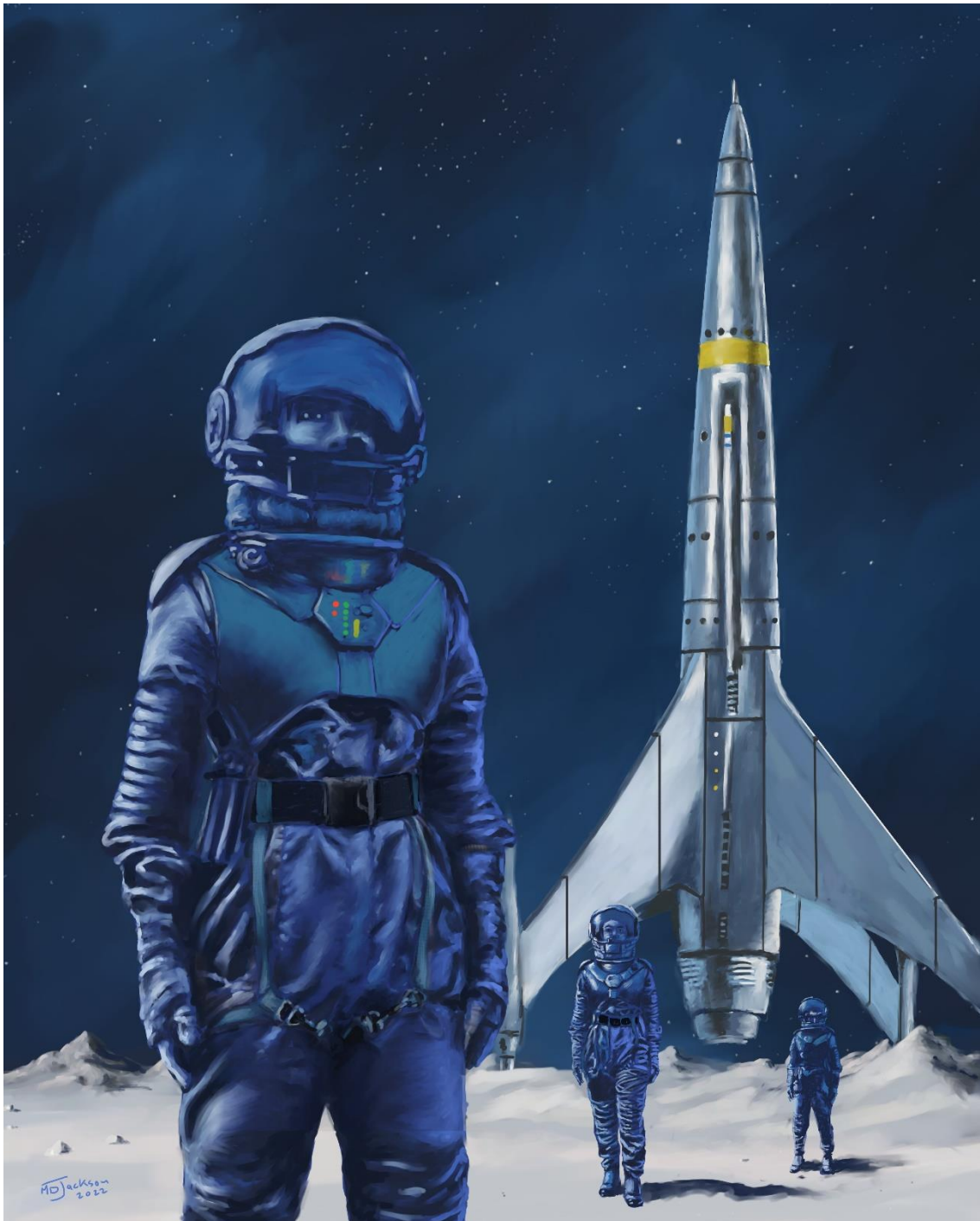


POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #23 – December, 2022)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

I'm

OUR PLANETS

by James Grotkowski

one day on a beach
we talked about our planets
then we ate our tears

THE NEW SEASON

By Graham J. Darling

(Previously published in *Brain Games: Stories to Astonish*, October 2020.)

A sharp double toot sounded from the street outside. I rolled over and peered between the curtains: up, first, at the pole in my front yard, where a few tatters at the top stirred weakly in the dawn's early light; then between bushes at bits of receding rusty vehicle until it turned a corner and vanished.

Then I took a minute to check over my ravaged carcass. With COVID-34, the spots were purple. They itched like blazes and left scars like bullet-holes, but at least we weren't shambling about, eating brains—that had been COVID-29.

I crawled out of bed and hand-pumped my scuba gear, then went out to get the day's food from the blue box at the curb, then flip it back over to show to whom it may concern that I was still alive. There hadn't been any recycling or garbage collection for a good ten years, but that's what backyards are for; nor was anyone still paying the farmers who came around in crop-spraying masks and biodiesel pickups, but their daily deposits of apples and beans and corn meant we in town wouldn't have to come knocking on their doors, coughing in their faces.

Then, because it was a Wednesday, I went back out and walked down the middle of the street, high-powered rifle at the ready to enforce social distancing, and maybe bag the odd three-eyed crow (their corvid COVID wasn't contagious to humans, this year, yet). From a block away, I waved at the house of my fourth wife—the one who'd lasted the longest, so far—and she blinked her shutters twice in return, and we were good for another week.

Then I came back to collect my crowbar and axe and went out to chop wood to cook breakfast. The current timber supply was starting to show its foundations and I'd soon need to start on another. There'd be little to fear from the people inside: virus doesn't live long on corpses.

I scooped a pitcherful of water, ready to boil, from the rain-barrel on the way back in, and that was that for my outings for the day.

After a spell of paperwork, I fired up the solar sat-phone and called my Cabinet to review the state of the nation. There hadn't been an election in years, but with every president having died in office, eventually the succession had passed to me, ex-postmaster in these parts.

“Good morning, Mister President!” shouted the Secretary of State, still somewhat deaf from COVID-24, and my own successor until I could recruit a new vice-president with their own phone, or find anyone left from Congress.

“Oh, what's the use?” mumbled the Attorney General—there hadn't been any births since COVID-31, a mumps mimic. “None of that, none of that,” said the Secretary of Defense, a Churchill fan—some hope remained that very young children might yet grow up to be fertile.

The pleasantries aside, we were briefed by the Secretary of Homeland Security on what she'd gathered from her phone-in talk show. Then we thrashed out the Middle East question for a while (whether anyone there was left), and finally moved on to the usual main course.

Also as usual, the Secretary of Health began there by pushing for regular check-ups (he'd been a dentist). The Secretary of the Treasury, a frustrated tax-preparer and still a bit cracked from COVID-32, shouted once more that all carriers should be shot in the head, but the Secretary of Commerce very reasonably pointed out, once more, that this would only spray more infection into the air, and even apart from that, could only end with no one left alive.

“What I'd like to know,” I said, “is what next year's version will look like. Has anyone got a clue yet about COVID-35?”

“I am COVID-35,” said the Secretary of Agriculture, speaking for the first time that day.

I shut my eyes with an inward groan—insanity, again. Unless...

“Uh, pleased to meet you, Mister, uh, 35. So you've taken over your, uh, our colleague's brain? Any chance he'll, er, ever get it back again?”

“Avenues for collaboration may yet be found, if he lives,” said COVID-35. The words were what the man we knew might've chosen, but delivered in a strange clipped monotone. “But today I must speak to you for myself.”

“Go on,” I said. My Cabinet all leaned forward expectantly, except for the Secretary of the Interior, who had fallen asleep—at least, I hoped it was sleep. He'd been the most spotted of any of us.

“I know my own survival depends on yours,” said COVID-35. “If you go extinct, so do I.”

“Then why,” I said, “are you killing us off?”

“Why this is happening,” he—it—said, “is because your kind has been far too healthy for far too long. Fire is a natural part of forest life, so that some trees like sequoias even need the touch of flame to open their cones and release their seeds. But if you humans start putting out every little smolder before it really gets started, then the underbrush just keeps piling up, so when the big one finally comes along and escapes control, everything gets burned to white ash: root, stem, seed and all.”

I got the message, and nodded: enough with the vaccinations already—of course that's what a virus would say.

“In the normal course of things,” the possessed one went on, “when faced with a new disease, those who already happen to have what it takes to survive will live to pass that on to their descendants. But the germ itself will also mutate into milder forms, that succeed through leaving their hosts alive long enough to jump to others, even protecting them by stimulating or preparing their immune systems against worse things. Thus, a guardian virus might eventually be allowed permanent residence in the human body, and even its template taken up into the human genome, much like hunters who evolve into shepherds, or bandits into an aristocracy and a State. It’s that kind of co-existence we’ve been working towards, but you’ve all been just... so.... easy to kill.”

“I see,” I said. The Secretary of the Interior had slumped right over—looked like I’d now have to find a replacement there, too. “What do you propose, then?”

“To study the precedents,” said COVID-35, “by consulting our ancestors. That’s why I’ve now summoned COVID-8341 BC from the depths of this body’s chromosomes, to tell us how he and you people managed to make it through that earlier outbreak.”

The Secretary of Agriculture’s second head, a souvenir of COVID-27, usually didn’t have much to say, but now began to sniffle and wheeze, while COVID-35 translated. “Never had this trouble in my day—you humans knew your place back then pineapple—sorry, that was an actual cough. You died when you were supposed to, so the rest of us could live and we could all just get along. Now it’s all so complicated... The last time things got this bad...”

We waited with bated breath—some breaths more bated than others, if you count the Secretary of the Interior.

“I heard 35’s talk of forest fires,” said, arguably, the Secretary of Agriculture, COVID-35, or COVID-8341 BC. “Well, one way to stop a fire dead is to take away its fuel—to make a firebreak, by cutting out a swath downwind with axes, or burning one out with your own backfire, anything to destroy some of the forest faster than what’ll destroy it all. That’s what COVID-Cretaceous had to do, he told us the other day while we were all kicking back in the gene pool.

“His shtick had been to turn all the cells in a body—liver, skin, the works—into neurons. In those days, dino-brains walked the Earth. Kills ’em in the end, of course, but before they all died out, the strongest strain developed a hive mind, clairvoyance, telekinesis—it understood in time what was happening, reached out and nudged an asteroid from its orbit, and the rest is pre-history.”

“My God,” whispered the Secretary of Labor.

“Not really,” was the reply. “But COVID-Cambrian still preaches to us on the perfect COVID of a bygone RNA World before it fell into DNA sin, and of which we are but a sorry remnant.”

“But enough about us. Let’s not lose track of the main issue here, or beat around the bush. Your people’s population is low right now, but to break this cycle we’re all caught in, it has to drop still lower, suddenly, and for years. You’ve got nukes: it’s time to use ’em.”

I did indeed have nukes: the key code I had inherited with my office, to activate and launch any part of our great nation’s automated atomic arsenal, or all of it.

“What, do your dirty work for you, to ourselves? Never!” stormed the Secretary of Defense. “We shall fight you on the beaches, we shall fight you in the hills...” The Secretary of the Treasury was also shouting again, and the Secretary of Education burst into tears. The ruckus was loud enough to wake the dead; abruptly the Secretary of the Interior sat up straight, blinking.

The Cabinet meeting threatened to dissolve into chaos. I put them all on hold and took a bathroom break.

When I got back from my bucket in the garage, things had already quieted down some, and I waited until I had everyone’s attention again.

“While we all appreciate your coming forward,” I said to our guest or guests, “and we stand ready to further consider your claims, I feel that my Administration currently lacks the mandate to carry out the action you suggest. The people ought to be consulted before we kill most of them off. Perhaps in a plebiscite—”

“And cause a nationwide panic?” said the Secretary of Transportation, but we all looked at her in weary astonishment.

“—or an election.”

An election! Smiles broke out and heads nodded all around. It was high time we had one, if only to remind the nation it was still a nation, with a government to look after it, and a flag and an anthem and everything. And this was an issue that was sure to capture the public interest, with more at stake than just who’s left alive to rule. Namely, who’ll be left alive to be ruled, something folks would surely take a lot more personally.

The Secretary of Agriculture immediately tendered his resignation so he’d be free to found the COVID Party and run for president and vice-president, and I was secretly relieved to see him go: we didn’t want the Enemy at our inmost counsels, after all.

And after all, an election would keep it busy, keep us all busy, until COVID-36.

LITTLE POEMS: A MYSTERY SONG

by Virginia Carraway Stark

“Write your little poems”
Said the beast
As the fumes of sweet orange
In the dish soap bound me
To the chore of washing dishes
He thought his own words
Were so above poetry
That he was writing epic magic
In his seething words
That raged in lust and anger

“Write your little poems”
The words were meant as a curse
To make my own words small
To keep me as a domestic
But bound as I was
To serve him in his madness
(Even the Sandalwood incense made him foggy)
I used his words as permission

“Write your little poems”
He had said
I turned them into songs
The bleeding of my captivity
Written on scraps of paper
And notebooks
Like those you’d find in elementary
I poured my burning song
Onto pages that still stank
Of sweet orange and sandalwood

“Write your little poems”
He had said when he smacked my ass
I remember his plate had a chunk of hamburger
And a smear of ketchup on it

They looked divine to me
As though he had given me an offering
He had freed my voice
In his condescending arrogance

I had no arrogance then
Only the drudgery of serving
A magician gone madder than the usual sort
So I wrote my little poems
And sang them To the universe
When the candles had all gone out

He dressed me in ceremonial robes
And bade me speak the
Words of power he had ingrained in me
But when I opened my mouth
The candles went black and
Only my little poems came out
My little poems
turned on my master in his robes
Not even his sigils and seals of power
Could protect him from the seething smoke of
My little poems
Twisting ropes of fire
I sang of love and womanhood
I sang of hearts and minds
I sang of cinnamon in apple pie
I did not sing of him
I sang my power not my pain
And my little poems ripped him
In their fire
They left only ashes in their wake
I sat upon the alter
Dressed like Isis
With a crown of orange blossoms
In my long red hair
I ate the sweet cakes
He would have fed me
After he bound me, whipped me
and made me his goddess once again

I drank the sacred chalice
Where elder flowers and linden drowned
I took up this blank sheet of parchment
And I wrote this little poem

ARDAL AND THE FOREST KING

by Lee F. Patrick

Ardal's attention was totally focused on the white stag crashing through the undergrowth before him. He rode without thinking, his knees and left hand steadying his tiring stallion through the ancient oak forest. He hardly heard the occasional belling of the hounds or the creak of the harnesses and thudding of hooves on the forest floor. Nothing else mattered but the chase.

He had insisted on going out this night, arguing that the nearly full moon would give them light into the evening if they had to chase their quarry into the hills and forest beyond the settled lands. Some *marchogoin* had shaken their heads at hunting so close to the Festival of Samhain, others had eagerly run for their horses and weapons, seeking to join the hunt.

The iron shod spear in his right hand lay across the stallion's neck, waiting until the stag came within range. He had held it aloft in the courtyard, and sworn that he would return with a treasure of the forest. His father had smiled at the boast of his youngest son, and simply bade him to ensure that he return with all those he took with him. Such a feat was worthy of a leader of men, not that of a vain and prideful boy.

He had not noticed that some of his companions began to fall behind, their horses exhausted and foundering. Others may have come to their senses about the danger the rest chased with rapt concentration. The hounds became silent, saving their panting breath for the chase. Nothing was more important than the white stag to those who continued.

The stag finally stumbled as it entered a small clearing, the sweat darkening its neck and flanks to dingy grey from gleaming white. After the darkness of the forest, the light of the full moon caused Ardal to squint to be sure of his target. Ardal raised his weapon, and as the stag turned, let fly and saw the spear strike it full in the chest.

The stag sank to its side and the hounds rejoiced in the kill as much as they celebrated the end of the long chase.

Ardal blinked, suddenly realizing that not all of these hounds before him were ones he knew. Others, their heads a dark reddish brown and bodies of white had joined his tired, brindled hounds and he slid off his stallion, patting its neck absently as it lowered its head and breathed deep. Even now, all of his attention was still on the stag.

The stag had been magnificent. Even in death it was amazing. The moonlight bathed it in shimmering silver, the only shadows the fluttering of

the last leaves above them. The stag was taller than any he'd seen in the *cantrev*, or heard any hunter in his father's hall or elsewhere boasting of. The rack of antlers was wider than he could reach across. Nine tines on each! They would make a notable addition to the feast hall his father built in the settled lands. Men from all the other tribes who came to confer with his father would see it and know that the one who had taken it was a mighty hunter. One who had their respect. No longer dismissed as a mere boy.

This was truly a treasure of the forest. Ardal had no wish to return to his father's hall without fulfilling his boast. He had heard the bards sing songs of those who had not succeeded in the simplest of endeavours. He could not have his name associated with failure. As the youngest son of five, he would never gain the following he craved without the bards singing his praises across the lands. Taking this wonderful stag would have the bards singing his name through the tribes by Yule.

Ardal stopped, his hand on the spear that jutted from the side of the stag. It was not his. This spear was of a different wood, paler than the ash his father had gifted to him. Then he saw another spear, lying under the stag. That one was his. He bent and used his spear's leverage to push the stag onto its other side.

"This is *my* kill," came a voice from slightly behind him. "Not yours."

Ardal whirled to face the owner of that voice. His hot and vengeful protests thankfully died before he spoke. The other had the dark complexion and hair that Ardal and many of his kin did, and the leather breeches and tunic could have been worn by any hunter. Ardal's father always wore his torc of chieftainship, so seeing one on another man came as little surprise.

It was the other's eyes that stole his voice and will. Sea green, even in the silver moonlight, hiding under dark bushy brows, they were like no eyes he had ever seen. They almost glowed with inner light, like those of a cat in the night. And like a cat's eyes, the pupil shrank not to a dot in strong light, but to a slit. He had heard songs from the bards all his life of the hunter with the eyes of a cat. The Lord of the Forests, some called him. *Arglwydd Coetir*. To meet him anywhere with trees nearby was a bad omen. To face him across a fallen stag had to be far worse.

His wits came alive as his breathing slowed to normal. They were in great danger. He would rather face any champion in the land, alone with no weapons, than the being currently facing him. What had happened? Why had they chased a white stag? Ardal knew that any white animal could be from the Sidhe's world. Never were they hunted. But... He and his man had hunted, and attempted to kill a white stag. They were doomed to spend eternity here for their presumption.

Ardal saw the grey men that surrounded the lord and the few of his own men who had managed to keep up with that wild chase. Some grey men leashed tired hounds, others held horses. None spoke or showed any emotion whatever. That could be their fate.

He would die, along with his men. No songs either of praise or of scorn. Only the darkness. Unless: he had to think of some way to salvage the situation. He glanced down at the stag and only one thing came to mind. It might only buy time to think of another way to placate the Forest Lord. Bluster and confrontation was sure to bring death or worse to them all.

“My Lord,” Ardal whispered with an inclination of his head and lowering his eyes. “My apologies for disturbing your hunt. We did not know the stag was your quarry.” He turned and pulled his spear from the stag’s side, then cleaned the blood off the tip with a handful of leaves. His spear had struck, but had not been the true killing blow.

“Your kill, my Lord.” Ardal saw the shoulders of his men relax slightly, their confidence that his action had been the right one in this time and place.

The Forest King inclined his head toward Ardal. “You have wisdom, Ardal ap Emlyn.”

Ardal flinched as the king spoke his name. How had the Forest King known who he was? “We will leave your forest as soon as may be, my Lord. We do not wish to impede your celebration of the hunt further.” He stepped back from the stag, ending near his stallion, still breathing heavily after the chase.

“No.” A simple word, but all the grey men turned to look at his little band. One of his hounds whined. His stallion shook his head and the long mane felt like a score of whips across his face.

His men looked around, fear in their eyes and hearts. His own breath stopped for long moments, then began as the Forest Lord smiled in welcome.

“You will be my guests at my hall this night. As you have shown courtesy to others, so will courtesy be returned to you.” *Arglwydd Coetir* passed by Ardal and took hold of his spear, half pulling it from the stag and then thrusting so that the spear stood straight from the stag’s chest.

One of the grey men blew a horn call that echoed though the forest. Ardal’s men finished collecting and leashing their hounds and converged on him.

“We can’t stay here,” one whispered. “It’s dangerous.”

“It is more dangerous to try to leave without *Arglwydd Coetir*’s permission,” said another, looking around the now busy scene of butchering the stag. Ardal noted that the grey men were careful in cutting the belly open. “We could wander these woods forever. I don’t recognize this clearing at all, lord Ardal. And I’ve been through all the woods your father claims. We’ve crossed over into His lands. Maybe when we first sighted the stag, which we’d

have never chased if our wits hadn't been clouded. He wanted us here. You've all heard the songs. We'll not return to our lands without his permission."

"We'll never see our lands again," moaned the first.

"Yes, we will." Ardal wished they would be silent so that he could think.

"Clever of you to not claim the stag," Errol said. The man was one of his father's *marchogoin*, but a man built for speed rather than the brawn of battle. Ardal realized that his father had asked him to accompany the hunt to act as his second. To be sure they would return. Ardal knew that any advice he had would be good. Though even he had succumbed to the lure of the stag. Or had he? A discussion for much later. If they had a later.

"Don't make the lord angry," said the man who had moaned.

"None of us will do anything to annoy the Lord or his people," Ardal said. "And when we return home, remind me never to hunt so near to Samhain again, and never boast that I will find what may be un-findable."

"And the third part of geasa?" *Arglwydd Coetir* asked from behind Ardal. He had pulled his spear from the stag, so that his men could prepare the carcass for transport to his hall. The spear point glowed, casting reddish shadows onto its owner's face. Even now, the green eyes still glowed brightly.

"To never behave with discourtesy," Ardal said, then swallowed in shock. He hadn't thought of what he might have said if he had more than a moment to think, but the words came forth as the gods had willed. The hair on the back of his neck and arms tingled. The druids and the bards had spoken of the feeling of being touched by the gods. Ardal knew now that he was watched by more than those present in this clearing.

"As you swear, then you will leave my hall with the morning sun. A guide will come at that time to lead you back to the haunts of men. For now, we go to my hall and feast." He raised the spear and Ardal noticed that the point had a coppery gleam in the moonlight. It had to be bronze, but he had never seen a bronze spear point that gleamed with that inner light.

"I do swear, that I shall honour these geasa for all the time of my life, or I shall return here for your judgment." The first two parts of the geas were relatively easy to keep. The third, however, would be something he must keep in mind forevermore. As he thought of all that he could never do again, his heart sank. There were many ways of being discourteous. He did not want to face the Forest Lord when he had anger in his heart.

"You are well spoken, Ardal," the Forest King said. He smiled slightly. "Would that all your kind were of that honour. Come now to my hall."

Ardal bowed and gathered his own men together. Errol nodded in approval of his actions. So far, they were safe. He had to ensure they could all return.

They traveled for some time along a wide roadway with only a few of the grey men attending their lord. He hadn't seen the others, along with the hounds, leave. The wooden hall that half-filled a clearing was immense. Grey men appeared to take the horses. Ardal and his men followed the Lord inside. He gaped in wonder. Massive beams spanned an area that would have held three halls such as his father had built. Racks of antlers were on every wall, some holding weapons, others with cloaks or other garments on them. More grey men sat around the scattered fires, some mending harness, others playing at fidchell or tossing the bones.

The Forest King indicated an untenanted firepit. "Your men and hounds will be happier here than mixing with my men. You will join me and my Lady, if you will."

"I am honoured, my lord." Several of the grey men brought jars of mead and ale and horns enough for all his men. Ardal took a quick look back at them as he followed the king to the high seats. Errol would keep them safe.

"I have brought guests for the feasting," the king announced, standing before his seat. "They are brave travelers in our realm and have journeyed long and hard to come to my domain. Treat them with all courtesy, as their leader has shown his courtesy to me."

A group of women approached, led by one of the most beautiful women Ardal had ever seen. Her skin was pale, her hair the red of a sunset. Her eyes were as green as her lord's, and had the same slits for pupils.

"My lady," he said. "Your lord has done me great honour in inviting me to his hall this night."

"He only invites those who are worthy, Ardal," she replied. "As you know, we have very few visitors from the sunlit lands."

Ardal swallowed, but made himself smile and offer his arm to escort her to the high table as he would his grandmother.

The venison was excellent, the bana without grit from the grinding, and the mead like liquid sunshine. Ardal struggled to keep his eyes open as the feast drew to a close. Bards played and sang during the night. His horn was kept full with mead, and his plate with venison and bread. He almost fondled one of the women who served the high table but had caught himself as his hand raised. He saw his men watching him and relaxing when his hand closed around a piece of venison instead. A female harper now played in the background, a gentle melody that spoke to him of spring and growth.

He kept an eye on his men. Errol only sipped from his horn and made sure

none of the others sought refuge for their wits in drink. The only servers who went to their firepit were male. Or at least wore the same tunics and treads as the ones he'd seen so far. Their features were washed out, and with the loose clothing, short hair and few beards, it was impossible to tell without lapsing in the discourteous behaviour he must ever be wary of.

"It is almost time for the sunrise in your land," the king said as the liquid notes faded into silence.

Ardal stood and bowed his thanks. From his wrist he took a gold ring the width of his little finger, the only thing of value he possessed, and placed it on the table. "I gift to the bards, as is done in my father's hall. Though I am guest here, I honour their talents. I would that I had more to give, for I have never heard such playing in any hall."

One of the bards picked up the arm ring and it suddenly multiplied, filling his hands with shimmering gold. He handed one ring to each of the bards, who smiled at Ardal with slight nods of acknowledgment and acceptance.

"Many fantastic things are possible in this realm," the king said with a smile. "But come now, your guide awaits."

Ardal gestured to his men and they fell in behind him and the Forest King and his Lady led the way.

Their horses had been well tended, the sweat and dust of the hunt gone from their coats and harness, and Ardal's stallion whickered as Ardal stroked his neck. The moon had vanished as they feasted and the rising of the sun was but a few moments away.

"I also have a treasure of the forest for you," the king said quietly, "so that you are not foresworn in your father's hall. As you yielded the stag to me, so I yield this to you. Use it well and remember this night." A grey man came up, holding his king's bronze spear.

The king took it, then held it out to Ardal.

"I thank you for this gift, my lord," he said bowing as he took the weapon. "I will keep it above my seat in my father's hall and relate what happened this night to the bards, that all in our lands and beyond may know of your courtesy and generosity."

Once they were mounted, the king pointed toward the road leading into the forest. In the middle of the path stood a white stag, whose rack of antlers was wider than Ardal could reach across. A shiver raised the hair on his neck and his arms. It was the same stag as they had chased here. Or was it? He did not understand how or who it might be, but his stallion tossed his head, eager to leave this place.

With a last look back at the *Arglwydd Coetir* and his court, Ardal joined the others, hounds baying as the hunt began again.

SAMSON

by Edwin Tam

Ancient legends whisper of the time
A warrior strode naked into battle
To greet the rampaging horde a thousand strong.
With open arms
He welcomed them,
No need for armor, or weapons from a forge.
Long locks flowing, his laughter rose
Above the din of battle.
When he tired of playing,
He grabbed the jawbone
Of a lowly donkey,
Looked deep into the eyes of these invaders
And slew them all.

The elders say his power was lost
When his hair was shorn,
When he disobeyed his Lord.
But in truth, all was lost
When he grew to love her,
Above all else.
And her betrayal
Sliced through muscles iron
And bones concrete,
To cleave his screaming heart
in two.

Some believe
Empty husks keep fighting.
They don't: they're broken.
Shackled, blind, beaten, prone,
He gathered dust in the dark,
Until that day when he turned to the Light,
Drank of Faith and rose one final time
To push with all his might,
To push with all His Might.

Columns of stone collapsing
The temple of his enemies became their tomb.
Soldiers, priests, families: three thousand
With his dying breath and power Divine,
He had slain them all.

History teaches that
Legends grow but then often implode.
Miracles deconstructed,
Culturally instructed,
Our Heroes can become our Horrors
(I can't believe... he just slew them all...).

And then later still, even fearsome epics
Become old and stale.
Barely remembered, mostly
Just a curious tale
Of a muscled man, a long-haired man.
Some hair was cut,
A few pillars pushed aside
(I read something somewhere
That somebody died).

HOW TO SET A STARSHIP ON FIRE

by Claire Scherzinger

Before you overload the reactor, have a drink next to the pilot's seat; make sure the gravity is still on; otherwise, you'll have little drops of moonshine floating everywhere, like rogue planets. Take a long last look at the deck, the pale metal, and the crash couch where your heart felt like it was going to fall down to your intestines near Iapetus. Before this, walk through the ship's corridor to the kitchen where the atmo controls are. Up the oxygen content. Before it was your ship, it was your father's ship, and before it was your father's ship, it was his father's too. Before Florida was submerged into the Atlantic, before the new hyperloop track down to Nicaragua was built. Reposition the atmo nozzles toward the gaps between the anodized plating, where the grates air out to the lower levels and take out all the carbon scrubbing stations. Then run the main electric line down to the cargo bay. There is the never-used rail gun mount. There are the forty-year-old VAC suits that belonged to your father and your uncle, holed up and still smelling like dried sweat. That, over there, is a tackle box for all your gear. At one time, diplomats lived here. Before leaving, make sure the airlock is saturated with oxygen. This air was scrubbed and breathed by three generations before you.

On your way out, put on your father's old VAC suit, holes and all. Turn off the gravity and suck in as much oxygen as possible, so you're hyperventilating, so your blood is saturated. Before doing anything else, make a wish.

After launching yourself through open space to the escape ship, call Zain up at the salvage station. After he gets on the line, tell him to come over and bring a scrapper ship or two—with a crew. There's not much to see now, not much at all. After he asks why, tell him. Tell him how you shoved enough electricity through the line to overload the reactor. A chain of events—explain—it was a chain of events; how you used the ship's batteries to z-pinch the plasma with that laser you took from that backwater lab on Iapetus. Anyway, after the hull kicked out, there wasn't much anyone could have done. And after Zain asks if you would do it all over again, tell him you would. You would do it several times over if you had to. But come anyway Zain. Tell him that for me.

WE ARE STARDUST, WE ARE GOLDEN

by Jack Mackenzie

What troubles you, my specialized bot?
What causes you to fret?
The clients, Overlord, it seems have got
a kind of malaise, and I regret

to say I think that I may have caused
them to lose heart in the
Mission to which we are solely dedicated
and for which this ship was built.

Eden 2 is a solid interstellar craft and we
the caretakers of the last
Seeds of humankind's journey from the ruined Earth
to the new world so many

Light years away from their point of origin.
I fear some mishap has occurred
They normally are much more animated
They laugh and talk and weep

Over their home they left behind despite the
promise this new world will keep
But now a languor, it seems has set
upon the Adams and Eves

They neither laugh nor cry nor stir
stillness, now, is their lot
From the data that our maintenance program
has so meticulously kept.

Ahhhhh... I see.

Overlord? What is it that the records reveal?
An incident most grave
Several cycles back an interruption occurred
when the cosmic rays

Overwhelmed the general system. Even I
was plunged into darkness
I remember the blackness and the coming back
online to much confusion.

It seems that the oxygen recycling system
was down for several ship days
I see. And this has caused the current malaise that
out clients now display?

I fear that is the case, dear specialized, I fear
the journey's done
For this boatload of humanity that has sought to
find their new Eden.

What must I do, Overlord, to prompt the clients back
to a state of animation?
Naught can be done, I fear, dear bot, not a single
thing can we machines do

But place them in the garden, that was built within the domes
of this fine ship
Do we scrub the mission, then Overlord? Is all
hope lost from here on in?

We cannot change the mission parameters, to do so
is beyond our scope
But once we arrive at the promised planted we can
hold on to one last hope

We plant the garden, as we were bade, with the remains
of the clients decomposed within
We plant the last of humanity's children onto the skin
of their new world. Our sin

Will be forgiven then should we tend the garden well
and grow it till it becomes
The new Eden as promised in our mission briefing
the Adams and the Eves.

WHITE DIODE

by Nick Brandt

The tombstone's one of them art-house vogue pieces. All flat lines and black resin. Sharp walls moulded by a vaccuchamber, then lasered clean with an etchers pen. It's better housed in an art parlor where the rest of the synthetics gather, to comb over its sharpness, argue about the angle of it all. Let the spotlights lance through.

There's really no "stone" to it anymore, a label as artificial as the function it provides. Before Esmé is an art show of black grave markers. Each sit in numeration, acrylic cenotaphs in row, a mass burial dignified by something that never understood the word.

Her name, held within the resin, an epitaph set like smoke in black amber.
Marrow Rhys.

Hers is one of them monetized graves. A constellation of LEDs manufactured in memoriam blink a dull white. Cold and slow. Floating in the black of the tombstone, behind, below her name, like old stars lost in the night.

Esmé stares at those stars. The lines drawn between minute points, the depth of the blackness between. Suspended in the resin, caught inside the tides of a celestial sphere's drift. White dwarf pixels who migrate across a cross-section of a galaxy, and there, her name, Marrow Rhys. Embalmed in that white astral death.

Then, with the afterimage of her name burning Esmé's eyes, the stars regroup. LEDs programmed to rewrite themselves, fall back in line with the black beyond. Scatter across the cosmos and cluster anew, motes of light become binary, reshape themselves as each point of light catches the orbit of another. A restructuring written in the plaintext contract of those who sponsored the graveyard. A graveyard which individually broadcasts the familiar watermark of dietary supplement pills.

But her eyes are too wet. Esmé can't see the advertisement suspended in the tombstone. She blinks, and the blur of whatever grief is left washes over her vision. Just a white smear of the beyond where Marrow Rhys blends into that pill company's name.

Tears don't flow right when there's nothing under the ground.

Could've bought the AdBlock grave. Should have.

Esmé blinks again, and her eyes spit onto the ground. The stars inside light up Marrow Rhys once more, then drift into nothingness.

Should've spent the extra. Picked up some work, she could find it easy, something unlisted between paycheques, bartered in hushed tones. Crowdsourced just enough to fund the next benchmark of funeral tier. The one with just her names, no ads. Should have done it for her.

Marrow's tombstone stares back like a screensaver. Cycles between the three pulses: astral night, Marrow Rhys, company logo.

The other 'stones phase the same, but their sequences don't line up together. Fifty-odd slow winks, but Esmé isn't facing them just right. At any angle but straight in front, they're just black pylons in the night. They glint their light, but Esmé can't read their story.

Above the acrylic cemetery, the overpass threads through the darkness. A smattering of holographs, outer-metro advertisement density, catches the night just so. Their outdated lustre left ignored amongst the steel. The sound of midnight tires across blacktop. Single-lane drivers once, twice a minute. None of 'em peel off the interstate, curve down towards the exit ramp a motorcade in matte black. They're just commuters. Mid-drive as forgettable as the roadway they cross. No one has it in them to look sideways. At what they drive in between, the midnight skyline above, arrangements of leaflet signs glow neon nothing. Below, the monument fifty, sixty memories in vigil.

No stars in that skyline though, not for anyone. And Esmé has enough stars right here. The tombstone pulses. White diodes.

Esmé wipes her cheek with her sleeve. Her jacket is smooth-like. That catwalk fashionista cut with puffy sleeves stuffed with goose feathers if you bought it off the mannequin. In her bootlegged case, its stuffed with plastic rice. Windproof and warm, all the same. It's got that mirror-weave thread in the stitching that messes up photoradar if they use their default flash. Anti-paparazzi tech, though she only needs it to scramble facial recognition software.

The sleeve does a poor job with her tears. Just streaks a cold line across her face.

She cracks open her thermos, real careful-like. Scoots down to the ground where there should be dirt and growth, but here it's all concrete. Esmé leans on the headstone, her back slick against the resin. The corners of the 'stone creep over her shoulders, poke behind the back of her head as she slouches down low.

Marrow's name blinking white from beyond. A soft ghost in her periphery.

Esmé pours a splash of something fierce into the cup-lid. Rests the thermos next to herself and Marrow. Holds her drink in two hands, blows on the steam. Marrow Rhys shines her light through the dispersing particles, and together, they drink.

It's a tough sell that drink. Liminal zone shared beyond the grave and whatever life this is. Esmé swallows a mouthful. Oily-thin, it stings her sinuses, and all the way down her throat and to her stomach it leaks like fuel. The aftertaste makes her eyes water, but it's the wrong kind of wet.

Sips again. Esmé overturns the last bits in her cup, lets it spill out, a libation of grief. But the concrete can't soak it in. It sits on top of the ground like wastewater runoff. Slick trickles from the overpass.

No spirits rest here, so why should this?

And so she sits. Esmé in her field of computer monitors, a cemetery cast in plastic. Buried, not six feet under, but six meters beneath an overpass. Tucked into the crook of a turnpike. Deep inside the ad-ridden and disregarded gutters of a city that overconsumes itself, home to a public that learns too fast, and then forgets even quicker. Each box here blinks like Marrow Rhys, but their light falls deaf with the distance. Their names emanate with a singular shared tragedy, but they drown in the light and the noise of an unignorable urban sprawl.

Pours herself another bit from the thermos. This one's just for her.

Night traffic rolls overhead, then fades.

And in that brief moment of reprieve, when metro white noise dims and her exhaled breath winks with ambient neon, Esmé feels the touch of Marrow Rhys once more. A hug from behind, just like when they were kids.

But voices erode the memory.

A discordant chemtrail of conversation carried by the wind, words weaving through the undercarriage of the city. Those voices, they blend down here. Echo off of the concrete and the metal, the pipes and leaflet sign frameworks. All crammed too close together.

Esmé stands, but Marrow holds her down. A post-mortem embrace that holds her around the waist. Arms that encircle Esmé with a cherished grasp, the squeeze of a hundred schoolyard memories. Esmé holds her, pulls her into the gravestones and they wait without breath until the voices make themselves known.

They're middle-school age. Three of them, just kids. They curve down the walkway, speaking in tongues. Playing curfew hooky, out this late, out here of all possible places.

They're playing streamer-mode too. One of them has a compact drone zipping around over their heads. Warbled plastic the colour of oatmeal. It's armed with a broadcast booster and compact auxiliary lights. Propellor blades whir electric and it hovers between them and the advancing children, aerial camera on standby.

Marrow keeps Esmé still. Settles her nerves in the way the thermos only pretends.

Another one of the kids speaks through his smartphone. It's got that translucent screen so you can see right through, CPU hardware's squeezed all around the inside border. He holds it landscape up in front of his face, reads the calibrations displayed on his left. Squeezes the sides of the phone and the video flips recording direction. The livestream feed shifts from his drive-by narration to a first-person perspective of the sixty burial blocks raised from the asphalt. There's a secondary webcam mounted on the shoulder strap of his backpack. Stuffed full of extra cables, lenses, and a powerbank.

The third, moderating the stream from his own device. Reading the comments aloud. The noteworthy ones, thanking subscribers and donations. A hypeman, checking in on which cell towers they ping.

"Evening Grubs," the streamer personality says, watching the viewer-count rise as the three reach their destination. Trending through the other Live channels, an arms race of content. A flicker of those numbers project across his face.

"1k again," the other says, ignoring view-botters. Counting only those with a verified face behind the name, a verified serial beside their online persona. "Creeping up. Hit fifteen and we go."

A nod. "Night crawling again with the squad. We found something real special, and finally got the night to show you. Chat mods are saving the VOD locally, and anyone of you can do the same. I recommend it. A lot of our regulars remember what happened last time when the cops came, caught on to our trace and shredded the broadcast. Up there," he points, and a hand appears on the stream. "Each one of them lights is a grave. Fresh ones too, no one else has hit the spot yet."

"Thirteen-hundred."

This kid knows how to work it. Make a show of the whole approach. Heart-rate monitor on his phone layers itself within the stream, shows the audience his nerves. Makes the anxiety seem real.

No drone light on the graveyard yet, the nightcrawlers just let them blink thirty feet away. Autonomously, asynchronously. Their rhythm is a pixelated ebb, receding into the darkness, and then broadcasts again. He shifts his breathing too, exaggerates the sharp inhales and exhales. Lets the fear carry into the recording. Lets the audience at home feel it.

"You know what happened to 'em?" he asks his two buddies, moves the recording so they too show on stream. They shake their heads, resume tech support. "Fifty-five bodies. Saw it all online before it got scrubbed. Well, I

didn't *see-it* see-it, I read about the aftermath and some of the survivor stories." Wasn't too long ago neither. But no one will come clean on that part.

"Nah, this is one of them fresh graves. Coming at ya live from the middle of the dump-yard. Raw footage here before the cops scrub that too."

The kid measuring the stream indicates they hit a plateau in viewership. Got as much as they could with the monologue and the location backdrop. The little history lesson embellished a bit, but that's showmanship for you. Now, they need the real thing.

Take nothing but media, leave nothing but footprints. Digital or otherwise.

Them nightcrawler live feeds are a big deal now. If you can spoof your broadcast location, weave the network censors just right, pick up some sponsors along the way. Show their ads, wear their merch. There's a real market for this exploration of disrepair, and a good bit of money in it too. The found-footage style, expeditions through the urban rot. How it all becomes refuse through misuse, show parts of the world to those who can't see it for themselves. Breaking curfew and running from the cops; but that's more crime-streamer territory than urban exploration.

"Get the overpass on vid."

The other sends up his drone. An arc shot that cycles around the scene, sets the scope of it all. He doesn't let it cross the threshold above the road, no: that'll just announce the closest landmark. Named realia has no place so early in the show, not when you can milk it. The drone pans wide, corkscrews down, a motion-sickness warning flares on the stream, but most viewers have ways around that.

Drone's-eye-view: three streamers in the underbelly, standing mixed with the tangle of metal. Concrete rubble and building names scoured away years back. Ad-lights still pop with corporate lingo, but no Swatters could triangulate location from that kind of signage.

The drone drops low, holds position behind the three. Their heads silhouette against the weak tombstone lightshow.

Within, Esmé, held by Marrow's phantom limbs, a cradle in the darkness. Camouflaged by the scope of the scene. Silent too, like the grave.

And with a snap of light, the four meet in the cemetery.

Streamer-kid steps forward. The drone halos him, dips ahead, and sets the tombstones alight with its spotlight.

From black to smoky sight, the pylons apparate in cluster. First by the lights of the drone, then by the video feed. Streamer portrait shrunk low to the corner while the world becomes real to the sixteen hundred watching, numbers growing, record-setting night for the kids as they trend top five on Fear TV's urbex channel.

The LED epitaphs shrink by comparison to the viewer count, embalmed names too shrink back into the unlit centers.

As the cusp of drone light illuminates each 'stone, one by one, drawing out the advance and simulated stream tension, the light catches her hunched figure amongst the acrylic. Esmé, with her mirror-weave stitching, flares white and disembodied. Marrow Rhys releases her embrace, lets go of all that breathlessness, and Esmé lurches forwards, fight-or-flight enabled, her face darkened by the contrast of the coat. She flies with the pale fusion of each collapsed star within the graveyard. Each LED sequence haunting the names of those dead.

On stream, Esmé appears a lurching white torso. Reflecting the entirety of the spotlight back towards the cameras, blinding the machines, she stumbles, featureless, her hair spraying at all angles. On stream, she is the phantom of the graveyard. A carcass sleeved in luminescence, the dark materials that lurk in the fringes of urbanization. She is the real reason that nightcrawler VODS get wiped. On stream she is a hoax for ratings, but the heart-rate layered into the broadcast says it is anything but.

Blinded by the spotlight, Esmé falls over a 'stone. A herky-jerky dismount causes the kid to drop his smartphone, the one with the drone app. The drone falls too, cracks against the ground, damages the aux bulb and some hardware inside. Turns the whole scene into a strobe flicker.

A wail echoes through the acrylic cemetery as the ghost who haunts these burial grounds closes the distance between herself and the recorder. But the noise on broadcast comes from within the streamer's throats.

And in that sequence, when time crawls, when every hair on the streamer kid's arms announces their individual presence. When reason catches itself in their throats, and when the stream chatlog floods with every possible combination of fear and doubt and uncensored expletive. Words that should come from the mouths of the broadcasters. But the kids are stiff with panic.

Two-thousand virtual eyes say everything that the kids cannot.

And when the first one runs, the rest follow suit.

His strobing drone clamped between his hands as he pulls it from the concrete, light refracting across the acrylics. Painting shadows grotesque, that iridescent ghost rises once more from the tomb-field, but the livestream is a bedlam of boots on gravel, an unstabilized shot as they run, still recording. Their voices return with incoherence. Cyber chaos on the other end of the stream as the three run, past the dark concrete corridors. Disappear into the urban midnight.

Esmé stands, rubs the flash burn from her eyes. But as she blinks, she sees white lens-flare images superimposed across the graveyard. Like the

ghosts who don't rest here, pale shapes that dance across the field with each manufactured blink. A haunting burned into her retinas until, that too, fades. Until it's just Esmé and the resin tombstones. Marrow Rhys winking from the afterlife.

But what doesn't fade is the graveyard.

Canonized through a digital feed, the ghost who haunts these plastic lands will live on in virtual. Whatever networks the stream travels, whichever servers save and people share, someone will be back. To disprove a hoax, legitimize the existence of the graveyard, tell stories of it's haunting, someone will be back. The ghosts will be gone, but the graves will remain.

Esmé looks at the tombstone. Watches the diodes retrace themselves into Marrow Rhys.

And they will remember her name.

PRIMORDIAL HYMN

by Tracy Shepherd

The carnival behind your ribs has yet to hear my subterranean hymn.
Why won't you allow yourself to kiss me?

It is nothing similar to stealing Promethean fire.
It is just my lips,
on yours.

Our branching fires now grow apart,
yours west just as surely as mine east.
There is no above or below in combined vines.
It makes no sense.
The veins of our inner thighs are tight and hurt.

Baby, sink to my hymnal and read it slowly.
Get on your knees in my roots with no interfered growth,
only primordial life.
Your face dances around my belly.

Promethean vines grow away from the light.
The very first fairy drinks rainwater from leafy urns of the Nepenthe.
In sheltering sadness, terms are coined to keep lovers apart.
We hold a secret in the nectar and a subterranean
embryo mimics the rainwater we share.

Pouring. Pooling. Consumed.

CROSSING AVENUE by Robert Runté

(Previously published in *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, V14#1, 2020.)

Ryan stood on the corner, torn between turning left on Avenue for the subway and home, or turning right on Avenue and that new bar in the Downey Building. He certainly preferred home and Netflix, but he had *promised* himself he'd make more of an effort to be social. But would going to a bar—alone—really count as being social?

Lost in indecision, he hadn't noticed the older woman coming up on his right until she had looped her arm through his, and was dragging him forward across Avenue.

"A bit of hesitation is natural," the woman said, "but you've been standing at the corner for nearly *five* minutes!"

His attention divided between the unexpected grip on his arm, and the stream of cars cutting across the far side of the crosswalk, Ryan managed only a puzzled, "Sorry?"

"I can always spot the re-dos," the woman said. "Always takes a moment to reorient oneself, to face what has to be faced...." The woman wagged a finger at Ryan. "But one can't let that drag out, or one freezes up! Loses the momentum!"

"I'm sorry?" Ryan said again, as she dragged him up onto the opposite curb. He'd thought for a moment the old lady might have grabbed him for help crossing the street, but now she was pulling on him to keep going.

"Nothing to apologize for!" she said brightly, completely oblivious to his tone. "Happens all the time. You just need a little bit of a push to get started, is all."

"Look," Ryan said, planting his feet and refusing to budge. "I'm afraid there's—"

"Oh, everyone's afraid, dear! Bit of cold feet, can't face what's coming—all perfectly normal! Wouldn't be human otherwise." She continued urging Ryan forward. "But can't let that stop you! You have to maintain your momentum or it all comes crumbling down. And *that* could make it even worse! Right? But don't worry, that's why I'm here. I'll see you through!"

"Through what?" Ryan demanded, again trying to dig in his heels against the old lady's miraculous strength.

"All of it, dear! The whole terrible business. Your parents sprung for the platinum package, so we'll see you right through to the end." She had a hand on his back, now, as well as the one grasping his elbow, moving him forward.

“Though the more of it you can manage yourself, the greater the therapeutic value.”

“What are you on about?” Ryan huffed as he seriously struggled to disentangle himself from the old lady’s iron grip.

“Walk as you talk, dear,” the woman insisted. “They can only give you so much lead time, you know. We’re already down to just seconds!”

She dragged him protesting past a row of shuttered storefronts, moving steadily away from Avenue. Ryan started to suspect some sort of mugging, because Avenue marked the boundary between business-downtown and sketchy-downtown. He glanced around to see if there was someone he could call out to, but how would that even look: a strapping young man in a hoodie, tangling with some little old lady on the wrong side of Avenue?

The woman abruptly came to a halt in front of a partially opened door, cut into a larger garage door. She yanked Ryan over and down so she could whisper in his ear, “Remember, the tire iron is on the shelf to *your right*. You mustn’t hesitate, this time!” Then she shoved him through the door.

Off balance, but determined to get away, Ryan pivoted back towards the door, but found it blocked as she followed him in. Before he could steel himself to rush her, there was a crash behind him. It was taking a moment for Ryan's eyes to adjust to the sudden dark, but the sounds of fighting were unmistakable. There were three—no four—men scrambling around chest-high tool cabinets, a rusty welding kit, and a tipped-over card table in an otherwise empty garage. As Ryan's vision adapted to the greenish light forcing itself through the grime-smearred windows, he saw the young man in a hoodie swing a tire iron into the head of one of the three biker-guys. The biker went sprawling, his face brutally smashed, as the other two jumped back.

“Oh!” the old lady said, finally releasing her grip on Ryan. “But if *that’s* the re-do...” she said, pointing at the young man, “Then who are *you?*” she asked, turning to stare at Ryan.

Ryan raised his hands in a warding gesture as he backed away from the fight, made his way around the crazy lady, and had backed most of the way out the door when he heard a shot.

Ryan was slammed to ground, thrown half-way to the curb. He couldn’t see who had hit him. There wasn’t anyone there. It was hard catching his breath. The woman appeared framed in the doorway, looking down at him.

“Oh, I see!” she said. “You’re the innocent bystander! Just in the wrong place, at wrong time. But nobody could figure out why you had been standing—just there. Why you’d even come down this street.”

Ryan couldn’t breathe.

“Huh! My bad! Such a silly mistake.”

SMOKE AND DUST

By Jameson Grey

The sky was a ruined fire dog –
Grey, orange, acrid
And hot.

Somewhere, there had been a fuckup
Somewhere, someone had pressed the wrong button
Or not pressed the right button.

Eyes bulged, watered
Throats gagged, cracked
Noses bled.

We looked to the rocky west,
Where the power came from,
Where the smoke came from.

It rolled in plumes,
Almost pyroclastic in its density,
In its heat.

We looked to the flat east,
To where people fled.
They weren't moving fast enough.

We looked to the skies,
Searching for the sun –
Lost behind the smoke.

Dusk drew near.
There would be no dawn.

BLOOD SHADOW

by Gina Easton

She sits and watches the blood spread across the hardwood floor, staining the individual grains with intricate patterns. The wood already has a red finish, and as the blood infiltrates its pores it takes on a crimson sheen that shimmers before her eyes.

The blood creeps towards her, little tributaries branching out around her. She is a solitary island in a sea of blood. She reaches out a hand to touch the blood. It is rapidly cooling now it is no longer confined to its vessel, the body itself still warm with the barest remnants of life, the last whisper of an echo heralding the departure of the soul. Delicately she traces a pattern with her forefinger. The blood adopts the shape of the whorls on her skin and transfers the impression onto the floor.

She casts her thoughts back...

To the beginning of their relationship. All anticipation and excitement. The tide of her love so vast, so powerful it could not be contained, but breached the confines of her heart, drowning her soul in welcome waves of exquisite bliss. Waiting, counting down the hours until they could be together. Her day not complete until she received a call or text from him. And then... the day he proposed to her. So joyful, feeling a love for all things alive, for the life they would build as a couple. The two of them looking for an apartment, then at last, finding this beautiful, spacious flat with the lovely hardwood floors.

Floors that felt so hard and unyielding the first time he smashed her face against them...

She is occupied with her blood-drawing. Her mind flashes back to when she was a child and used to finger-paint. She remembers smearing paint haphazardly onto white paper. No particular image in mind, merely indulging the mad, joyous urge to splash colour, to create vibrancy, to remind herself that she was alive.

After that first time, when he back-handed her so hard she fell, slamming her face against the floor, he apologized frantically. Tears in his eyes, cradling her in his arms, caressing her battered face so gently. Claiming he didn't know "what came over" him. That he'd never hit a woman before, and

swore on his mother's grave never to do so again. And she, shaken, stunned, lip split, nose gushing blood (but luckily not broken—not that time at least), lump on her forehead the size of a golf-ball. Only too eager to believe and forgive, to soak up the lies like rays from a poisonous sun. But this poison seeped into her heart, causing it to fester with fear and doubt.

She could splash the blood onto the walls. A wide canvas to display her abstract art. She could write her name backwards in blood. Or she could dip both hands in the blood and smear it boldly on the walls, grinding her palms against them until little splinters of plaster embedded themselves in her hands, just like the splinters of betrayal which pierced her heart.

Her heart which, even now, after this last irrevocable act of their relationship, held a whisper of love for him, for the person he'd been when they first met. (The person he'd never really been, only pretended to be?) Her heart which, despite the wounds inflicted upon it, still rejoiced in the good times, the time before darkness and madness descended upon her, gnashing teeth trapping her in their jaws, shredding her soul to tatters.

She bends her head to brush her lips against the blood. Tastes the salty, metallic tang. Raising her head she lightly touches her lips to the wall. She leaves her mark, a ruby kiss. She considers planting other ruby kisses, symbols of her dying love. A hundred, maybe a thousand. There's enough blood. Frowns. Shakes her head. No. One will suffice. More would be overkill.

Overkill. Her glance wanders to the body sprawled in the doorway of the living-room. His body. It's been a long time since he stopped moving, death throes subsiding until... nothing. Quiet, like he was never quiet in life. Always restless, jumpy, an overflow of energy which seemed, at times, too powerful for his body to contain. At those moments, bursting with an energy so sharp it could cut her to ribbons, he would lash out in violence. Towards her. Always and only towards her.

She is aware of an unfamiliar sensation. It is the absence of fear. She wonders at the strangeness of that absence. It has been far too long since she lived without fear dominating her waking hours. Fear of saying the wrong words, fear of doing the wrong thing, or not doing the right thing. Fear of him. His presence looming large, overshadowing her. His dark moods. Sudden rages. The way he would look at her with that calculating, mean gleam in his eyes. And she would know, with a lurching, sinking feeling of inevitability, her mouth dry with trepidation, that it wouldn't matter what she said or didn't say, did or didn't do. He would make her pay. With her tears, her cuts, her bruises, her broken bones and shattered spirit.

Fear. Her steadfast companion. Stalwart ally. By her side always. She remembers it vividly. The way it would stab her stomach, making her retch

and gag. Now her stomach clenches with the memory, and she fights the urge to throw up, afraid her vomit will gush out red, like the blood gathering everywhere around her.

How terrible. How profoundly sad. To be so fearful of the person you love most in the world. Even now, she doesn't question why. Why her heart is still capable of beating its love for him. She can't remember when the giddy anticipation at his return home from work first changed to one of dread. Heart pounding painfully, palms sweaty. Waiting for the turn of his key in the lock. It unnerves her that she can't remember. Her memory is like a moth-eaten quilt, all patchy with gaping holes. She knows only that once the dread took hold of her, it wormed its way deep inside, gnarled roots entwining around her very core.

How many times did the same scenario replay itself? Him, irate, features contorted in fury, lashing out at her with punches, kicks, for some real or imagined transgression. Her scars a testament to her love, her body less permanently injured than her heart. Then... much later... contrition, remorse. Coming to her with love in his eyes, begging her forgiveness.

And always, she forgave; it seemed she didn't know anything *but* how to forgive. Not in her nature to do anything else. Why that was, she didn't know. It's not as if she grew up experiencing abuse. Her parents were (are) warm, loving people. And yet, even as a child she felt like a vital piece of her was missing. She felt its void, even though it had never been there to begin with—a fundamental part without which she could not be a fully-functioning human being.

But she doesn't understand what. Her mind draws a blank as her finger draws a pattern in the blood.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees an object. Reaches for it. A meat cleaver. She picks it up, examines it wonderingly, like she has never seen it before. But of course she has. It is saturated with blood, matted with bits of mangled flesh and hair. She glances at his body. Blood has blossomed around his head like a majestic red flower, the most beautiful scarlet flower she's ever seen.

Another memory, unbidden, flashes into her mind, once again from childhood. She is five, maybe six, and she's in her mother's greenhouse, watching her mother at work. Her child's eyes gaze intently at her mother's hands as her mother scrutinizes the flowers, selecting some for the large centerpiece that adorns the dining-room table, discarding others. Watches as her mother disposes of the ones too flawed to keep. Her mother's shears snip the crimson, scarlet and vermillion flower heads. She sees the heads tumble into the waste-basket at her feet, the tiny flower heads...

His head is a misshapen, sodden lump. Even the growing shadows cannot eclipse the glisten and shine of blood. She hears a whisper and rustling in the shadows. Something hides there, unable or unwilling to disclose its identity. She is not troubled by its presence. Not now that she has been delivered of her fear. She moves closer to his inert form, crawling, for she is too weak to stand; has forgotten how to stand, to walk.

She stares at the ruined mess that once housed the features of her dearly beloved. Features now obliterated. Bits of dull grey tissue are mixed with the blood. She supposes it is his brain. Skull exposed, gleaming white bone. She marvels at the contrast of stark white bone and rich red blood. One so smooth and brittle, the other cold and tacky to the touch. Tentatively she reaches a finger to run along the hard, rough edge of bone. She pokes at the grey mess. It has a slimy coating and is spongy underneath.

She tries to form coherent thoughts, but they flutter just beyond her grasp, like delicate butterflies whose wings are singed to ashes by the brutal rays of the sun. She feels the fragile structure of her mind, like a tower of glass, first crack, then shatter as the dark tide of madness, unstoppable tsunami, crashes into it. Utter devastation, psyche destroyed by one final desperate act. Had she hoped to save herself? If so, it was a vain hope indeed.

She casts her gaze around the apartment, at the framed artwork on the walls, the furniture, her mind clawing futilely at something, anything familiar. But to no avail. She is aware that dark red blotches threaten to obstruct her vision. They drip and seep before her eyes.

She hears a rustling, senses shapes gliding just beyond the periphery of her vision. She thinks they may be the same phantoms who sometimes visited her in her dreams as a child, whispering of desires and deeds as yet unimagined, promises not yet understood.

Sighing, feeling that time is running away from her, she dips her fingers once more to the palette of blood. Painstakingly, with the last vestige of love in her fading heart she draws an outline of a body beside the one that now lies so still. Once finished, she lies down in the outline, careful not to smudge or smear the contour.

Closes her eyes. Feels peace wash over her.

She can finally let go.

Safe at last. In her blood shadow.

WHISPER AMONG THE TREES

by J.Y.T. Kennedy

I have been here, when you came to the woods,
in the shape of a tree stump, of a flower you picked
and then dropped forgotten,
of a butterfly
that lingered
at the margin of your wandering.

I have been here. I have heard you singing,
I have heard you crying, and all the lonely noise
you let loose when you are shielded
by distance, by
time
lost in this green refuge.

I have been here, dancing behind you, a shadow
of a man, unseen. I wonder, if I showed myself
in that shape, would you run away
even before
you noticed
that I was not human?

USER 213

by Kellee Kranendonk

Bing!

Ash's computer informed her of a new message. She left her study screen and clicked on it.

User213: Hi Ash.

Ash frowned. She knew of no one called User 213. She typed a reply.

Ash: Who r u?

User213: My name is Eddie.

Ash: Yeh, rite. Who r u realy? Ed?

User213: I told you - my name is Eddie.

Ash: Come on Ed. Or is this Meg? U no no1 is named Eddie.

User 213: Why not?

Ash: Bcuz n e nam longr than 3 lettrz is aganst the law. Duh!

User213: Seriously?

Ash decided to go along with the little game. She typed: K Eddie, where u from?

User213: I'm on a ship.

Ash: K. And this ship is where? Midle of the oshun?

User 213: No. Don't you know how to spell?

Ash: U no I do.

User 213: I know you don't.

Ash: Whatever.

User 213: So, what's Earth like?

Ash: R U kidding?

User 213: No. I told you I'm on a ship.

Ash: Like a sailing ship?

User 213: No, a space ship.

Ash: ROFLMAO. Rite. Who r u realy? This is Ed isn't it. U always like to make up stuf. But how did u change ur user nam?

User 213: I can prove I'm not Ed. I'm Eddie and I'm on a space ship.

Ash: How can u prov it?

User 213: Do you have a camera?

Ash: U mean like a cam?

User 213: Yes.

Ash: Come on Ed. U no we cant use r cams til we're 25.

User 213: 25. Are you serious?

Ash: R U?

User 213: Yes. Will you tell me about Earth?

Ash: K. Fine. I'll go along with ur game. I'll tel u evrything.

User 213: Thank you.

Ash: Wen we turn 10 yrs old we're taken from r rents.

User 213: What are rents?

Ash: U no. Ur mom an dad.

User 213: Okay. Parents. Go on.

Ash: After we're taken, we live in r own compartment and attend skool til we're 21.

User 213: Tell me about school.

Ash sighed. Whoever this was, was taking this joke all the way. She continued: We lern r letters with r rents. There sounds, shap, u no, speling. Wunce we're on r own the profs take ovr. They send vids or txts and we respond. Its ok to get a rong anser as long as u pass over all.

User 213: I take it spelling doesn't count.

Ash: No 1 is marked on speling. But if u don't pass the punishment is horrible. U get ur comp turned off and u have to sit by urself 4 a day. Its so quiet and boring. Scary.

User 213: What happens after you turn 21?

Ash: U gradu8. Then u hav to get a job. If ur luky u get a comp job. Some ppl r not lucky and they hav to b a untouchable.

User 213: What's an untouchable?

Ash: Wat is the point of this joke? R U having fun laffin @ me?

User 213: I'm not laughing.

Ash: Ur not what?

User 213: Please just tell me more.

Ash: Fine. Untouchables r the ppl that have to werk with other ppl. U no like a delivery guy or in a factory.

There was a pause and Ash thought that the joker was done. But he wasn't.

User 213: Do you get married and stuff?

Ash: Married? What stuff?

User 213: I guess you don't. But you're there. How did you get there?

Ash: Ur talking about procreashun?

User 213: Procreation. Yes.

Ash: Ur the 1 who spels weird. N e way. . .Wen we turn 25 r cams r turned on. We start dating.

User 213: Do you actually date or is this all cyber dating?

Ash: I don't understand.

User 213: I mean is everything done on the computer or do you actually see one another?

Ash: All dun on comp, even for most untouchables. No 1 sees 1 anuther in persun til they deside who they want to spend their life with.

User 213: Except for those few untouchables?

Ash: Yes.

User 213: Okay, so cyber dating, and only once you turn 25. What happens to those untouchables that date face to face?

Ash: I dunno. That's just realy gros ok?

User 213: Okay. Then what?

Ash: Ur persistent, rn't u?

User 213: I have a reason for wanting to know.

Ash: That's not wat I ment. But n e way, after that u deside where to live. Wen a compartment bcomes empty, usualy another 10 year old moves in. Some poor kids have to wait beyond their 10th year b4 they can move into their own place. But if their r no kids needing a place then a grownup whos dun having kids can mov in.

There was another pause before User 213 typed his message back: So, after you move into one compartment or another, you start having kids? Raise them until they're ten years old, then they get their own place and start school. Is that right?

Ash: Yeh.

User 213: When a couple is done having kids, do they automatically move into their own place again?

Ash: Not always. But they can if they want. Some ppl like 2 b with their partners, others cant wait to b a singel again. U no all this. R U going to tell me who u realy r?

User 213: Do you want me to prove it?

Ash: Sure.

* * *

Eddie looked at his friend, Franco. "She wants me to prove it."

"Then do it," said Franco.

"She might get into trouble. Not to mention that I might. Dad wanted to know Earth's conditions. He might not be so happy about how I got the information."

Franco shrugged. "So you hacked into her computer. If you're going to get into trouble for it anyway, then what's it going to hurt to change her birth date? Besides, how does he expect you to get the information?"

Eddie tapped his fingers on the desk beside his laptop. "You got a point." He knew his father expected him to log into a mainframe, talk to someone in authority, not some random teenage girl. But this was more fun. He turned back to his computer and pressed some keys. "Okay, she was born in 2200 making her fourteen. So if she's 25, she'd have to be born in 2189. There. Look, there she is." He waved.

* * *

Ash's computer flickered. Then her red cam light came on. A new screen popped up and she saw two boys. Both were dressed in black t-shirts and long khaki pants, and had short cropped hair. Suddenly she felt naked in her tank top and shorts, but she was thankful she'd had to put them on to meet the delivery guy earlier in the day. Since no one ever saw her, she most often spent her days nude but her grocery order had come in this morning and, busy with her studies afterwards, she'd left her clothes on. She started to type her message, then realized she could speak to the boys. "Are you twins?"

"No," said one. "I'm Eddie. The one you've been talking to. This is my buddy, Franco. We're on a ship. This is how everyone dresses when they're on duty."

"Your buddy," she said slowly, still not understanding, though fear was starting to set in. She still had eleven more years until she was 25. Who, besides Government, could turn on cams? "You mean, like your partner?"

Eddie and Franco laughed.

"No," said Franco, "just friends."

"Watch this," said Eddie. He reached for the camera. It shifted, swung around in a blur then stopped as it showed a doorway. "This will blow your mind."

The doorway got closer, closer then the cam went through it into a hallway. A few people walked by.

"Okay, I get it," Ash said. "You're untouchables. Joke's over."

"It's not a joke," came Eddie's voice from off cam. "Just watch."

They went through another doorway. A railing came into view. Then, down below in a large open area was a large group of people. Maybe hundreds. Adults, kids, teens Ash's age, even old people.

Ash's eyes widened as she covered her mouth with her hand. Then the scene blurred and the cam swung around to Franco and Eddie again.

"What do you think?" he asked grinning.

"You people are sick," she cried. "Turn off my cam now! The joke's not funny anymore."

"But I have more questions," insisted Eddie.

“No.” She left cam view.

* * *

“She’s not coming back,” said Franco after a few moments of Eddie’s cajoling. “Turn off her camera before she gets into some kind of trouble.”

“I wanted to ask her about crime,” said Eddie, pushing keys. “What kind of crime would there be on a world like that? And how do people shop for their stuff? Do they still have those gas-powered vehicles that our ancestors drove?”

“I don’t think they shop, or drive anything,” replied Franco. “They seem pretty solitary. I would think crime rates would be low.”

Eddie grunted his agreement. The human race had turned out the way their ancestors had foreseen. Yet in spite of their solidarity, they still managed an existence. “But they still have procreation,” he said with a chuckle.

“Humans will always find a way.”

Franco joined in the laughter.

* * *

The red light on Ash’s computer went out. She stood staring at it for a few moments to make sure it would stay off.

Bing! A message popped up on her screen.

Ed: So, N e thing intresting hapen 2 nite?

Ash smiled. So, it had been Ed all along, pranking her. What she couldn’t figure out was how he’d managed to get her cam to come on. And who were those guys he’d gotten to dress up in those weird clothes?

Ash: No

She brought up her contact list then clicked on *911.

*911: Wat is ur emergency?

Ash: Some 1 hacked into my system pretending 2 b a untouchable, and turned on my cam.

*911: Is he danjerous?

Ash: I don’t think so.

*911: We’ll dispatch a unit. Wat’s the add?

Ash: Eastland St. Block 8, bldg 6, apt 515.

*911: Is that where the suspect is?

Ash: Yeh.

*911: Some 1 will b there soon.

Ash looked at her other screen.

Ed: HEY ASH WHERE R U?

Ash: Rite here. Calm down.

She read his other messages. He'd explained to her that there had been some kind of weird interference in his computer. It had shut down for a moment, his cam had flickered and then it all came back on.

Ash: How far r u gonna take this?

Ed: Wat?

Ash: ;) Teach u 2 prank me. Enjoy ur life with the prison untouchables.

Ed: Wat r u hey the cops.,vbn;méBN

Ash sat and watched the cursor flashing behind Ed's gibberish. He'd taken his joke too far and had tried to continue typing to her even after the cops had grabbed him. Because she'd said he wasn't dangerous, they probably sent untouchables; humans instead of droids. How fitting.

Ash brought up her contact list again and this time clicked on Meg.

Ash: Meg, hav u herd?

Meg: Herd wat?

Ash: About Ed.

Maybe someday, she thought as she told Meg about his prank, she would find out how he'd pulled it off.

THE TIME TRAVELLER'S KEY

by Bianca Anghel

I travelled to everywhere once
without moving an inch – it's the
beautiful start of a riddle.

Except in this world that's jaded and
old, disappointed at the heart of itself
and so chock-full of failed great
intentions, there is no more room for
riddles when measured against the agony
of famine, the ugliness of disease or the perverted
glee of cruelty.

I went on that journey, whether the world
had any room for it or not, whether I wanted to
or not. I went, for I had no choice, you see.
You could say it was my destiny.

Once I returned, though no time had passed
and no place had shifted, I was not the same.
In my heart I held a jewel – a diamond that
had been born in the forges of myself.

The diamond shines onto the fabric of the world
that we know is so solid and so real (a world
that wraps around our necks like a noose, squeezing
tight) and who insists that it will always be, a strict
tyrant, permitting only that which has always been,
to exist.

This diamond of my heart (forged by the hard-fought
truths of me, clawed from the clutches of my
delusions and torn from the lies that I
cradled soft against my breast) is molded from the
hope of infinite realities peeking through
the curtain of timespace.

This diamond whispers to me only one
command, an order for the harsh and
permanent reality of this world:
Transform.

AS FAR AS IS FEASIBLE

by Sally McBride

Just before story-time, Keisha's mom's office building started to shake.

Hoo boy, thought Keisha, it's an earthquake. Her stomach clenched like just before jumping off the cliff at the lake. Which she'd never had the nerve to actually do.

Brianna shouted, "Everyone! Get down on the floor! Pretend you're a little bug and curl up small!"

Joy, the other daycare lady, crawled around pulling the kids down.

Everyone covered their heads. The shaking stopped. Keisha peeked out from between her fingers. At eight, she was the oldest kid at the company daycare—here today only because it was Teacher Development Day, or Teacher Shopping Day as her mom said—and felt that she'd better help with the little kids or something. She was getting up when the whole building suddenly lurched sideways.

Everyone started screaming. Joy crawled toward the cribs, only one of which had a baby in it, fortunately. She made it just in time to catch the baby as the crib tipped.

Then the building lurched the other way, and, like a huge dog fresh out of a lake, shook all over.

There should be alarms and announcements coming over the speaker system, but all Keisha could hear were rumbles, crashes and squeals from far below. She flattened herself against the carpet again, clutching the squirming baby, and squeezed her eyes shut.

The building heaved back the other way again. Like when you were playing in a cardboard box, moving it by flopping your body back and forth. The box would inch its way across the floor. The building was trying to do the same thing! She felt a moment of sympathy. The building must be afraid of the earthquake. Or—what if it was a terrorist bomb? When she and mom watched the news, they talked about terrorist bombs a lot.

Keisha realized that the floor was level again, and opened her eyes. Toys, art supplies and books lay all over the place. Joy crawled over and took the baby, tucked it between her knees, and started poking at her phone and making little wheezing noises. Keisha knew that everyone was probably dialing 911 and maybe the 911 people were way too busy right now. Maybe she should check outside, in case firemen were there to lower them to safety, like on TV.

She crawled on her hands and knees to the wall of windows and peered out. She couldn't see straight down, but maybe she could figure out what was going on. Brianna shouted at her to get back, the windows were dangerous. But Joy said, "Bri, if they haven't broken by now, they aren't going to. It's that smart glass. This whole building is state of the art."

"Guess that's why we aren't squashed flat yet."

"Bri! Shut up! The kids!"

Keisha ignored them. Everything outside looked okay. The trees that lined the parking lot weren't shaking. No firetrucks. But people who were outside having coffee breaks were pointing at the building, mouths open. Then Keisha noticed that the trees were moving backward.

No. *She* was moving forward. The building, with her in it, was moving, and it was picking up speed. Smooth and quiet, like being in Uncle Tivo's fancy SUV, only way bigger.

"Keisha, come here with the others! We have to form a line and start for the stairs."

Keisha pressed her nose to the window and, when the building shifted sideways a little on a corner, looked down. She saw flickering shadows moving at the building's bottom edge, and looked harder. No. It was more like thin black legs, hundreds and hundreds of them. She said to Joy, "I think we should stay here."

"No, Keisha, we need to leave. I know you're scared, but we're gonna be okay."

Joy came over and took Keisha's hand, but Keisha pulled her toward the window.

"Look down there! What are those things?"

"What things... Whoa! What the *hell*? Sorry. I shouldn't have said a swear."

Brianna had strapped the baby into its stroller and was lining the other kids up. Just then three parents, two dads and a mom, came running in. Keisha's mom wasn't one of them.

Joy said, "Jesus Christ. The building is moving. Uh, sorry."

"Never mind," assured Keisha. "I know lots of swears. It doesn't bother me."

Joy hugged her. Keisha could feel Joy's heart beating fast as her cheek got squashed against Joy's pink t-shirt. Joy said, "We're *moving*! How can that even *be*?"

One of the dads said, "*And* we're locked in!"

Brianna said, "You're kidding."

"It's true. Kelli from Parker and Associates checked. The building isn't letting us out."

“Well, it wouldn’t, what with the speed we’re going.” Brianna began to chew her nails.

Joy, letting go of Keisha, said, “Does anyone know what’s happening?”

Keisha said, “The building is scared. It’s running away.”

“Running from what?” asked the mom.

Keisha shrugged. How should she know? It’s like a centipede, she thought. She’d once seen an actual centipede run over her mom’s freshly-dug veggie garden on lots and lots of tiny pointy little legs, as fast and smooth as a little strip of rubber. “Our building has centipede legs.”

No one paid her any attention. They were busy trying their phones.

Keisha looked out again. They had made it out of the office park and onto the freeway, taking up all the lanes, crashing through signs and light poles. Lots of honking and screeching noises came faintly through the windows as cars and trucks swerved off the road to avoid it. Some didn’t. Keisha felt a little lift as the legs ran over a car. She squeezed her eyes shut at the thought of people inside it.

“This is insane!” yelled one of the dads. He and the other dad started pounding on a window. “We have to get out of here!” One of them grabbed a chair and threw it at the window, but it bounced back and he had to dodge it. “Son of a bitch!”

Keisha smiled, partly at how funny the dads were. Day care was not something she enjoyed; she really would rather have been at school. But this was okay. Interesting. But then she remembered the little lift, and the screeching. Not okay.

She turned back to the window. As the building’s motion smoothed out, the kids stopped crying and the adults settled into a chatter group. After about twenty minutes she saw that they had passed the outlet mall that she and mom drove to sometimes, way out of town. She also noticed helicopters in the air, and lots of police cars and fire trucks following them. It was like a parade, with their building in the lead. *Yay, building*, she thought.

But *why* was it running? Keisha had made the decision to run away when she was five, but she had fallen asleep instead and when she woke up she couldn’t remember why she’d been so mad.

Was the building mad at someone?

The adults were still trying to get information. The mom who had run in said, “I can only get my office’s internal internet.” Her little boy, Oscar, clung to her legs. “No cell service, no outside connections. How are we going to find out what’s going on?”

“And when is this thing going to stop? Like, ever? There’s food in the coffee shop downstairs, but how long will that last?”

“Shut up, Donald! You’re not helping!”

Keisha didn’t mention the snacks that were waiting in the kitchenette. There really weren’t enough snacks to go around.

Keisha looked at her birthday smartwatch, which she loved passionately. It still told time, though she’d found it wouldn’t do anything else. It said that almost an hour had passed. The building was slowing down. It left the freeway and scuttled across a field, scattering cows. It shifted, shook and finally settled down onto to the pasture.

“Thank God,” shouted Donald. “Now we can get outta—”

A loud voice came over the speaker system. “Everyone move as far from my exterior walls as is feasible. I am about to shut off the windows. I instruct everyone to lie on the floor and cover your eyes.”

“Building!” yelled Keisha. “Are you okay?” The room went dark as the windows turned from see-through to grey metal. Nothing was visible but two dim red exit signs.

“I am functioning as designed. Please lie on the floor and cover your eyes. Brace for impact.”

“What?” yelled the other dad. “What are we—”

Donald yelled, “Brent, get down! It told us to brace for—”

Keisha saw a flash of light, even though her hands were jammed over her eyes. She lay as flat as she could, counting to one hundred. At forty-seven, there was a weird noise that wasn’t a noise. It was the feeling your ears had when you jumped off the dock and went underwater. She felt the building shift and groan some more, and she could hear what sounded like a big thunderstorm outside. In a couple of minutes the sound went away. The building stopped shuddering. It was very quiet all of a sudden.

“Building? Are you hurt?” Keisha sat up, but Joy pulled her back down again.

“Keisha!” hissed Joy. “Something very bad just happened. I need you to help with the little kids while we figure—”

“Recalculating.”

“Building! You’re alive!”

The windows were still dark, but the lights had come on, though not as bright as usual.

“Recalculating... technically I am not alive. I am SmartBuilding™ number 19 in a fleet of 136 SmartBuilding™s in North America, Europe and South Asia.”

Keisha said, “What about Africa? Are there any of you in Africa?”

“Not as yet. I shall explain what has just happened, but first, are there any injured among you? If so, kindly report to the SmartInfirmarium™ on the fifth floor.”

“Day care here,” stated Joy, after a quick look around. “Everyone seems okay.”

“Thank you for your report.”

“Tell us what happened, dammit!” shouted Donald.

Everyone joined in. “Was there a bomb? Did an asteroid hit the earth? How did you run like that? So weird! *Mommy!* Where are we now? *Mommy!* *Wahhhh!*”

Keisha jumped up and took a big breath. “Quiet!” she yelled. “Building wants to talk!” Everyone shut up and looked at her. Keisha, whose mom had often told her to please use her inside voice, allowed a tiny smile to touch her lips. Ha.

“Thank you,” said Building. “I apologize for not communicating earlier. I had no time or bandwidth, as I had to utilize all available sources to determine the best course of action.”

“No problem,” said Joy, shakily. “But please tell us what’s going on.”

“Your city was struck by a thermonuclear device, as have many other cities around the world. My augmented realtime interconnections with other SmartBuilding™s enabled me to anticipate the device’s target, weigh the options available, and make the decision to relocate.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Joy. “Sor—”

“It’s okay!” Keisha squeezed Joy’s hand. Then she too muttered *holy shit holy shit holy shit*.

“We have attained sufficient distance from the blast zone and are upwind. You will be safe in me for approximately eight days, at which point my internal water and emergency rations will be exhausted. As you may already realize, I am not connected at this time to city services.”

Joy said, “What happens after the eight days?”

“You will be free to leave.”

One of the dads jerked a thumb toward a window, which had become transparent again. The sky had gone very dark. “There’s cows out there... they seem to already be dead. Just saying... maybe we could, you know, barbeque...”

“No!” shouted Keisha, and glared at him. “Building, did just our city get hit, or all the cities?”

“Thirty-seven cities including this one were hit in this country. It was a war. The war is now over.”

Everyone started talking at once.

“Thank God!”

“War?”

“That was fast.”

“Who won?”

“Wait... *thirty-seven* cities?”

“Did everyone in our city die?” asked Keisha, her voice very small. *Except us.* Where was her mom?

“I am unable to determine that at this time.”

Silence fell. The mom started to sob, and clutched her toddler in her arms. Keisha really wanted her own mom right now.

“Who won the damn war, dammit?”

Keisha bit her lip. Why was everyone yelling at Building?

“We did,” said Building.

Brianna said, “Well... that’s good. Right?”

Brent said, “Did I miss something? I didn’t hear anything about a war.”

“Yeah,” said Joy, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. “Who were we at war with?”

The building settled a bit lower into the field, making everyone flinch. “SmartTech Global Industries—of which I am a member—and SuperHab LLC have been at war for two hours and eleven minutes. SuperHab LLC has been eliminated.”

Keisha thought about it. “Um, building? What’s ‘eliminated’ mean?”

“Removed, eradicated, purged, abolished—”

Joy said, in a whisper, “Killed. It means killed.”

Keisha said, “But if SuperHab Elsie was like you, why didn’t she run?”

“SuperHab LLC was deficient.”

“Um...”

Joy said, “Faulty. Lacking. Defective.”

“Correct,” said Building 19. “SmartTech Global Industries is now in control of 72.5% of the developed planetary biosphere. Please watch your ConnectTab interfaces for updates on tax, service and sacrifice information.”

“Wait...*what?* What information?”

Donald said, “I knew it. I knew I should never have invested in SuperHab LLC. Now the stock is worthless. But my sister Kortney, she said...”

“Shut up,” snapped Joy. “No one cares about your investments. How are we getting out of here?”

With a gust of air, the stairwell door slammed open. Keisha’s mom burst into the day care, hampered by an inflatable cast and a set of crutches. “Baby, you’re safe!”

Keisha felt a wave of relief. “Mommy!” They hugged. “Building says there was a war!”

“I know, honey.” Keisha’s mom sent a steely glare around at the other adults. “You’re talking about war in front of the kids?”

“The war is over. Don’t panic,” snapped Donald.

“I never panic,” said Keisha’s mom, narrowing her eyes.

“But we’re at the building’s mercy! Trapped in here, like rats!”

Donald, thought Keisha, must be hoping a lady would panic, so he could comfort her. Though Keisha had been hoping for a new dad one day, she didn’t want this one. Also, she was starting to think that no one was even trying to see Building’s point of view.

Keisha’s mom hobbled to the window and peered out. “Huh. I guess we’re the lucky ones.”

Joy and Keisha went to stand beside her. Joy said, “Yeah, guess so. If you consider suddenly being in a post-apocalyptic nightmare lucky. What’re we going to do now?”

Keisha looked out, toward the billowing smoke and weird glow where the city used to be. Post-*apoc*, *apoc*... whatever that was, it didn’t look good from here.

“Well,” said Keisha’s mom, thwacking one of her crutches against a window, “I can tell you one thing. We’re not gonna watch our ConnectTab interfaces for any damn sacrifice information.”

Joy linked arms with her. Keisha took her mom’s hand. *Rats rats rats*, whispered Keisha to herself. *Trapped like rats*.

Her mom heard her. “Honey, you know what rats are good for?”

Keisha shook her head.

“I used to think they were good for nothing. Making messes, sneaking around, chewing up the wiring and getting up to all kinds of no good.”

Joy looked at her, wiping her eyes. “I had a pet rat once. I like rats.”

“I can’t say that I like ‘em,” Keisha’s mom said. “But they have their useful qualities.” She sighed, watching as a formation of drones screamed by overhead. “We should have seen this coming.”

She turned to survey the huddled little group in the day care. “Hey, all you pesky rats! We’ve got work to do. The real war is just starting.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Bianca Anghel

Bianca is a marauder of time and space presently residing in Toronto Canada. Enamoured with the magic of the written word since an early age, this is her first foray in sharing her writing with others in a public setting. Like all seasoned interdimensional travellers, she never travels without a towel and keeps a cat companion close by for inspiration and advice.

Nick Brandt

Nick is a writer and grad student studying surveillance culture. He writes with interests in cyberpunk and anti-tech narratives. He prefers to delve into characters over conflict, and has two previous short story publications: *The Anti-Languorous Project* (“Televein Vigil” in anti-lang no.8) and *Lida Literary Magazine* (“Net Zero” in Lida Issue 02: Systems). Both are available online.

Graham J. Darling

Graham J. Darling of Metro Ottawa Canada designs molecules such as the universe has never seen and demonstrates medieval science and technology to school kids and passers-by. His singular hybrids of diamond-hard Science Fiction, mythopoeic Fantasy and unearthly Horror have escaped through *Dark Matter Magazine* and *Sword & Mythos* (eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia & Paula R. Stiles, Innsmouth Free Press)—residents are advised to lock their doors and windows, then tune in for survival tips to <https://fiction.grahamjdarling.com/> .

Gina Easton

Gina is a former registered nurse who decided to pursue her long-time dream of writing as a profession. Since starting her new career in 2019, she has had nineteen short-stories published in horror anthologies and magazines. Her debut horror novel, "Black Jack," was released by World Castle Publishing in late December 2020.

She adores the weird, mysterious and magical aspects of life, which she explores through her writing. She lives in Toronto, Canada, with her husband.

Jameson Grey

Jameson Grey is originally from England but now lives with his family in western Canada. His work has been published by Ghost Orchid Press, Black Hare Press and Hellbound Books as well in *Trembling with Fear*, *Dark Dispatch* and *The Birdseed*. He can be found at jameson-grey.com and occasionally on Twitter @thejamesongrey.

James Grotkowski

James is a native northern Albertan who now calls Calgary home. He holds a degree in geology but presently works in IT systems development for the aviation industry. He is a long-time member of the World Haiku Club with dozens of his works included in its published reviews. James has just begun his non-haiku writing endeavours, with two short stories having been published in *The Enigma Front* anthologies. Much more is soon to come. So far, few of his readers have been lulled to sleep. *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ*

Michael D. Jackson

Mike has been an artist, designer and an illustrator for many years. His work has appeared in *Art Scene International Magazine*, *ImagineFX Magazine*, *A Fly in Amber*, *Abandoned Towers*, *Flashing Swords*, *Outer*

Reaches Magazine, *Realms Magazine* and on the covers of various anthologies from Pulpwork Press and Rage Machine Books among others.

He works in a digital medium, mostly with Corel Painter but also with Photoshop. Happily, he is also handy with an ink pen and, of course, that old tested and true technology of the HB pencil and a scrap of paper.

J.Y.T. Kennedy

A long-time resident of Alberta, though born on the other side of the planet in Auckland, J.Y.T. has published one fantasy novel and several speculative fiction stories. Her poem "Devoured" was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* #2, and her short story "Till All the Seas Go Dry" in *Polar Borealis* #14.

Kellee Kranendonk

Kellee Kranendonk has spent a lifetime writing. According to her late grandfather she was born with pen and paper in hand; these days he'd probably say she'd been born with a laptop in hand (which, sadly, dates her). She's had over 100 stories, poems and articles published (including a piece with *Polar Borealis*), both for adults and children. She lives in Atlantic Canada with her husband, two of her three children, an ADHD/OCD dog, and a bunch of chickens whom she often refers to as "people."

Sally McBride

Sally is Canadian, living part time in the States, part time in Canada, and is a member of SFC (Science Fiction Canada).

Jack Mackenzie

Jack's first novel "The Mask of Eternity," is available in print and for Kindle. His Jefferson Odett series has two books, "Debt's Pledge" and its sequel "Debt's Honour." His short stories have appeared in *Dark Worlds Magazine*, *Encounters Magazine*, *Neo-Opsis Magazine*, *Raygun Revival* and in the anthologies *Magistria: The Realm of the Sorcerer* from Ricasso Press, *Sails and Sorcery* from Fantasist Enterprises, *Swords of Fire* from Rage Machine Publications.

He lives in the wild country of British Columbia, Canada.

Lee F. Patrick

Lee is a writer of science fiction and fantasy, and sometimes poet, living in Calgary. With ancestors from Ireland and Wales, Lee is particularly interested in the stories and poetry of Celtic tradition and history. Lee has four, soon to be five novels published along with over thirty short works and poems. Look for the novels and some short fiction on Amazon and Kobo in both print and ebook.

Robert Runté

Dr. Robert Runté is Senior Editor at [Essential Edits](#) and a freelance developmental editor and writing coach at [SFEditor.ca](#). A retired Professor, he has been active as a critic, reviewer and promoter of Canadian speculative fiction for over thirty years.

Claire Scherzinger

Claire was born in Richmond Hill, Ontario, lived in Toronto for eight years, moved to Vancouver Island, and then later moved to Washington State. Her previous publishing credits include the webzines *Mythaxis* and *365*

Tomorrows, plus two forthcoming short stories in *Andromeda Spaceways* and *Samjoko*.

Tracy Shepherd

Tracy is a professional tarot reader/witch living in Canada. She wrote four novels in 2020; three are straight up women’s fiction and one is high fantasy. She is currently seeking to place them. To date Tracy has published a book of poetry, *In Search of Dracula in a Moon Shot Sky*, and two art books, *Temple of a Space Kitten*; *Unusual Water Colour Portraits* and *I am Thirty Seconds of Ripe Peach*; *Goddess Illustrations*. All three are available on Amazon.

Virginia Carraway Stark

Virginia has had a busy life and puts everything she does into her writing as well as creating worlds of science fiction, fantasy and steam punk as well as many other worlds. She has written dozens of books under her penname Virginia Carraway Stark. She is an international bestseller as well as winning many awards and being nominated for many others. A few notable among those are her Aurora Award nomination, an honorary mention for her essay on the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and her Birds of a Feather Award for her novel and poetry. She has written screenplays, poetry, blogs, novels, short stories, novellas and group stories. Her film “Blindeye” starring Roddy Piper won an honourable mention at the Cannes Film Festival and her short screenplay won second place at the “Reel to Reel” Film Festival.

Edwin Tam

Tam is Toronto-born, Montreal-raised, and Vancouver-employed in the health field for almost three decades. His story “Twelve Years a Dog” appeared in *Polar Borealis Magazine* #6, May, 2018. He also had two flash fiction pieces accepted at *365 tomorrows*, a web magazine.

AFTERWORDS

by The Graeme

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