminder in the form of Rich Cooper whizzing around in his invisible Lamborghini.

Cooper-with-Julie sat at a booth in the raised area near the pool tables. Cooper-who-had-quit-his-job-at-Moviemail was probably over at The Tavern drinking buck-a-beers, sporting three days of stubble and wondering what he was going to do when his last drips of bonus money were played out. They were all over the board, his possible selves, though he had to say, while he wouldn't necessarily want their lives, most were more interesting than his.

Rich Cooper left early, beaming, his forearm held at an angle that suggested a Lottery Girl was hanging from it. Cooper left a few minutes later, after a final glance toward Cooper-with-Julie.

Berkshire Road rolled by with nothing but cyclone fences and nondescript industrial businesses on either side. Cooper took the turns hard. He'd never felt so untethered to the world. His future, which had always been so clear and easy to imagine, was now nothing but a gray haze. He knew he needed a plan. He still hadn't contacted Kenny Stone, the lawyer, because the extra Coopers had complicated things. Maybe the monster could turn off the alternate selves if Cooper figured out how to ask, but that would not be possible if he sold it.

He was fairly sure he wanted the other selves gone. It wasn't all bad having them around, especially with so little else going on in his life, but it made him feel unbalanced to see them when no one else could. All in all it would probably be good if they disappeared.

But regardless of the apparitions, what was he going to do? It was hard to think about starting college at twenty-six, living in dorms with eighteen-year-olds fresh out of high school. The thought of working at Moviemail for the next thirty years was intolerable.

Passing a boarded-up furniture factory, Cooper slowed, cursed softly. The rich Cooper was lying twisted on the side of the road. Cooper pulled onto the shoulder and got out.

Rich Cooper was upside-down, his head at an alarming angle, his back bent into a U that bordered on a V. He was suspended two feet off the ground. Another two feet separated him from the bough of a white birch. Cooper was certain the space between his double's lifeless body and the birch was occupied by crumpled Lamborghini. For all he knew he was standing on Lottery Girl.

It was a sobering sight. There wasn't much blood (likely because of air bags), but even now, just a few minutes after the accident, the left side of Rich Cooper's face was swollen and purple. Cooper squatted on his haunches and pondered that face.

Was this for sure how he would have ended up if he'd been in on the lottery? It was impossible to know; the creature in his house wasn't going to tell him. Maybe these possible selves were filtered through his own subconscious, images of how he imagined things would unfold.

The rich Cooper rose higher into the air, or more likely was lifted. He straightened out somewhat, then drifted away flat on his lifeless back. Cooper watched as he was loaded into an invisible ambulance and sped away, shrinking, shrinking, until he winked out of sight over a rise.

Cooper slid into his BMW and headed home, twenty miles per hour slower than he'd been driving, because he was drunk, and he should fucking know better than to fly around turns at sixty-five in a forty-five zone after five beers. As he drove, he thought about Rich Cooper. Somehow he felt certain what he'd seen was a true glimpse into the might-have-been, not something he simply imagined. His dark mood lifted. It kept on lifting until he was grinning, then chuckling, then laughing

deep down in his belly. Yeah, if only he'd pulled out that twenty. He wished he could tell Cooper-with-Julie what that twenty had really bought.

Another Cooper passed him going the other way, and Cooper nearly ran his car into a ditch despite his slow speed.

The white pinstripes and bright red sleeves this other Cooper was wearing were unmistakable. It was a Cincinnati Reds uniform.

Cooper had no doubt about when this other Cooper came to be. He was from the night Cooper decided to call it quits, the night he stopped in that crackerbox motel in Pennsylvania. This Cooper had originated from before Cooper ever laid eyes on the monster. Another piece of the puzzle dropped into place: the monster hadn't created these doubles; it had only made it possible for Cooper to see them.

Cooper stopped the BMW again and stared over his shoulder down the empty street where the Cooper in the Reds uniform had gone. He must have recently been called up, had made a stopover in the old neighborhood before going on to Cincinnati. Cooper put his car in drive, meaning to follow this Cooper. Then, realizing there was no need, he settled back in the seat, his turn signal flashing. Cooper knew where the other Cooper was going.

If Cooper went to the Reds game the next night he was sure he would see himself in the bullpen, perched on the end of the bench spitting invisible sunflower seeds into the dirt. If he went to enough games he'd eventually see himself on the mound, nervous as hell, throwing major league pitches with an invisible ball as the real game carried on around him.

The thought filled Cooper with such longing, such deep regret that it made his lottery regret seem trivial. He'd quit too soon. When he'd quit, it had seemed like he was quitting way too late. He'd stuck around six years, and never stood out, never got tagged as a prospect to watch.

Evidently something had clicked in season seven.

He held up his right arm and looked at it, marveling at the possibility that it might have been capable of throwing a pitch in the big leagues, if he'd stuck it out.

If he'd stuck it out. The retrospective nature of the monster's gift was beginning to annoy him. All these *might have beens* and *glad he didn'ts*.

Was it too late? Were the bridges burned as soon as the other Coopers pulled free of him? Cooper tapped the steering wheel as the left turn blinker continued to tick. Cooper had the same arm as his double in the Reds uniform. He was the same guy as the one who seemed overjoyed to be back together with his small-town girlfriend. Maybe Cooper could have his own Reds uniform and his own small-town girlfriend. What if the point of seeing your possible selves wasn't to cause you to regret, but to guide you into the future?

Cooper pulled out, heading back the way he'd come.

When he got out of his car in front of Julie's house, another Cooper stayed in the car, then pulled off in an invisible car. It was after midnight, but Cooper rang Julie's doorbell anyway.

Her brow furrowed when she opened the door and saw it was him.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late, but this couldn't wait until morning." He was suddenly aware of the slight alcohol-induced laziness in his tongue, and hoped Julie wasn't. "For the past months, ever since I bumped into you outside Larry's, I've been imagining what it would be like if we hadn't broken up. I see us going out, having a great time. Laughing." It certainly wasn't a lie; he did see them doing those things. Julie's brow was still furrowed, like she was trying to get a sense of what the hell was going on. He pushed on, figuring he had nothing to lose but his dignity at this point. "What I'm trying to say is, I made a mistake. More than one, actually, but one with you especially, and I'm wondering if it's too late to fix it."

Julie leaned her face against the door jamb and studied Cooper for a moment. "What are you asking?"

"What?"

"What are you asking?" Julie shrugged. "Are you asking if I want to go get a hamburger sometime, or are you about to get down on one knee and propose? 'Cause it sounds like you're about to get down on one knee. If you're asking if I want to go get a hamburger some time, then sure."

Cooper felt a little dumbstruck. "Oh. Yeah, I'm asking about the hamburger."

Julie gave him a crooked, somewhat ironic smile. "Okay, then."

"How about this Friday?" Somewhere Cooper had read that it was rude to ask a woman on a date for the next night, that it implied she didn't have options.

Julie nodded once and started to pull the door partway closed. "I'll see you Friday."

"Great."

His lips feeling slightly numb, his nose tingling in an odd but pleasant manner, he turned and took the steps down her stoop. Eventually he would have to show her the thing in his house, but there would be time for that, if things went well.

As he headed home Cooper realized he'd had the monster all wrong. Maybe there would eventually come a time when most of his doubles were leading less satisfying lives than he. Assuming, of course, he was really seeing his possible lives and not just suffering from some massive psychosis. That possibility had to remain open.

He'd have to wait until morning to call Dave Dreyton and ask if the Mudcats would take him back. He'd ask nicely, maybe offer to play for less than what they had been paying him. Knowing what was possible (again, assuming this wasn't all a delusion), he'd work his ass off—right the hell off—to merge Cincinnati Reds Cooper's reality track back into his reality track. He was rehearsing what he'd say when he called Dave Dreyton as he unlocked the door and burst into his living room.

There was an enormous hole in the glass, just like before. This time, though, the monster and all of his doubles were on their side. Cooper approached cautiously, afraid the monster might lunge out at him, maybe undo what it had done the first time. It stayed put, though, watching him approach.

"Thank you," he said. "For what you did. I understand it now."

If the monster understood, it gave no indication.

Cooper picked up the remote. "TV? Want to watch some TV?"

The monster grew an appendage, and, in a gesture that was unmistakable, invited Cooper in. Cooper's balls curled at the thought, much as he had grown to respect the thing.

It pointed at the hole in the floor.

"Oh, Jeez." Was it asking him to go down that hole? It wasn't making any threatening moves toward him—an invitation rather than a command.

The monster waited, watching him. Somehow Cooper felt sure it wouldn't take him somewhere unless it was sure he would be safe, but still, that hole went somewhere people weren't meant to go.

On the other hand, it would be like taking the first step on the moon. Yes, he might die horribly, but as he'd learned, you didn't get anywhere unless you took some serious chances.

Cooper touched the glass where it was newly-shaped, stepped into the archway between his part of the living room and the creature's, and hesitated. The truth of it was, Cooper didn't want to walk on the moon, he wanted to walk to the mound in Cincinnati. He wanted to walk on a beach with Julie. He'd already set out on his adventure.

He shook his head. "No. Thanks, but no." As Cooper backed away from the threshold, another Cooper tore free and ducked through the opening. The new Cooper followed the monster into the hole as the old Cooper turned on the TV. O

Introduction

Are single-author genre story collections a dead or dying category? Absolutely not! Are they a dead or dying category for big publishers? Well, yeah, pretty much.

Take a look at the *Locus Recommended Reading List* for 2010, the most recent one available as I write: www.locusmag.com/Magazine/2011/Issue02_Recommended_Reading.html. Scads of excellent story collections, a brilliant mosaic of a thriving field. But not one from any of the so-called “Big Six” firms or their various imprints: Hachette, HarperCollins, MacMillan, Penguin, Random House, or Simon & Schuster. The last such book I can recall, in fact, was Gene Wolfe’s *Starwater Strains* from Tor in 2005. Or maybe Stephen King’s *Full Dark, No Stars*, Scribner’s, 2010.

It’s a lamentable state of affairs, this lack of support for short fiction on the part of the Big Six, due to either real or perceived low sales for such books. How can an entire category, essential to the development and history of SF/F/H, simply be written off on strictly mercenary terms? Aren’t low sales partly a testament to bad marketing and lack of publisher vision anyhow? Who’s buying all the collections that do appear?

But rather than agitate against the self-injurious ignorance and perversity of the Big Six, let’s celebrate the super-human efforts of the independent presses that keep such collections alive.

Here, alphabetically by author, are mini-reviews of twenty great offerings from 2011.

I initially encountered the awesome prose of Michael Bishop over forty years ago, when I read his first story, “Piñon Fall,” in the pages of *Galaxy* magazine. That story likewise is the first to greet readers of his magnificent career retrospective, *The Door Gunner and Other*

Perilous Flights of Fancy (Subterranean, hardcover, \$45.00, 528 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-374-7). Usefully arranged by order of publication with the help of Bishop-savvy editor Michael Hutchins, these lightly but meaningfully revised tales—stefnal, fantastical, one mimetic—comprise an astonishing career, illuminating and enjoyable for readers new and old. But even longtime Bishop fans will encounter unseen gems.

Story collections are not only for the benefit of living authors, but also a means of keeping the work of the field’s forebears alive. Robert Bloch—once a famous byline, but possibly growing forgotten since his death in 1994—gets just such a reinvigoration with *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$40.00, 336 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-424-9). Not strictly a story collection, since it contains an entire novel, *The Night of the Ripper*, it’s an omnibus of all Bloch’s tales concerning the famed British serial killer. This includes the screenplay of Bloch’s well-loved *Star Trek* episode, “Wolf in the Fold.” With mordant and ardent professionalism, Bloch rings the changes on Red Jack’s hideous career, delivering shivers galore.

When speaking of child prodigies in our field, we often fail to mention Ramsey Campbell. He began his acolyte’s editorial correspondence with August Derleth as a Lovecraft-besotted fan in 1961 at age fourteen, and his first book manifested three years later. That volume now receives its slightly premature “fiftieth anniversary edition” from PS Publishing: *The Inhabitant of the Lake & Other Unwelcome Tenants* (hardcover, £19.99, 298 pages, ISBN 978-1-848632-00-4). These Cthulhu Mythos tales exhibit a compelling and unnatural gravitas for such a young author, and capture without slavish imitation many of HPL’s frissons. I particularly enjoyed “The

Mine on Yuggoth" for its nighted and hideous cosmic vistas. The bonus material here—Campbell's original drafts, plus Derleth's letters—raises this volume to milestone status.

Readers of this column might recall the name Brendan Connell from my review of his prior collection, the urbicentric *Metrophilias*. Connell now returns with *The Life of Polycrates* (Chômu Press, trade paperback, \$14.00, 266 pages, ISBN 978-1-907681-04-2), in which the stories exude a kind of fevered Aubrey Beardsley Euro-decadence. Think Alberto Moravia, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Thomas Mann. In "The Dancing Billionaire," louche partygoers hoist "thin-stemmed glasses growing from hands like effervescent fungi." Connell's protagonists are all monsters, and not hopeful ones either. They generally inflict and receive grief and pain and meet bad ends. Perhaps the template is best seen in the protagonist of "Collapsing Claude," who wallows in a sick love affair, then pines for more.

Fans of smart genre criticism and reviews know the name Don D'Ammassa from his long stint as the chief reviewer at the lamentably extinct *SF Chronicle*, and also from the encyclopedia work he's done for several presses. (D'Ammassa continues his reviewing these days at his website: www.dondammassa.com.) But savvy readers of this magazine and of *Analog* will have also seen his byline on a number of fine stories over the years. Despite having sold over one hundred fiction pieces, it is only recently that his first collection appeared: *Translation Station* (The Merry Blacksmith Press, trade paper, \$13.95, 200 pages, ISBN 978-0-61548-936-0). The tales here are for the most part hardcore SF—first contact, space travel, life on alien worlds. The title story plus two others form a great mini-saga about hyperspace travel with a unique twist involving wheeled spaceships!

Gardner Dozois's new book, *When the Great Days Come* (Prime Books, trade paper, \$14.95, 360 pages, ISBN 978-1-60701-230-6) functions as an essential career retrospective, spanning as it does exactly forty years of his intermittent but collectively impressive fiction out-

put. Unlike the Bishop volume cited above, this overview is arranged with newest items first, and then, more or less, proceeding backward in time. We see the current version of Dozois up front: a seasoned professional capable of turning out any type of story. For instance, "Recidivist" is a top-notch post-Singularity tale equal to the work of Stross or Doctorow, and full of rueful humor. The voyage back through the decades to his earliest work, which I like to think of as "Angry Young Sturgeon," is one that provides endless pleasures.

On his twenty-fifth anniversary of writing what might be best described as odd, weird, and disturbing fictions, Christopher Fowler has compiled a mammoth volume of twenty-five stories in that macabre vein, christening it *Red Gloves* (PS Publishing, hardcover, \$32.00, 210 pages, ISBN 978-1-848631-98-4). The first half, *Devilry*, features London-based tales, while the second half, *Infernal*, is subtitled "The World Horrors." Fowler's London pieces exhibit his elegant and understated prose to good effect, proving he can summon up with keen verisimilitude any portion of that metropolis, evoking the eerie and uncanny even from something so mundane as a limo, in "The Stretch." In the second part of the book, creepiness abounds around the globe, even unto the distant past of the Wild West, with the gruesome tale of "The Boy Thug."

Glenn Grant's *Burning Days* (Nanopress, trade paper, \$11.90, 132 pages, ISBN 978-0-9811905-4-9) brings us icy-hot hardcore cyberpunk fictions originally presented during the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, which prove that old-school Gibson-esque visions, clarified and ramped-up by second-generation insights, remain eternally relevant and exciting. As Bruce Sterling says in his introduction, "Glenn Grant's stories are full of jolting moments of . . . mental clarity . . . moments of ontological realization." As Grant's characters move through ultra-wired, densely depicted milieus, the reader gets to experience their epiphanies in realtime. "La Demona" is particularly vivid for being told first-person by a young "Mex-Am girl

working (illegally) as an apprentice myo-electrician for Pandemonium Crew."

With the blue collar fascinations of Stephen King and the gleeful perversity of a young Ray Bradbury, Glen Hirshberg digs deep beneath the commonplace exteriors of modern American lives to find malaise and bad mojo. *The Janus Tree and Other Stories* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$40.00, 230 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-408-9) is his latest compilation of mundane façades destroyed by buried impulses and desires. And although illness and madness course through these tales, there are quieter, more melancholy moments such as the account in "Shomer" of a young man's bizarre trials during the Jewish ceremony of guarding a corpse. And the two stories concerning a strange urban phenomenon dubbed "the Book Depositories" have a kind of black Brautigan whimsy.

John Wyndham once did a book, *The Outward Urge*, with his alter ego, Lucas Parkes. Ed McBain collaborated with Evan Hunter on the novel *Candyland*. Now Robin Hobb and Megan Lindholm, who otherwise share a single body, bring forth *The Inheritance and Other Stories* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$45.00, 392 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-438-6), representing "their" two approaches to tale-telling: sprawling versus concise. The three Hobb stories, two of which are pendants to her novels, are interesting and will reward her fans. But the Lindholm offerings, to my eyes, are superior, showcasing a vivid imagination, deep empathy, and twisty sense of plotting. Whether dealing with drug-beslimed aliens ("A Touch of Lavender") or roadkill magic ("The Fifth Squashed Cat"), Lindholm delivers surprises and thrills embodied in the lives of some very relatable souls.

Chances are, you will not have seen the fantastika stories of Greg Hrbek in their magazine incarnations, because they all appeared in non-genre publications, places like *Conjunctions* and *Sonora Review*: zines toward which we haughty fans all too often turn a blind eye. But, as the title might hint, none of the stories in *Destroy All Monsters* (Bison Books, trade paper, \$14.95, 192 pages, ISBN 978-0-8032-3644-8) would have seemed out of

place in Asimov's or *F&SF*, and they speak to the same passions and dreams that motivate our genre explorations, with perhaps a tad more polish and gloss. Certainly a touching story like "Sagittarius," which details the feelings of human parents of a child centaur during one crucial evening, might have flowed from the pen of Kelly Link or John Crowley.

Famed for her novels and essays, Gwyneth Jones also writes superb short stories, though at lesser rates of production. Almost twenty-five-years' worth are collected in *The Universe of Things* (Aquaduct Press, trade paper, \$18.00, 296 pages, ISBN 978-1-933500-44-7), and they offer immense pleasures, both cerebral and sensual. If I had to pick one word, I would qualify Jones's work as "playful," in the sense of serious ludic juggling of ideas, emotions, and themes. Whether creating a punk portrait of our near future ("Blue Clay Blues") or a peculiarly enspirited house ("Grandmother's Footsteps"), Jones sports among her tropes like a dolphin at sea. She is a mage whose main message is that "Our magical technology may have unsuspected costs" ("La Cenerentola").

Perhaps you recall a story from these pages almost thirty years ago, titled "Her Furry Face," written by Leigh Kennedy. It was nominated for a Nebula Award and generated some level of controversy for its sensitive but frank depiction of interspecies love. However, if you are not such a longterm veteran of Asimov's, you will still be privileged to encounter the story in Kennedy's new collection, *Wind Angels* (PS Publishing, hardcover, £19.99, 230 pages, ISBN 978-1-848631-97-7). "Her Furry Face" holds up remarkably well, and is matched by the other entries here, such as "Belling Martha." "She sniffed the frigid wind blowing toward her. . . . Someone was roasting human flesh in their fire." Also, two stories are original to this volume.

Almost four years ago I read Maureen McHugh's story "Special Economics," about the fortunes of a spunky young Chinese girl, and immediately considered it to be the *ne plus ultra* of hip, wired, globally aware, twenty-first-century SF. I had a chance to peruse it

again, thanks to the publication of her new collection, *After the Apocalypse* (Small Beer Press, hardcover, \$16.00, 200 pages, ISBN 978-1-931520-29-4), and found the tale just as *au courant* as ever. SF would not be deemed irrelevant if it were all as good as this. McHugh proves she can deliver zombie shocks ("The Naturalist"), surreal whimsy ("Going to France"), and beautiful mimesis ("Honeymoon") as well. She's at the top of her game in these pages.

After gifting us with recent short-story volumes by Paul Tremblay and Claude Lalumière, the magnificent, bold and perspicacious Chizine Publications delivers a phenomenal collection with Teresa Milbrodt's *Bearded Women* (trade paper, \$15.95, 280 pages, ISBN 978-1-926851-46-4). Milbrodt's writing is akin to that of Carol Emshwiller or Karen Russell (*Swamplandia!*). The most outré beings and events are presented with matter-of-fact mimetic clarity and emotional empathy. Besides the hirsute females of the title, Milbrodt shows a fascination with legendary entities such as cyclopes and giants. In "Snakes," the protagonist is quite happy with the reptilian "seventy-eight little siblings" that adorn her fate. And why not? No character in this volume feels themselves a freak. Or rather, all humanity is freakish, some of us just a bit more colorfully so than others.

Flaunting all the hypnotic elliptical lyricism of an R.E.M. song or the writings of Blake Butler or Rikki Ducornet, the little fables in Helen Phillips's collection *And Yet They Were Happy* (Leapfrog Press, trade paper, \$14.95, 180 pages, ISBN 978-1-935248-18-7) cohere into a kind of cloud-like meta-narrative that details a world of metamorphoses and disasters and redemptions that blends Ovid, William Blake, and Walt Disney. "Before we left for our trip, we neglected to wipe the kitchen counters. . . . When we returned—we gasped—for there—in our kitchen—a mouse carnival was taking place!" ("Failure #1.") Ranging from the quasi-autobiographical ("Wedding

#1") to the Phildickian ("Apocalypse #8": "The trees are flat, two-dimensional, made of brown paper."), these tales represent our modern world filtered through a unique sensibility and imagination.

Kit Reed has been writing caustic, satirical, jazzy fiction for over fifty years now, and she just keeps getting better. Her newest assemblage of short, sharp shocks is *What Wolves Know* (PS Publishing, hardcover, £19.99, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-848631-34-2), and it will knock your socks off with its contrarian, take-no-prisoners approach to both storytelling and subject matter. Consider a story such as "Special," in which celebrity airhead Ashley Famous meets an ending worthy of a Shirley Jackson *conte cruel*. Or perhaps "Denny," which begins thus: "We are worried about Denny. We have reason to believe he may go all Columbine on us." But topicality is not Reed's only forte. In a story like "The Chaise," she creates weirdness resembling Edward Gorey's "The Curious Sofa."

A prophet of the flesh, Geoff Ryman is fascinated by biology, our human capacity (shared with the rest of squishy creation) for bodily transcendence, degeneration and metamorphosis. Whether contemplating the genetics of homosexuality ("Birth Days"), the lives of transgenic sophonts ("Days of Wonder"), or the humiliating transformations attendant upon aging ("VAO"), he brings a kind of saintly compassion and insight to his characters. But not all the entries in *Paradise Tales* (Small Beer Press, trade paper, \$16.00, 314 pages, ISBN 978-1-931520-64-5) conform to this paradigm. There are cosmopolitan explorations, such as the Cambodian-centric "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" and "Blocked." And there are densely speculative cyber-forecasts like "The Future of Science Fiction." But all benefit from Ryman's economical yet lapidary prose.

Here is an open secret: Bruce Sterling actually lives in the future—his eleven-dimensional lifeline is smeared across several eras, I suspect—and he merely visits our era occasionally, leaving be-

hind “fictions” for our edification. How else to explain the uncannily prescient and uber-happening stories in *Gothic High-Tech* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$25.00, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-404-1)? Are they “merely” the result of being as wired as Charles Stross or Neal Stephenson? No! They derive from actual observation of other eras. Sterling merely uses his journalistic training to document what he sees. In fact, he provides a covert self-portrait in “Black Swan,” where cross-dimensional traveler Massimo Montaldo reveals himself to be God—or rather “several million billion Gods,” creating entire continua with the press of a function key.

Can you resist a story that begins thus: “Millard Augustine came home every evening promptly at six-fifteen,

unlatched his skull port, removed his brain and placed it in the Bolivian Rose-wood box lined with Thai silk that had been given to him by his grandfather on his thirteenth birthday” (“A Gray Matter”). Or how about this opener? “Orly’s modest cottage was located in the mountainous region on the border between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead” (“On Orly’s Border”). If these alluring salvos—fully justified by what lurks beyond them—entice you, pick up Gay Terry’s *Meeting the Dog Girls* (Non-stop Press, trade paper, \$14.95, 206 pages, ISBN 978-1933065-20-5). Along with some irreducible short allegories, you will find nonpareil fantastika that will stay with you for a long time. ○

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The big Easter convention weekend is here. Pick cons then are the first four listed below. I'll be at RavenCon the next weekend. After that, consider Ad Astra, ConStellation, OdysseyCon, and EerieCon in April. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2012

6-8—**LepreCon.** For info, write: **Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285.** Or phone: (480) 945-6890 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (**Web**) leprecon.org. (**E-mail**) lep38@leprecon.org. Con will be held in Tempe AZ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Mission Palms. Guests will include: artist Franchesco!, author Joe Haldeman, local artist M. Greenawalt, gamer T. VanHooser. SF/fantasy art emphasis.

6-8—**MarCon.** marcon.org. Columbus OH. Pierce, Gass. Putting the March back in MarCon (almost)—NOT Memorial Day any more.

6-8—**NorwesCon.** (206) 230-7850. norwescon.org. Seattle WA. SF and fantasy. Many authors attend.

6-8—**MiniCon.** mnstf.org. Bloomington MN. Frank Wu, Brianna "Spacekat" Wu, Ted Chiang, Christopher J. Garcia. SF and fantasy.

6-8—**ChimaeraCon.** chimaeracon.com. LaQuinta Inn, San Antonio TX. Gaming, anime, SF, and fantasy.

6-8—**Anime Boston.** animeboston.com. Hynes Convention Center, Boston MA. Big anime event.

6-9—**UK Nat'l. Con.** olympus2012.org.uk. Radisson, Heathrow. George R. R. Martin, Paul Cornell, Margaret Austin, M. Easterbrook.

12-13—**Oral Roberts U. SF Conference.** (918) 495-6692. alang@oru.edu. Hilton Southern Hills, Tulsa OK. P. Davies, J. Slonzewski.

13-15—**RavenCon.** ravencon.com. Holiday Inn Koger Center, Richmond VA. Author Glen Cook, artist Matthew Stewart.

13-15—**Ad Astra.** ad-astra.org. Toronto ON. Lesley Livingston, Joe Jusko, Kelly Shapiro, Bova, Pierce, Lackey, Kay, Vonarbourg.

13-15—**ConStellation.** constellationne.net. **Facebook: ConStellation Nebraska.** Lincoln NE. E. Bear, artist W. J. Hodgson, R. Vick.

13-15—**Creation.** creationent.com. Gaylord Opryland Resort, Nashville TN. Commercial media event. Many media guests.

13-15—**SupaNova Pop Culture Expo.** supanova.com.au. Showgrounds, Melbourne Australia. Commercial multi-genre event.

14-15—**Hal-Con.** hal-con.net. contact-hal@hal-con.net. Port Opening Memorial Hall, Yokohama Japan. Alastair Reynolds.

20-22—**OdysseyCon,** Box 7114, Madison WI 53707. (608) 772-4455. oddcon.com. Larry Niven, Steven Barnes, gamer Kenneth Hite.

20-22—**JordanCon,** c/o Box 767353, Roswell GA 30076. ageoflegends.net. M. R. Kowal, Sam Weber. The works of Robert Jordan.

20-22—**Corflu.** corflu2012.org. Sunset Station, Las Vegas NV. Celebrating the traditions of fanzine fandom, old and new.

20-22—**SupaNova Pop Culture Expo.** supanova.com.au. Convention Centre, Gold Coast QLD, Australia. Commercial multigenre event.

26-29—**EuroCon.** zagreb-eurocon2012.com. Zagreb, Croatia. Tim Powers, Charles Stross, Darko Macan. Continental SF/fantasy con.

27-29—**ErieCon,** Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226. eriecon.org. Niagara Falls NY. C. Asaro, L. H. Gresh, R. Sawyer, D. Schweitzer.

MAY 2012

11-13—**Malice Domestic,** Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. malicedomestic.org. Hyatt, Bethesda MD (near DC). Goldberg. Mysteries.

11-13—**CostumeCon,** Box 39504, Phoenix AZ 85069. costumecon30.com. Mission Palms, Tempe AZ. Masqueraders' big annual do.

11-13—**KimeraCon,** 745 N. Gilbert Rd., Ste. 124, #104, Gilbert AZ 85234. kimeracon.org. Mesa AZ. Anime, gaming, SF, fantasy.

11-13—**StarFury,** 148a Queensway, London W2 6LY, UK. (+44) 07930 319-119. seanharry@aol.com. Renaissance, Heathrow UK.

11-13—**Gaslight Gathering.** gaslightgathering.org. Town and Country Hotel, San Diego CA. Steampunk and Victoriana.

17-20—**Nebula Awards Weekend.** sfwa.org. Hyatt, Crystal City (Arlington) VA (near DC). Nebula awards ceremony, workshops, tours.

18-20—**KeyCon,** Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6. keycon.org. Winnipeg MB. T. Zahn, S. Dawe, D. McCarty. Literary SF and fantasy.

18-20—**NautiCon.** animeboston.com. Provincetown Inn, Provincetown MA. Confab to relax and plan next year's con. Want to help?

18-20—**Steampunk World's Fair.** steampunkworldsfair.com. Piscataway NJ. "The World's Greatest Steampunk Festival."

25-27—**Oasis,** Box 323, Goldenrod FL 32733. oafis.org. Orlando FL. L. E. Modesitt Jr., David Weber, Pat and Roger Sims.

25-28—**BaltiCon,** Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737. balticon.org. Hunt Valley MD. Jim Odbert, singers Dale & Deschamps.

AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—**Chicon 7,** Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. chicon.org. Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$195.

AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—**Lone Star Con 3,** Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. lonestarcon3.org. San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160+.

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