

SOFT STAR MAGAZINE



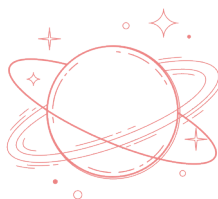
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Soft Star Magazine

ISSUE ONE

Fall 2022



TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Case for Optimistic Futurism	8
---	---

*Editor's Note * Miranda Adkins*

PART ONE: UNDER THE SUN

The Location of the House Was Perfect but There Was Too Much Space	12
---	----

*Fiction * James C. Holland*

After the Rain	15
-----------------------	----

*Poetry * Ivan de Monbrison*

Eliot's Creed	16
----------------------	----

*Poetry * Adora Williams*

La Asíntota	18
--------------------	----

*Fiction * Dustin Michael*

The Poet, His Husband, and the Fox	23
---	----

*Fiction * James Penha*

The Mission 35

*Fiction * Christine C. Hsu*

Each To See the Shine on the Sea 36

*Poetry * Sabrynne Buchholz*

Winter at Blue City 37

*Poetry * Fatimah Quadri Eniola*

The Ant 38

*Poetry * Fatimah Quadri Eniola*

The Arm 40

*Fiction * C.G. Inglis*

PART TWO: OVER THE MOON

Specular Reflection 50

*Poetry * Kaia Boyer*

One Day Is As A Thousand Years 52

*Creative Nonfiction * Bethany Jarmul*

Moon Milk Skin 54

*Poetry * Melissa Nunez*

The Mysteries of Dia Van-Burdick 56

*Creative Nonfiction * Dia VanGunten*

The Pictographer 61

*Fiction * Sarah Little*

hold on 64

*Poetry * Ilana Drake*

heavenly bodies 66

*Poetry * Micah McCutchan*

Bodies Craving Fusion 67

*Poetry * Charlotte Hamrick*

The One Who Waits 69

*Fiction * Marisca Pichette*

Lyra's Winston 73

*Fiction * Amy Marques*

PART THREE: AMONG THE STARS

The Gods of Science 83

*Fiction * Gemma Church*

Happy Holidays from Another World	91
<i>Fiction * Dori Lumpkin</i>	
Carina + Stephan	101
<i>Poetry * Britt Kaufmann</i>	
Three Prose Poems	102
<i>Poetry * Quinn Rennerfeldt</i>	
Eva	104
<i>Fiction * Lois L.K. Chan</i>	
Interpretive Dance at the Translation Division	108
<i>Fiction * E.J. Nash</i>	
Bill Heart Lea	114
<i>Fiction * Michael Fowler</i>	
Parasite Nerves	123
<i>Fiction * A.J. Van Belle</i>	
The Lifetime of a Star	127
<i>Fiction * Korinne West</i>	

PART FOUR: BEYOND

It Makes Me Afraid: Pascal, Infinity, and "Everything Everywhere All At Once" 144

*Essay * Evelyn Anne Clausen*

That Time the Planet Exploded 148

*Fiction * Francine Witte*

She's a Question Mark 151

*Fiction * Russ Bickerstaff*

If I Threw a Party 153

*Poetry * Kelli Lage*

Without Time 154

*Fiction * Teresa Berkowitz*

Sisyphus at the Edge 158

*Fiction * Robert Pettus*

VISUAL ARTIST CREDITS 162

THE CASE FOR OPTIMISTIC FUTURISM

By Miranda Adkins

Late last year, I was at a writer's meetup in a cozy bar in Queens when the concept for this magazine was born. I've had a special love for lit mags since college, when I served as design editor and EIC for Echo Literary Magazine. I found a lot of joy and fulfillment as a part of the small community of literary publications at my university, and since graduating I've long wanted to start a publication of my own.

I loved the idea of a genre publication, and I've been a huge fan of science fiction for as long as I can remember. But when I set about defining the ethos of this fledgling publication, I knew that I wanted to be more specific than that. One of the greatest joys I've found as an editor is sifting through submissions in order to curate a particular tone, a thesis for the publication told through the voices of many. I wanted Soft Star to have a message, a story of its own to tell. My favorite sci-fi and speculative fiction stories have always been the ones with a more human-centered focus, so I decided to focus on "soft" science fiction stories, including stories from the slipstream between realistic literary fiction and the fantastical.

I also decided, for better or worse, that Soft Star was going to be a source of optimism about the future. Dystopian stories have dominated the mainstream sci-fi space since I was a teenager, and frankly, I was bored. Dystopian art serves an important purpose in highlighting the dangerous tendencies of our world and the potential ramifications, and I certainly believe it has its place. It's difficult to look at the world today and not feel a sense of pessimism when it comes to the future, but I've started to find that pessimism suffocating. There has to be a way to dream about the future that doesn't end in existential dread.

To be clear, I'm not necessarily super optimistic about the future of the

human race as a whole. We, in general, have a pretty rough track record. War is accepted as a core behavior of our species. People are selfish. Sure, animals of other species are selfish too, but they don't have the same power to manipulate the world in a physical and far-reaching way. Here we are, building and razing cities, polluting rivers and oceans, burning forests to the ground. We develop and we destroy, and that takes its toll. We are very good at innovating and bouncing back, and I don't think we are inherently evil, but I think we are too powerful for our own good and that doesn't bode well for us.

But that doesn't mean that I'm not optimistic about the future. The universe is unfathomably enormous, and more than that, it's diverse. We humans will most certainly never know every possibility that this universe holds. But those unknown possibilities are awe-inspiring. Nebula clouds, volcanoes larger than the human mind can conceive, even different forms of life. Such an infinite set of possibilities is akin to magic -- effectively, anything is possible. And I think the most beautiful and awe-inspiring moments come from unexpected collisions between these fantastical phenomena.

Throughout history, humans have come face to face with surprises from the universe. Things that they didn't expect or didn't think possible. Sometimes that's scary. But mostly, it's awe inspiring. Those chance meetings and discoveries are what keeps us going as a species. We want to learn more, to see more, and every time we do it changes our world for the better. Discovery is a net positive in my eyes. And the future contains so many discoveries, by humans and by others. New things will happen, new combinations will occur, the universe will conceive of new ways to express its magic.

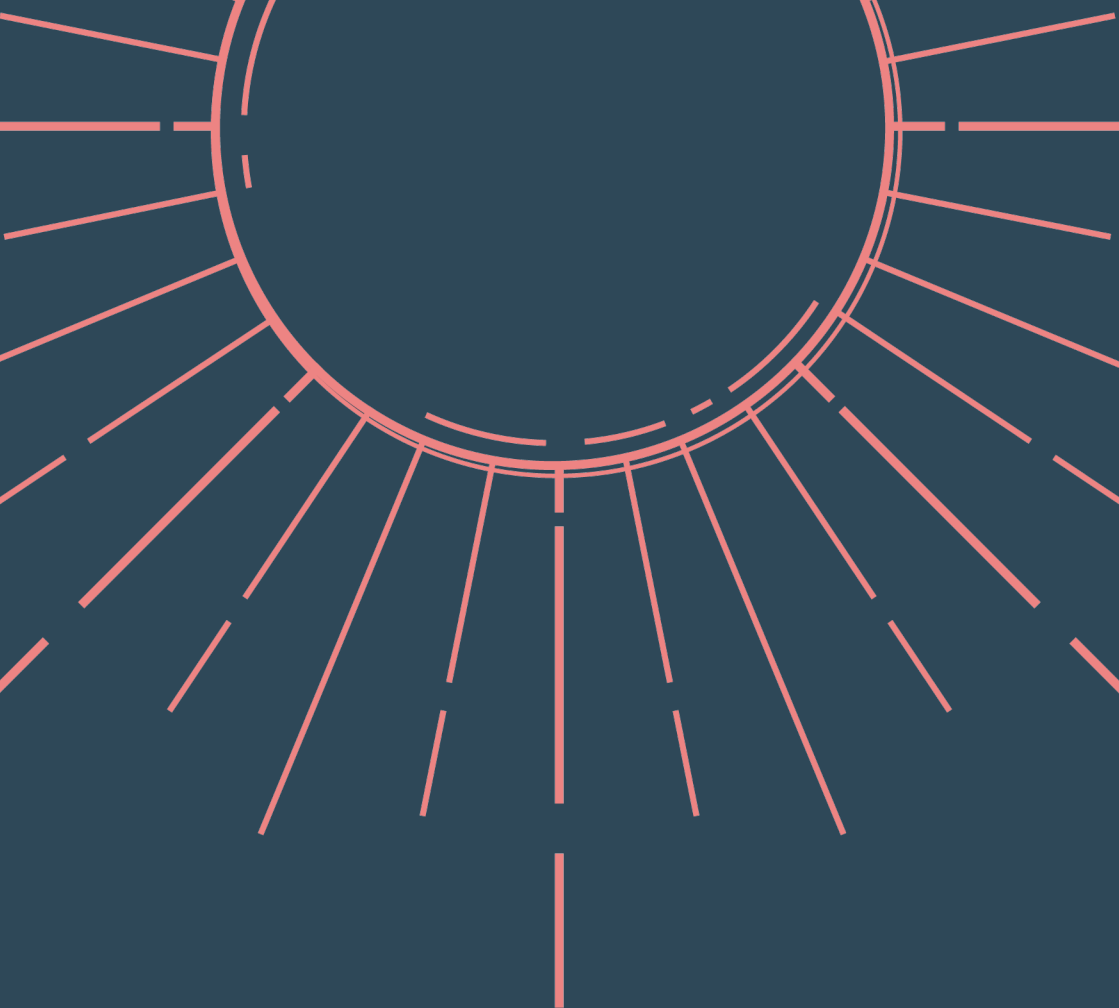
That's why I'm hopeful about the future, and that is the message I hope to convey through Soft Star. I know that magic is happening all the time, and that it will only continue. And I especially look forward to the ways in which humans will interact with that magic, and how it will change us. In general, I think that every time we come face to face with new surprises from outside of ourselves, it does change us for the better. We are humbled, we are inspired, and we are reminded of our innate need to explore.

Until next time,

Miranda Adkins

Editor-in-Chief

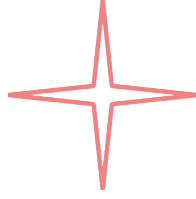
Soft Star Magazine





Part One

UNDER THE SUN



THE LOCATION OF THE HOUSE WAS PERFECT BUT THERE WAS TOO MUCH SPACE

By James C. Holland

"This is the master bedroom," said Tim, the realtor.

Jen looked around at the chintzy décor. It looked disgusting, but she could see the potential in the place. It just needed a lick of paint and a bit of love. She looked over at Keith, who was scowling at a lamp.

"It's a fantastic property," said Jen.

"Can I look in the attic?" said Keith.

The realtor beamed at them.

"Ah! Yes! That's a bit of a... feature, actually."

"Good. I really need the storage space for my Star Wars toys... I mean, collectibles. They're valuable!" Keith said defensively.

The realtor's smile didn't falter; he just stepped onto the landing and opened a hitherto unnoticed door.

"Ooh!" said Jen

"A secret door," said Keith

"Yes! Be careful on the stairs. They are rather steep and narrow... but they maximise the space available for this wonderful, wide, light, airy landing." Tim waved an arm over the perfectly normal landing. "After you," he waved his other arm toward the ladder-like stairs.

Jen noticed an odd glow as she ascended. She pushed herself up from the attic floor, then turned and stopped.

"Keith," she gasped, "Come and see!"

Keith huffed as he emerged from the floor with difficulty. He stood and saw.

Floating in mid-air at the centre of the generous attic space was a large ball made up of glittering points of light.

"What's this!?" Keith spat.

Tim emerged from the floor after him.

"It's the feature I mentioned. It's..." Tim looked for the right words, "As far as we can tell, it's the universe."

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Jen.

"It's taking up storage space, is what it is," grumbled Keith, "I assume the owner is taking it with them?"

"Ah. No. He passed away. Rather mysterious fellow. No known relatives."

"So, you're getting the house clearance people in?"

"It's been cleared as much as possible. We're not sure how to move an entire universe." Tim shrugged, "Some sort of artificial gravity well? Not my area, I'm afraid."

"So, we'd be stuck with it! I wondered why the price was so low. I thought it must be damp. But it turns out it's the universe."

Keith stepped toward the ball of tiny lights and raised his hand.

"Keith, don't!" cried Jen.

He poked one of the points of light with his finger. It flew apart into a thousand motes of brilliant dust.

"What was that!?" said Jen.

"I believe your husband just destroyed a galaxy."

"Fiancée," corrected Jen. "We're not married yet."

"So, we can get rid of it!" said Keith triumphantly.

"Yes... ish. It's actually our universe. So, in clearing the storage space, you would also be destroying yourselves. ...and all of creation."

Keith harrumphed as if he was still weighing it up.

The realtor continued optimistically.

"Other house-hunters have loved the revelation about the fractal nature of our existence. It's a conversation piece for the house warming!"

"We'll take it!" announced Jen. She turned and reversed down the ladder-stairs.

Keith despaired.

"But where will I put my Star Wars... collectibles?"

"Well," said the realtor, waving a hand at the universe, "In a way, they're already here."



James C. Holland is based in the UK and has recently concluded his series of alien invasion gardening columns for Bear Creek Gazette. He has also been published in Bureau of Complaint, Spare Parts Lit and The Story Nook. Previously he wrote an illustrated story for Brighton: The Graphic Novel by QueenSpark books. He has performed at the Edinburgh Festival in "Choose Your Own Edventure," an interactive storytelling show, and "Shoegazing," a stand-up show about shoes. He has long Covid which is exhausting but has given him time to discover the joys of flash fiction. Visit him on Twitter @james_c_holland or at www.jamescholland.com

AFTER THE RAIN

By Ivan de Monbrison

The Sun moves on an axis not horizontal but vertical,
It is an invisible thread made with the absolute.
The mind is a spider's web, it tries to catch thoughts
Like flies.
But, the dreams, them, like leaves, or ghosts,
pass through them and remain free,
in the static air as in a storm.

تتحرك الشمس على محور ليس أفقيًا بل عموديًا
إنه خيط غير مرئي ممتد في المطلق
العقل هو شبكة العنكبوت، يحاول التقاط الأفكار
مثل الذباب
لكن الأحلام، مثل الأوراق أو الأشباح
الذين يمرون عبرها ويظلون أحرارًا
في الهواء الثابت كما في العاصفة



Ivan de Monbrison is a French poet born in 1969. He has studied non-Western languages at the University of Oriental Languages in Paris. He has published several novels and poetry books in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and the US, between 1994 and 2021. His next book, Brambles, is due to come out in Wales next year.

ELIOT'S CREED

By Adora Williams

Are my beginnings where it
ends¹
Are all beginnings endings and the other way
around
Is everything anything else

Time is a watch
I've been watching the orbit of a lost star
and calculating

relatively to my dubious perception

when
the imprint of its light that has already
died will point to the spot where a bird
died in the top wire
in front of my house where kids fly kites to/for angels²

A place much older than me with its own history and I
made it mine when I arrived with a lost innocence and a pocket of dying will
tired and yearning to try again

Time doesn't really heal and when
you spend too much time in the outer world becomes too much space⁴

If my walls were made of wood
perhaps I'd be comfortable
with vulnerability

And³ the wind would crash it
 And there would be another crack in the barrier
 And the sun would probably burn every lasting structure I cherish
 And the water would invade it
 create life in it

And the walls would expel me

Someone else would make it their own

When they lost everything the end
and all begins

¹ My beginnings could have been located where it ends
My beginnings could have been when it ends
Isn't it sweet that where and when can be just the same thing?

² When I'm doing something to someone, I'm also doing it in their place
We are but a reflection of a random action happening sixty degrees opposite to us, amplified

⁴ Space and time were once the same
Before we took over, the sound was also

³ This conjunction was the
One responsible



Adora Williams has degrees in Journalism and Languages and writes poetry in Portuguese and English. She lives in a historic region of Brazil. Her poetry anthology, Mulher Poesia, in Portuguese is being published in Brazil and Portugal in December 2022.

LA ASÍNTOTA

By Dustin Michael

The playground had been shut for months, an old shell kind of empty, the clam long rotted out.

To celebrate this communal space's reopening, and to shake our collective fist at the pandemic that had closed it in the first place, the neighborhood collected some money to buy a new piece of playground equipment — a slide.

The slide arrived by moving truck one breezy spring Saturday in a series of crates that seemed to go on forever, each one wheeled by dolly inside the playground fence by an anxious-looking driver who did not bother trying to find anyone to sign for the delivery and who left without saying a word to anyone.

A crowd gathered to witness the new slide's construction, watching it uncoil itself from its packaging crates like a nest of drowsy snakes. Children darted gleefully between a labyrinth of crates all marked with the words "Borges Inc." in black spray paint. Slinking forward reluctantly to help erect the new slide came a handful of forlorn adults, each of us casting the same thousand-yard stare common to all veterans of DIY playground equipment projects, each of us resigned to laying untold hours of our weekend upon the altar of community improvement.

Gary, the paunchy recent divorcee from two cul de sacs over, stepped forward and drove a crowbar beneath the lid of the nearest crate. I was surprised to see him, as he was seldom seen outside of his shadowy bungalow and it was commonly assumed that he was working through a midlife crisis or something.

"Y'all ready to get at her?" Gary said as he passed. Gary's pronoun usage made it difficult to ever truly know who or what he was referring to. As a general rule, though, "y'all" served him indiscriminately as a catch-all second-per-

son pronoun and he assigned feminine pronouns to all objects.

Together, Gary and the rest of us opened and emptied the crates until we stood like a team of amateur fossil hunters over the scattered bones of a prehistoric leviathan. As luck would have it, the final crate contained a manual.

That isn't quite right, though.

The booklet that emerged from the packing kernels of the final crate resembled a museum artifact more closely than anything written by a modern technical writer. Its unevenly bound pages were yellowed and brittle at the edges. From my travels to psychological conferences in South America, I recognized its cover to be Argentine leather. Emblazoned on the cover by firebrand was a horizontal line intersected by a vertical line next to a sloping curve under the word Direcciones.

"The hell is this thing?" Gary sniffed, turning the booklet over and dangling it upside down between his thumb and forefinger before tossing it to the ground. "Shit ain't even English. They don't know this here's America?"

"We could go get Bev from Harmony Lane," someone suggested. "She knows Spanish. Her dad owns the Cuban restaurant."

"I love that place," someone else affirmed. A low murmur ensued in which it was agreed that the Cuban restaurant owned by Bev's father was objectively delightful.

"Instructions is for pussies, y'all," Gary declared. "Gimme that wrench."

Someone gave Gary that wrench. I picked up the booklet and opened the Argentine leather cover.

On the first page, in bold, handwritten letters, the following words appeared:

Ten cuidado. Este es una asíntota.

I glanced up at Gary and my other neighbors as they shuffled back and forth carrying sheet metal sections like a team of ants maneuvering the shimmering wings of a dead dragonfly. Then I turned to the next page of the booklet and saw a mathematical function.

More lists of numbers and figures followed. From what I could tell, the booklet offered not so much as a single diagram for putting together a playground slide. I skipped forward a few pages.

Near the fence, a throng of eager children whined and demanded to know if the new slide was ready, though my colleagues in impromptu playground

design had only barely connected two long black girders to form a pair of right angles that would serve as the horizontal base and the vertical connection point for the curving metal slope and the ladder.

"Anything useful in that manual?" a neighbor called to me.

"Nothing so far," I said, furrowing my brow and raising the booklet back to eye level to indicate that unraveling its mysteries would be my sole occupation for the remainder of the heavy lifting.

It was then that I noticed that most of the pages — from the section just after the mathematical equations to the end — were empty except for a "0" in the middle of each facing page that appeared so faintly that it seemed like a trace image from the page beneath. But when I turned the page, there was only the same faint "0" on the following page. Any individual page lifted to the light was revealed to be completely blank.

"How...?" I said to no one.

I turned a dozen sequential pages, examining each side front and back for the "0". Nothing. And yet, laid flat, the "0" once again emerged from below. I flipped to the middle of the manual. Again, the same "0" materialized just beyond whatever page was facing.

In a kind of panic, I flipped toward the end of the booklet. The "0" remained in place just beyond whatever page I turned, always appearing slightly fainter than the last with each subsequent blank page turned but never disappearing entirely.

At last, I arrived at the last page. Again, the same "0" image peeked up from below, but the page itself was blank like the rest. Beyond it was only the worn Argentine leather cover.

A chorus of cheers rose from the children at the edge of the playground. The structure was almost completely built.

"Bout got her ready," Gary bellowed triumphantly. He was crouched turning a wrench atop a tower of metal that looked like an upside-down "T" with stairs opposite a deep, sloping ramp, the lip of which hovered above the bottom girder without actually making contact.

Flipping back through the manual booklet to the beginning, I arrived once again at the first page and its inscription:

Ten cuidado. Este es una asíntota.

I wished that Bev — Spanish-speaking denizen of Harmony Lane and daughter of the owner of an acclaimed Cuban restaurant — had been there.

Out of curiosity, I pulled out my phone and searched for an English translation of the inscription. It brought up the words, "Beware. This is an asymptote."

Out of even more curiosity, I searched the term "asymptote." It brought up an image of a Cartesian plane perfectly recreated by the looming metal structure before me, complete with a swooping talon of a curve stretching endlessly toward the x axis.

"OK kids," Gary yelled, "which of y'all wants to get down her first?"

"Wait!" I said. "I...I don't think this slide is safe."

"The hell y'all say, boy!" Gary shouted down at me, as if I were more than one person and as if he and I weren't approximately the same age. "I turned every goddamn screw myself. Y'all sayin' I didn't make it safe?"

"No," I said, "I just think it might be dangerous to —"

"Dangerous!" Gary screamed. "Y'all ain't even helped!" Y'all been kickin' back over there readin' yer goddamn immigrant book whiles I been over here doin' all the real goddamn work! Tell y'all what, boy, how 'bout I come down there right now and show y'all dangerous!"

What happened next is a matter of some debate.

In truth, it has become an obsession of mine, although in my profession this is called "the subject of ongoing scholarship." While I continue to await the approval of my IRB forms to formalize the psychological research to be gathered from the accounts of those present at the playground the moment that Gary mounted the slope of the asymptote, I can report what I saw, as well as what has entered the public record from the depositions collected from my neighbors by law enforcement.

I watched Gary pivot and fling himself down the curving surface with the confidence of a man who was assured of the structural integrity of his handiwork and the outrage of a man who had yet again found his blaring hypermasculinity challenged by someone he suspected (correctly) of being a smartypants cupcake of a person.

Gary hung in midair above the asymptote for an impossible moment. Then his body descended, intersected the surface of the curve, and became an irrational value receding infinitely toward a zero denominator.

The moment this happened reveals something about the individual human perspective and the human mind's ability to process the sublime terror of eternal reduction.

For instance, I saw Gary's body disintegrate into a school of tiny fish darting away forever in unison. This image is burned into my retinas, and it reappears in my vision anytime I shift my gaze from light into darkness — a flash of fish that withdraws and diminishes but never fully disappears.

Everyone who saw Gary go down the asymptote experiences a retinal afterimage like this, even now, after numerous eye examinations and, in one neighbor's case, surgery. We are all slowly learning to accept that it will never be totally gone. Perhaps the same can be said of Gary himself? Who knows.

One child onlooker saw Gary become a dazzling explosion of fireworks. The elderly gentleman who lives behind me witnessed Gary's entrance into infinity as a scattering and reassembling of the mosaic tiles in a cathedral. A woman whose house is four down from mine said that Gary assumed the properties of a vibrating string.

No two accounts of the incident match identically, but everyone agrees that Gary's abstract or fractalized form vanished from sight halfway down the curve and that nothing material about Gary arrived at the bottom. In the moments after it happened, everyone rubbed their eyes for the first of many times to come, looked around, and stood there in the playground not knowing what to do next.

A week later, a pair of tired-looking FBI agents arrived to question some of us about Gary's whereabouts and jot down our responses on their clipboards. None of us could be certain how their investigation was going. I suspected that, if they'd handed us a graphing calculator, we could have plotted where it was going. In any case, they never found Gary.

Nothing remains of the asymptote. We carefully dismantled the impossible structure and shipped it back with its impossible instruction booklet after the investigators concluded their impossible work. We demanded a refund.

It has yet to arrive.



Dustin Michael lives in Georgia with his family, where he teaches writing and literature. He and his wife share blogging duties at <http://phinphans.blogspot.com>, where they write about their son, Phin, who was recently diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia.

THE POET, HIS HUSBAND, AND THE FOX

By James Penha

*A free and queer adaptation of "The Fisherman and His Wife"
by the Grimm Brothers*

Joshua lived for his husband Gabe—both in the positive sense that Gabe was the love of Joshua’s life and in the negative sense that Joshua spent most of his waking hours (including those in the deep of night) fearing another paranoid outburst or surge of melancholia from his spouse. And so, Joshua would do just about anything to satisfy Gabe and keep their home life bearable. He had trained himself not to argue, not to disagree, nor to try to explain away the concurrences and vexations that, Gabe believed, were parts of a plot by unidentified enemies to drive him mad.

They lived, thanks to an inheritance from Joshua’s parents, in a huge old Victorian house on forty-two acres of a mountainside in upstate New York. Their nearest neighbor was on the other side of the mountain. There was no connecting road between them. The village of Maryville was a mile down a rugged driveway. Except for the team that cleaned the house and cared for the lawns and gardens once each week, the thirty-something couple saw no one who might accidentally (Gabe would say intentionally) upset their lives with a word, a gesture, or an oversight. They both worked online from home, Joshua teaching writing workshops when not crafting his own poetry, Gabe playing and blogging about domestic and international lotteries.

"I think they hacked my phone," Gabe said. The couple had, until then, been stretched out contentedly on the long coach that faced the great bay window of the sunken living room. Joshua was reading *The New Yorker* on his iPad; Gabe swept through Instagram.

Joshua felt the familiar tightening of his stomach muscles. "What makes



you say that?"

"They did."

"But, I mean, what makes you say that now?"

"Remember how we talked about buying a new car?"

"Yes."

"I WhatsApped my sister yesterday about our conversation, and now suddenly there are all these ads for cars on my Facebook and Instagram!"

"That's how these apps work, Gabe. You're not being hacked."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm as sure as I can be. Honey, you are not important enough to be hacked."

Silence.

"You okay?" Joshua asked nervously.

"Yeah." That Gabe continued playing with his iPhone was a good sign.

But Joshua needed a break. "I'm gonna take the dog for a walk." Joshua roused the poodle curled in a corner of the couch and pointed to the front door. The dog followed Joshua into the cool autumn afternoon.

When Joshua had walked high enough up the mountain to be certain that he couldn't be heard, he screamed at the top of his lungs—just screamed, wordlessly, to release the tension. The dog was used to it and didn't flinch, but he did run far ahead to the crest of the hill. "Joey! Wait up!" But the dog, by now barking furiously, was after something.

By the time Joshua found Joey, the dog was sitting quietly in front of a stunning red fox tethered to a pine tree. "Jesus!" Joshua exclaimed. "What happened to you, Beautiful?"

"Funny you should ask," said the fox. Joshua did a double-take so rapidly his neck muscles throbbed. Pulling himself together, he closed in on the fox. It must be a robot or drone or AI thing of some kind, he thought.

But the fox set him straight. "I'm a fox. For now, I am a fox, although I am really a man. Sit with us, Joshua—you, me, and Joey here." The dog wagged his tail and lay on his haunches, his head resting on his forepaws. The fox sat up, like a dog. "But, first, can you undo this fucking leash from around the tree?" Joshua opted to remove the collar around the fox's neck to which the leash had been attached. "Oh, yes, that's better. Thank you. Really... thank you."

"You— you're welcome." Joshua sat between the two animals.

"I suppose you are wond— I guess you have questions. The least I can do is explain."

Joshua nodded.

"I live on the other side of the mountain with my lover. We are magicians. Not stage magicians. Real magicians." The fox paused. "Do you believe in magic, Joshua?"

"I do now."

The fox—his name was Michael—"but you can call me Mischa"—said his lover Benjy had the power to shape-shift "not himself but others."

"Like you."

"Yes, like me. In the best of times, it can make for quite a bit of fun and some very good sex." Mischa had been metamorphosed into Brad Pitt, Keanu Reeves, and Ronaldo among other human beauties. Rarely animals.

"But not never."

"No, not never. And in the worst of times, when he is angry with me, Benjy traps me in appalling guises: a cockroach—"

"Speaking of 'Metamorphosis.'"

"Exactly. Or a snail. Or a naked Donald Trump—"

"No!" Joshua burst out laughing.

"Yes, and of course he peed on me."

"So why the fox now?"

"I'm a redhead—"

"A ginger!"

"Ginger twink, yes, which Benjy loves and loves to make fun of. I'm being punished."

"For?"

"I need to explain my magical power first." Mischa was a wish-granter, like a genie in the thousand and one nights stories. "Benjy wanted me to grant him a wish to make his previous lover sick." Deadly sick. "Benjy knows I will never grant wishes to do harm. I'm not even sure I can since I've never tried."

"Why doesn't Benjy just turn his old lover into... I don't know... a snake... or a virus... or," Joshua giggled, "Ted Cruz?"

"Distance. Benjy's power is limited by distance. When he broke up with his old boyfriend, the guy knew to put miles between them."

"Your powers are not so limited?"

"Not geographically, no."

"But why didn't you make a wish to undo the leash or, now, to undo your foxiness?"

"I can only make one wish for my own benefit in my lifetime. If I had the ability to wish endlessly for myself, I could become as all-powerful as a god. There are beings far greater than magicians who will not allow that. So I have to save that one wish in case, if worse really comes to worst for me, I have to escape existence entirely."

"By the way, how do you know my name is Joshua?"

"Sometimes, Benjy turns me into a moth so I can snoop around the village, peek in our neighbors' windows and listen. Moths have very good hearing, you know."

"I've learned a lot today." Joshua exhaled deeply. "What will you do now?"

"My turn to punish Benjy. I'll make myself scarce—put some distance between us for a while."

"And live like a fox? Can I help you somehow?"

"Maybe I'll wander by your house from time to time for some food and fresh water?"

"Yes! Give me a signal when you come—not words... some other kind of signal. Something foxy, maybe. Do you howl?"

"Not really... not like a wolf. I'll gekker."

"Gekker?"

Mischa gekkered, "Ack-ack-ack-ackawooooo-ack-ack-ack. Quite distinctive, right? You'll know it's me. But why don't you want me just to call out, Hey, Joshua?"

"My husband. Gabe. Gabe is not very trusting of people."

"What? Like autistic?"

"Paranoid. I never know how he's going to deal—if he's going to deal—with surprises, with strangers." Joshua frowned. "I don't know if I'll even tell him about you. But wait!" Joshua's frown turned into an excited smile. "I can wish for you to cure him of his paranoia, right?"

"Shit!" Mischa cried out. "The worst things about magical powers are their many limitations. I can't change someone's personality. Believe me... if I could, Benjy would be a far better human being, and I wouldn't be a fox right now." Mischa snickered. Joshua shook his head. "But what would your Gabe want? Something special. Let me fulfill a wish that will help Gabe trust the world a little more, trust you, trust me."

Joshua said nothing for a while. "Okay. Let's try something. But I don't know if it will increase Gabe's trust or erode it further. But then, I never know."

"Tell me what you wish, Josh."

"Gabe lost his grandfather's Le Coultre watch. Well, 'lost' is my word. He says someone stole it or hid it or who knows what. Can you find it or recreate it and put it in my hand so I can explain you and your magic?"

"Wish it!"

"I wish for you to put Gabe's Le Coultre in my hand." Joshua stretched out his arm and felt his hand depress with the weight of the watch. But neither he nor Mischa were depressed; they could not hide their glee. "That's it. Exactly. Even down to the scratches on the crystal."

The fox promised to come by Joshua's house the following evening not only for food and drink, but to hear what happened after Joshua reunited his husband with the antique watch.

When he returned home, Joshua remained unsure if he should tell the truth—the unbelievable truth—to Gabe... or just say that he had found the watch... somewhere... or just hide it and say nothing. But the chance to see his husband happy won the day.

Gabe was in the kitchen making doughnuts, an activity that freed his mind from the burdens of paranoia. Joshua called him from the doorway. "Gabe, look at this."

"Wait... I've got my hands in the bowl... What?" He turned and saw the watch dangling in Joshua's raised right hand. "WHAT? The Le Coultre? Where..."

"And thereby hangs a tale."

Joshua waited to tell the story of the magical fox till the doughnuts—apple cider doughnuts—were ready to melt in their mouths accompanied by a fruity white wine in the living room.

"This is really what happened? You're not trying to make a fool out of me? To hurt me?"

"No way. Why would I ever do that? Have I ever done that? I wanted... I

only want you to be happy.”

“Prove it.”

Joshua pointed to the Le Coultre snug on Gabe’s wrist. “C’mon. This isn’t proof enough?”

“It’s good,” Gabe admitted. “It’s good. But let me think of something else you can wish for from your foxy friend... something completely my own notion. Okay?”

“Yes, we can try that.”

“Only try?”

“Hey, this is all new to me, you know. And there seem to be a lot of rules about wishes. But I’ll try. I will. What do you want to wish for?”

“A car, I think. Yes, a car. We talked about getting a new car. You can keep the old one. I want my own car if we can wish for it. And I want something special. A Mercedes Maybach.”

“Shit! Really?”

“Why not?” Gabe smiled as he popped another donut in his mouth and emptied his wine glass. He smiled, Joshua thought, more broadly than in a long time.

Joshua went online to discover that foxes eat “virtually anything. Being carnivores, they like cooked or raw meat and canned pet food. Foxes also like other savory items such as cheese, table scraps, bread soaked in fat, fruit and cooked vegetables.” So he just cooked dinner for three, packaged several Tupperware containers in—he laughed to himself as he said aloud— a “foxy bag,” and waited for the gekker.

It was almost midnight when Joshua finally heard ack-ack-ack outside the house. Gabe was sprawled, sound asleep, on the couch. Joshua didn’t bother to wake him to ask if he wanted to meet the fox, but quietly gathered the plastic containers holding the fox’s dinner and slipped outside. Mischa was standing a yard or so from the steps leading to the front porch.

“Hungry?” Joshua removed, opened, and set the containers in front of the fox.

“Famished,” said Mischa who demonstrated the truth of his description by devouring the dinner in quick time. “Oh, good. Really good!”

“I hoped so,” said Joshua as he retrieved the Tupperware and poured a bottle of Evian into a bowl. “I wondered about wine—”

“No, you don’t want to make a fox drunk. Trust me.”

"But I'm glad the dinner was good." Joshua paused. "Cause I—we—Gabe has quite a wish."

"So you told him about me?"

"I did, yeah."

"But he's not here?"

"No, he's asleep. And I—I'm just so used to keeping things to myself... to avoid crises—"

"But you told him about me? And he has a wish?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure I follow your logic."

"No, me neither. My approach to dealing with Gabe is way beyond logic."

"I see that. And the wish?"

"He wants a Mercedes Maybach." The fox laughed although it sounded much like a gekker. "You can't do that?"

"Oh, I can do it. It's just that I learn about people from what they wish for."

"Yes, that must be so."

"What color?" Joshua looked perplexed. "The car. What color?"

"He didn't say... but I've never seen one that's not black."

"Okay, then, I have to sound a bit like a Jeopardy host and ask you to put this request in the form of a wish."

"I wish for Gabe to have a black Mercedes Maybach."

"Done!" Joshua looked around. "You'll find it underneath the porte-cochère on the side of your house. And you'll find me tomorrow night right here for dinner."

The car was dazzling even in the moonlight that reached it beneath the roof of the porte-cochère. Joshua touched it to make sure it was real before hurrying inside to the living room where he woke Gabe. "You have got to see this, Gabe." Wiping the sleep from his eyes, Gabe and Joey followed Joshua to the porte-cochère.

"Oh my God, Josh. You did it. Oh my God. C'mon, let's go for a ride."

"Why not?" Gabe found the fob in the driver's seat. He took his place at the wheel, Joshua next to him and Joey in the back seat, started the car, and circled the house several times before daring to descend the steep driveway

that led to the main road. "Where to?"

"Let's go to the river. We haven't been there in ages."

When they arrived at the riverside, Gabe turned off the car and turned to Joshua. "I love you, you know."

"I do." They hugged each other and kissed with more passion than either had mustered for months.

"It's not just the car," said Gabe. "It's that you did it... for me."

"I have always wished the best for you, Gabe."

Joshua slept well after a night of raucous lovemaking in the four poster bed that dominated the master bedroom, but he awoke with trepidation as he often—maybe usually—did that Gabe would be in the throes of a fit of paranoia. And, indeed, eyes open, Gabe was waiting for Joshua to turn to him.

"How do I know this isn't some kind of trick to harm me?"

"This what? What's this?" Joshua asked.

"This car."

Joshua had sworn to himself endlessly not to get angry in response to Gabe's uncontrollable fears, but he heard himself raising his voice when he averred, "But you wanted the car."

"Is it registered in my name? What if the police stop me on the road and ask for the registration? Your friend didn't give me the registration. What if it's a trick to get me in trouble?"

"We can ask Mischa for it tonight... although I bet it's sitting in the glove compartment... or—" Joshua got out of bed and picked up Gabe's pants from the floor where they had been dropped in the lovers' eagerness to get naked and in each other's arms. Joshua plucked the wallet from the back pocket of the trousers, opened it, and exclaimed, "Ha!" He brought the wallet to the bed and showed Gabe, next to his driver's license, the registration for the Mercedes. "Okay?"

"Don't you find it somewhat creepy that your friend has access to my wallet?"

"Amazing. Magical. Miraculous. Yes. Creepy? No. You own a fucking Mercedes Maybach. This proves it! Creepy my ass."

"I want him to take it back."

"You're kidding."

"If you won't ask him, I'll do it myself."

And so, that night, when he heard the fox's gekker, Joshua and Gabe, trailed by Joey, both carried bags of Tupperware filled with foodstuffs for Mischa.

"Wow," said the fox, "Mr. Mercedes himself is here. No need to thank me for the car. I thank you for the dinner." Mischa gobbled up the baked chicken, sweet potatoes, spinach, and apple pie a la mode.

"I wish," said Gabe, "I never had that car."

Mischa stopped eating. He looked up, vanilla ice cream dribbling from his mouth, at Gabe and then over to Joshua who smiled sadly and raised his arms, hands to the sky, in an I-can't-help-it gesture. "Your wish is my—"

"Command!" said Gabe sternly.

"My pleasure. It's gone." Gabe ran to see that the porte-cochère where he had parked the car the previous night was empty. As he walked back to Joshua and the fox, he reached in his back pants pocket for his wallet. The registration for the Mercedes had disappeared. He pushed the wallet in front of Mischa's face. "How do you get in my wallet?"

Mischa scooted beneath the wallet in Gabe's outstretched arm and faced him. "It's magic, asshole. Did you see me move the car? That's how I move stuff from your wallet. M-A-G-I-C."

"He must have helped you!"

"He?"

"Joshua."

Joshua exclaimed "Me?" as Mischa exclaimed "Him?"

"And he must have described the scratches on my grandfather's watch," Gabe continued. "How else would you have known? No one else would have known." He swung his right arm up and down, right and left, pointing his index finger back and forth repeatedly at Joshua and Mischa. "You two are in this together!"

"*This?*" asked the fox.

"Oh, I can tell you that," Joshua said. "*This* is the worldwide conspiracy targeting Gabe."

"Targeting you with an antique watch and the world's greatest car?" Mischa could not hide his contempt. "Quite a conspiracy!"

"They play with my mind. They drive me crazy."

Joshua approached Gabe, seeking to wrap his arms around him. "C'mon, Hon, trust me. You know me."

But Gabe would have none of it. "Oh, I know you. I wish I had never known you."

"My pleasure," muttered the fox. A startled Joey sniffed the spot from which Gabe vanished.

"Wha—" Joshua babbled as he stared at the spot where seconds before Gabe had stood. "Wh— where is he?"

"I don't know, Josh. He wished he had never known you, and so where he is now is the result of his life without you."

"He won't remember me?"

"You will be nothing to remember."

"But I still remember him! I know him! If I go in the house, will all his things still be there?"

"Yes."

Joshua sat on the ground. He stared at the fox. After a long silence, he asked, "Can I—you—we—unwish this... like you unwished the car?"

"I think so. But, Josh, is that really what you want?"

"He was the love of my life."

"He was driving you insane."

"He thought I was helping to drive him insane."

"*Gaslight* squared."

Joshua giggled, but not at the allusion to the famous film or the vernacular usage of its title. "What will Gabe think when he looks in his wallet? Everything is so different!"

"Yeah, but he won't realize that."

"Mercifully." He paused. "And you, Mischa, why have you never wished that Benjy never met you?"

"Well, for one thing—and you need to keep this straight in your mind—you didn't wish that Gabe never met you; Gabe wished that he never met you. Very different, yeah? And anyway, I told you I only have one wish to make on my own behalf. Ever. I don't have to wish Benjy away to rid myself of him. That would be an awful waste of my one selfish wish." The fox furrowed his brow. "This. This is my one wish." Where there had been a fox there sat, without a

gradual metamorphosis as one might see in a werewolf movie, a very naked, very fit, and very male human being, his body lightly covered with red hair slightly blonder than that which abundantly swept from the crown of his head to his shoulders.

"Mischa?"

Mischa tried to stand, but unused to balancing himself on two legs, he accepted the help of Joshua who wrapped his arms beneath the shoulders of the tottering fellow to prevent him from collapsing. They made their way to the bench on the front porch. "I need to sit a bit," said Mischa. "I know from too much experience that I'll be okay in five or ten minutes."

"Why now?"

"Why now what?"

"Why use your one selfish wish to unfox yourself now."

"I hope this doesn't sound too corny... but... so we can make all our other wishes come true."

"Our wishes?"

"Yes, ours. Together."

"Now that Gabe is gone?"

"Now that I am here."



Expat New Yorker James Penha has lived for the past three decades in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his work is widely published in journals and anthologies. His newest chapbook of poems, American Daguerreotypes, is available for Kindle. His essays have appeared in The New York Daily News and The New York Times. Penha edits The New Verse News, an online journal of current-events poetry Twitter: @JamesPenha

THE MISSION

By Christine C. Hsu

42.2673 degrees north, 79.9569 degrees west. 1900 hours. It's a new moon, so I'll have perfect cover in the darkness, Commander. It will look like a murder-suicide with my body discarded by the creek, along with a gunshot wound to Joshua's heart and his penis chopped off with a machete. We need to make it look as gruesome as possible. Basic love story gone wrong. Of course, I will remember to bring his head back in the accelerated vacuum sealed storage unit, which I hid in the woods when I arrived on Earth. I know you wanted a young spawn to dissect, but Joshua made dinner reservations at a romantic French restaurant for our human anniversary. He has his mother babysitting the female infant. Audrey cries incessantly and is not as mature as the bacterial spawn that we carry and nurture back home. I will never be human-pregnant again for the sake of science. I will be happy to be rid of the high heels, the lipstick, and the worst contraption: the bra. I hope my fellow comrades will be more successful on their missions on this deplorable planet.

Be home soon to give my full report. It would be a kindness to obliterate all of humanity. Signing off. GLORP.



Christine C. Hsu is a short story writer, essayist, poet, and playwright based in San Francisco. She has been published by The Bold Italic, xoJane, KQED, ABC News Radio Online, Yellow Arrow Journal, Lunchbox Moments, Slipform Poetry Anthology 2020, Mixed Mag, DropOut Literary Magazine, NonBinary Review, Nonwhite and Woman Anthology, and Red Ogre Review. Her plays have been performed by the Negro Ensemble Company, Crafton Hills College, Houston Community College - Stafford, The Pear Theatre, Enterwine, and The Playwrights' Center of San Francisco. The Writers Grotto of San Francisco selected her as a 2022 Rooted and Written Fellow for Screenplay. Find her on Twitter at @HsuChristineC.

EACH TO SEE THE SHINE ON THE SEA

By Sabrynne Buchholz

from the brine pool, where the water sits heavy with salt and
mussels line the edge and crabs perch up above,
the eye of a shrimp might see the bubbles from the core or the current
and looking up and out of the pool the reach from beyond
above the water so high up, the light filters in like a haze
gentle, soft, and oh so quiet

from the water's edge and out of the deep, where the sand shifts slowly and
tide pools ripple and the breeze dips low to catch the cusp line between land
and sea,
the eye of a turtle might see the froth of the ocean as the tide washes out
and looking ahead to a beckoning realm
where the world is endless and blue, the light catches on the fizz
glittering, buoyant, and welcoming home

from the gallery railing that encircles the lantern of a lighthouse, where the
sky is closer and
horizon line is visible at the edge of the earth or as far as can be seen,
the eye of a gull might see the bobbing of boats and their crested wakes
and looking out at all the waves
through crisp and salted air, the light glides along the surf and the swell all
the way to the shore
glowing, floating, and encouraging flight



Sabrynne Buchholz has taken to using poetry as a means of investigating and learning about the world she inhabits, and her work has been published in print and online nationally and internationally, appearing in the Greyrock Review, Bloom Magazine, Studio OUCH! Gazette, and others.

WINTER AT BLUE CITY

By Fatimah Quadri Eniola

After autumn, papa and I moved to the blue city/ sparrows were gorgeous with their front teeth & the sky's window panes were bright and beautiful with the stars pressing their bodies against the wall. I remember ripping a snail out of its shell & because god was watching in a blue cottage/ I/ a brunette/ mooched into Venus to crunch rain water. That night/ the insects of darkness crawled into the dining room & I stopped eating Bigoli. I travelled thirty-three miles into my blue gown for a night show. At the cinema/ cute planet Earth was the popcorn man I loved at first sight/ we sipped red wine from ocean/ from sea/ from little blue lakes as he threw me the blue stone containing a hundred grains of smile. We kissed till my lips softened into a red onion but papa broke in & fear/ the city cop/ sharpened a bind of sixteen pencils & poke it into our hearts, we died & woke the next summer.



Fatihah Quadri Eniola is a young poet from Nigeria. She is a member of HCAF (Hilltop Creative Arts Foundation) and Nibstears Poetry Cave. She has contributed a number of intricately constructed poems to literary journals including Art Lounge, The Kalahari Review, Beatnik Cowboy, Notion Press, World Voices Magazine, De Curated, Synchronized Chaos and elsewhere. She lives with a very cute cat, Honiy.



THE ANT.

By Fatimah Quadri Eniola

Death is the brown-thorax ant that bolted

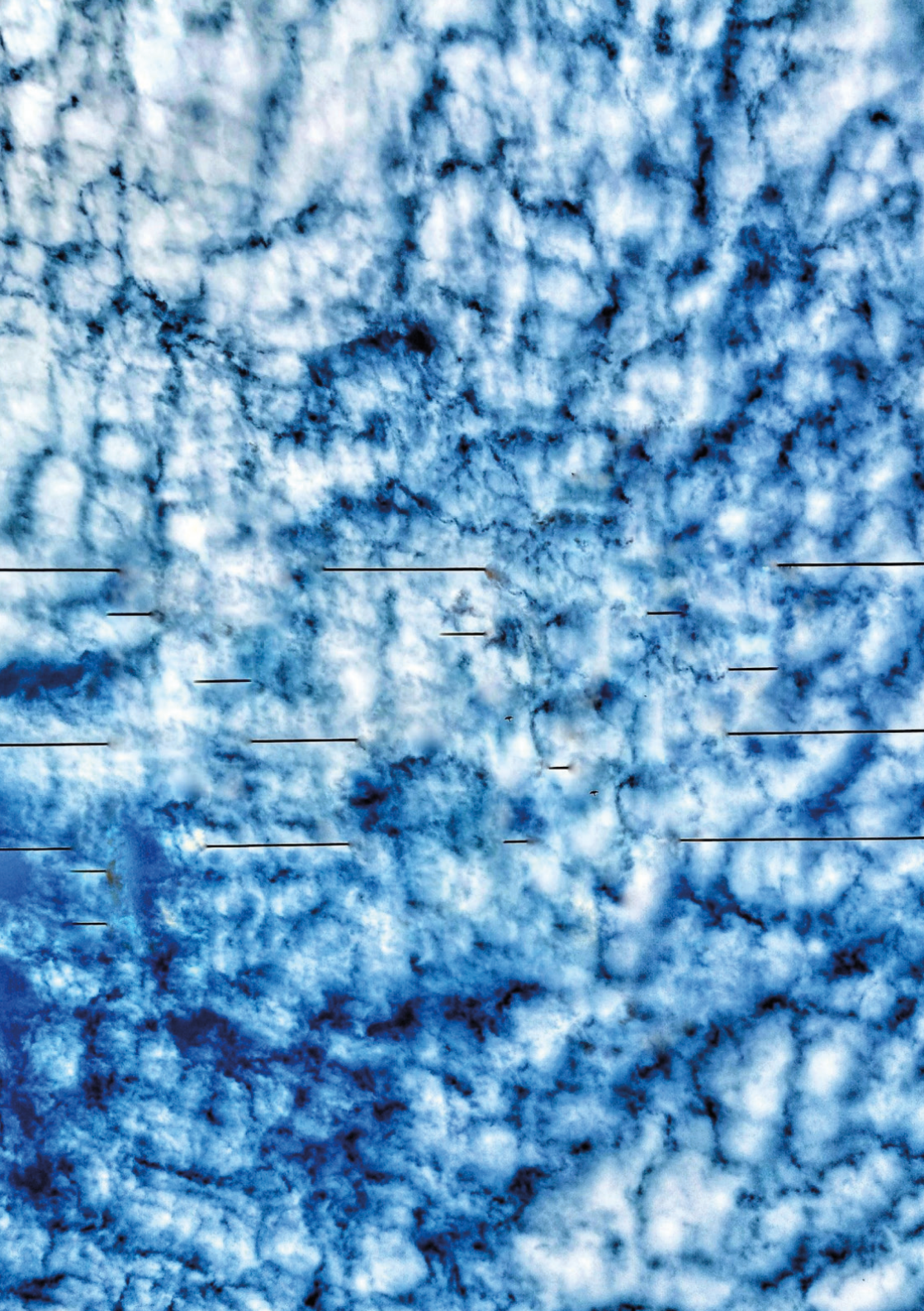
down the loaves you left on the high table last night.

It traced your footsteps to the cinema, shared your popcorns
with you, & sat on the left side beneath the halogen lamps. I saw it.

This happened.

I am watching it now, licking your window panes
with bloody lips, calling it its own. Spying on the screaming
night, calling it its own. It draws your poor curtain, it wants to say hello.





THE ARM

By CG Inglis

That evening, an arm emerged from the wall.

It was very plainly a man's arm – long, well-formed, and covered in a soft layer of brown hair. The hand was wide, with powerful knuckles. Twin crescents of dirt were caked beneath the nails of the index and middle fingers.

These fingers appeared first, as the surrounding drywall grew gelatinous, and then almost syrupy. Inch by inch came the hand, followed by the wrist, forearm, and bicep, all the way to the curve of a broad shoulder. It seemed likely to continue, the shoulder giving rise to a neck, and at last producing a head and torso, but all at once, as if suddenly remembering its nature, the wall snapped solid; the hand contracted, its fingers clenching into a tight fist. Corded muscles strained. There was a final spasm, and the arm fell limp.

The occupant of apartment 1701 witnessed all this from the kitchen table. At first he assumed the fingers erupting from the wall were the legs of some large and particularly meaty spider. When his understanding caught up to his eyes, he flew upright, upending his chair and sending it crashing to the floor. Backing away, he watched in horror as the rest of the arm revealed itself. Only after the wall had sealed shut and the arm stopped moving did he remember to breathe.

Hesitantly, he took a step towards it: far too detailed and textured to be anything else, this was, without doubt, a real human arm. Until a moment before, it had possessed life. Blood, presumably, still occupied its veins. A thin, white scar ran along the outside edge of the thumb.

The man tasted bile, and he was aware of a mounting pressure in his gut. He reached out to touch the arm. Limply, the hand bobbed in place. The man awaited some reaction, some change of state in the wall or the arm itself. But there was no change; an arm had sprouted from the wall and now it lay

there, inert.

A grin spreading on his weathered face, the man began to laugh.

• • •

He was halfway through a cigarette when there was a knock on the door.

Frowning, the man crushed out his smoke in an overflowing ashtray. He got up, traversed a dim hallway, and peered through the peephole.

Bulbous and oddly distant through the fisheye lens, two agents stood in the hall. One was a woman, and the other a massive, stone-faced man. Their scalps were freshly shaven, and they were both wearing black goggles and jackets. As if sensing his presence through the door, the woman smiled.

"Jonas Mira?" she asked, her gentle voice only slightly muffled. "We need to come in."

The man in the apartment swallowed.

"What's the problem?"

"The problem," the male agent said. "Is that there's a door in our way."

As if in apology, the woman spread her hands.

"It's been a long day," she said.

"Give me a minute," said the man inside the apartment.

He hurried to the kitchen. Quickly, he grabbed a threadbare towel. Slinging this over the arm, he arranged it as best he could to hide any traces of skin. The result was what looked like a sadly angled drying rack. Given the state of the rest of his apartment, the effect wasn't terrible. Returning to the hallway, he unbolted and opened the door.

"Took you long enough," growled the male agent.

"I wasn't decent," Mira responded.

Without waiting for an invitation, the woman slipped into the hall, and her partner followed close behind. The big man made a point of clipping Mira's shoulder on his way past. Grunting, Mira ground his teeth.

"You two got a warrant or something?"

Neither of the agents answered. Everyone knew that as far as their agency was concerned, no warrant was necessary. Still, Mira's best chance was to play dumb, at least for the time being.

How had they found him? His crack of the Institute's security systems had been a thing of beauty. There was no way they could have traced him to this apartment. It could only be the arm; the agents were rumoured to have a nose for such things. "Breaches", as they called them. If Mira was smart, he would have been long gone by the time they arrived. The problem was he had nowhere to go. He'd burned all his bridges and spent the last of his money renting this room. Until the sale went through he was broke. He'd had no choice but to trust his luck, and just like always it had failed him.

The female agent sat down at the table. Her partner leaned against the refrigerator, one burly shoulder resting next to the towel that jutted from the wall. Neither of the agents spared it a second glance, their goggles trained squarely on Mira. He didn't mind the attention. The longer they were focused on him, the better.

"So," he said, sitting down opposite the woman. "Let's hear it."

"You're familiar with our work, Mr. Mira?"

She had a pleasant, narrow face. Her bronze skin was healthy-looking and clear. She couldn't have been much more than 30. As she folded her arms across her chest, the dark fabric of her jacket crinkled and warped. The room's single, fluorescent light glared from the lenses of her goggles.

"Who isn't?" muttered Mira.

"Then you know why we're here."

Behind her, the big man smirked. Idly, as if just passing the time, he fingered the end of the towel. Mira forced himself to breathe.

"Something's off, right?" he asked. "A breach or something, and you two are out making the rounds, knocking on doors."

"Just the one door," said the big man quietly.

"Our methods are somewhat more straightforward than that, Mr. Mira," added the woman.

"Well, sure," Mira replied. "I mean, the Institute doesn't mess around. Everyone knows that."

"No, Mr. Mira, it does not. So let's say we cut to the chase."

She nodded to her partner. The big man grinned, and with a light tug, he sent the towel slithering to the floor. Exposed to the light, the arm was rendered shameless and obscene.

"Interesting choice of decor," the big man said.

Mira fought to keep his face neutral. His back had gone prickly with heat, and the pressure in his gut had grown into a wedge of pain. He offered a crooked smile.

"I had to try. Who needs the hassle, right?"

"You got an arm sticking out of your wall," the big man stated flatly.

"It must have been unnerving," added the female agent. Forearms on the table, she thread her fingers together. Her manner was that of an old friend, as if she and Mira had been sharing quiet chats for years.

"I guess," Mira said, trying to keep the edge out of his voice.

"And you didn't call us," chimed in the big man. "Personally, I'm hurt. All our efforts at community outreach, and for what?"

"I was going to call," said Mira. "Tomorrow, first thing."

"You're comfortable sleeping in here with this?" the big man jerked his head in the direction of the arm.

"Not comfortable. Unnerved, like you said. But so what? Stuff like this happens all the time."

The female agent was nodding.

"So it does," she mused. "We're in perfect agreement with you there Mr. Mira. There are times when it feels like no matter how hard we work, there's no keeping up. Every day the Institute logs more breaches. I'm afraid the fabric of our world is growing threadbare."

"The paperwork is a nightmare," the big man intoned.

"So what now?" Mira asked. "You gonna take some readings, cut that thing out of the wall for me?"

"We've already got all the data we need," the woman replied.

The big man flashed his teeth. With the tip of a finger he tapped his goggles. "Latest design," he said.

"No, Mr. Mira," the woman went on. "What we need from you is information."

Mira raised a graying eyebrow.

"Sure," Mira said. "Whatever you want."

"Where is it?" she asked simply.

Mira's throat went dry. He had the sudden and acute desire to stand. Exhaling sharply, he forced himself to remain still.

"Where's what?"

"The compound, Mr. Mira," answered the woman. "The compound you and your partner stole from our lab."

Mira shifted in his chair.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

The female agent sighed.

"We're fully capable of tearing this apartment apart to find it Mr. Mira, assuming it's here. But I'm hoping that won't be necessary. After all, the property owner didn't steal from us. You did."

"Listen, all I know is, some guy managed to shove his arm through my wall and a couple hours later you two arrive at the door."

The woman appeared to consider this.

"And you didn't recognize it?" she asked, after a time.

"Recognize what?" Mira answered, shifting uncomfortably.

"The arm. Given your history together, I thought you'd have known it right away. But maybe we can jog your memory."

She nodded to her partner. Without a word, the big man left the kitchen. The sound of the door being opened and slammed shut came a moment later.

"Honestly, I was hoping for better from you, Mr. Mira," the woman said, once they were alone. "You're obviously an intelligent man. You'd have to be, to overcome Institute security. But major breaches like this one are still uncommon, no matter how bad the wider situation may be, a wall does not simply sprout an arm. You had to expect a response."

"Sure," Mira said, his voice darkening. "Sure, I expected a response. But you guys work fast."

"We have to, Mr. Mira. A breach is a very dangerous thing, and despite what most people think, they do not occur in a vacuum. Certain conditions must be met. The man this arm belongs to chose to meet those conditions tonight. He did so by making use of a compound the two of you stole from us. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't left with enough to finish the job. I can only assume the rest is here with you, and that this man was, quite literally, trying

to reach it. I almost feel bad for him. I'm told the experience of breaching verges on excruciating."

"Hey," Mira said. "Whoever this guy was, it's got nothing to do with me."

The woman shook her shaven head.

"We both know that isn't true."

Her diminutive frame was nearly swallowed by her jacket. The bones in her hands looked as delicate as those of a bird. To crush them, Mira felt, all he would have to do is squeeze.

"Please don't try anything Jonas," she said, her voice almost sad. "I'd hate to see you hurt tonight."

Mira lunged.

He was up and out of the chair, arms outstretched, hands poised to curl around her neck, when a wall rose up to meet him.

His body was flung back, the air ripped from his lungs as he landed in a brittle heap on the floor. He had no idea what hit him, but whatever it was had been solid, some kind of invisible barrier or fist. He was left gasping for breath, his legs feebly scrambling to bring him to his feet. The female agent stood above him.

"The Institute ensures its agents are well protected Mr. Mira."

She had withdrawn a small device from her jacket. It looked no different from a plastic key fob, the kind people used to locate their cars in a parking lot. A small thing, resting lightly in her palm.

"A negative field emitter," the woman explained. "Made possible by our study of the very substance you and your former partner took from our labs. Of course, this is just one of many useful applications, another being the ability to tear a hole in reality, to push oneself through a solid wall. A truly marvelous compound. I'm sure the two of you would have made a tidy profit selling it. A pity you chose to be selfish. Walking out on your partner while he was sleeping? That was harsh, Mr. Mira. He trusted you. And who knows? If you'd stuck together, you might have gotten away with it. Certainly we wouldn't have had a breach to pinpoint your location."

Mira was still struggling to breathe. His whole body ached. A line of spittle dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Once more he tried to stand up, but the best he could manage was to drag his back against the wall.

"How could you know?" he croaked.

"Obviously, we obtained a confession," the woman answered. "In fact, our informant has been waiting patiently in the car."

The front door was thrown open. The trudge of heavy feet sounded in the hallway.

"Ah," the woman said, turning to watch as the big agent dragged a man into the kitchen. "Here he comes."

The man was shoved roughly into a chair. His bottom lip was split, and a wide stain of blood emblazoned the front of his shirt. His right arm was missing, severed cleanly at the shoulder. He had been left with a cross-section of muscle and bone. But there was no blood, no gore. The wound was, if anything, oddly reflective, as if it had been cauterized or stanching with some kind of transparent material.

"Hello Jonas," the man said.

"Andre," Mira breathed.

The one-armed man shook his head, strands of brown hair clinging to a sweat-covered brow. His dark eyes were wide, feverish.

"Tried to reach you earlier. Guess you noticed."

"Andre, I – "

"Shut up," the one-armed man spat. "You left me behind to rot. How could you do that? How could you do that to me?"

The words caused Mira to flinch. A part of him wanted to shout back, to defend himself; he'd never been handed any breaks in life, never had any luck. If Andre'd had any brains, he would have thought of it first. Life was a series of betrayals.

He kept his mouth shut.

As Mira's former partner glared from across the table, the big agent was making himself busy. He had a small device in his hand, very similar in shape to the one the woman had used on Mira. A slight whine arose, and the tip of the device glowed orange. The agent touched it to the point where the arm met the wall. Dead flesh sizzled and hissed. The rich aroma of grilling meat filled the room. Mira repressed an urge to vomit.

Within a few seconds the arm was severed. Before it could fall, the big agent caught it by the wrist and tossed it without ceremony onto the table. As Andre stared down at his former limb, his face began to harden.

The female agent crouched next to Mira.

"Where's the compound Jonas?" she asked.

"The bedroom," Mira answered. He couldn't take his eyes from the arm, or from Andre, the anger and resolve etched into the younger man's face. The rapid rise and fall of his broad, blood-stained chest. "Under a loose board."

The woman's partner left the room. Andre was running a hand over the dead flesh of his arm. His breathing was easier now, his eyes shining.

The male agent returned with a small package. He nodded to his partner. The woman stood up.

"Gentlemen," she said, and together she and the big man made their way to the hall. Andre blinked, shaking himself. A slow smile claimed his broken mouth.

"Wait," Mira said, struggling to get up. He still didn't have full command of his limbs. His feet scraped weakly against the tiles. "You're leaving?"

"We have what we came for," the woman replied, pausing in the door-frame.

"Come on," Mira said, pleading now. "You can't leave me in here with him."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mira," the woman said. She sounded genuinely apologetic.

"You said I'd be safe," Mira went on. "Told me you didn't want me to get hurt."

"No, Jonas," she responded sadly. "I only said I'd hate to see it."

With that she left the room.

The one-armed man cracked his remaining knuckles. He picked up his arm and, hefting it like a club, got up from the table.



CG Inglis is a Stockholm-based writer whose work has appeared on SciFiORama.com, as well as in the Hart House and Danforth Reviews. You can find him on Twitter @viscereale.



Part Two

OVER THE MOON



SPECULAR REFLECTION

By Kaia Boyer

after Amy Hauff's exhibit at the
Mass MoCA: 700,000:1 | Terra + Luna + Sol

Kaia Boyer (they/she/he) is an author born and raised in San Francisco, California. Their love for writing lies in sweeping angsty romance and fantasy with an aspiring interest in linguistics and reading classics. While she's not reading and writing, she can be found on the softball field pitching wildly, making 'aesthetic' boards on Pinterest, watching shows, and listening to music. They're currently revising their second novel.

my moon,
haven't you learned your echoes
are far louder than your words?

my luna,
two paths to your mind will never be
enough

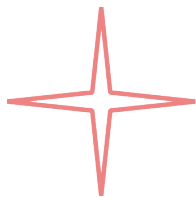
you cannot only listen and not
absorb
you cannot only speak and not
observe
your light is not the only bulb that
glistens
you see their tears shining in your
luminance?

you may have your craters
you may have your inverse
but acceptance is the remedy
you shield their light too often

be calm

stop your orbit and your
hovering
let your echoes ring with soft
melodies

leave your chips of plaster for the
broadness of space



ONE DAY IS AS A THOUSAND YEARS

By Bethany Jarmul

I.

This morning, my mattress cuddles me with lavish, lavender tranquility. But my baby cries for my milk-filled breasts and my toddler climbs my body like an apple tree, seeking the sweet fruits of my touch, my morning breath. As these two small seeds of the future require me to leave my nest, I think about the time to come and the time that's past. My ancestors' DNA passed down to grandparents, parents, in me, in my children. The sage-and-cinnamon flecks in my son's eyes, my daughter's pointy toes—his incessant curiosity, clinging, climbing, her vampire-toothed smile—all the result of nucleotides in quilt patterns, double helix spirals. I imagine the four nucleotides like the Fantastic Four, each with their own spandex supersuit and neon-colored cape.

When I was a fetus in my mother's womb, my ovaries developed eggs that would one day form my son, my daughter. My children were a part of me, a part of my mother, my grandmother, the women before them who were also stirred from their sleep by tiny humans that would become the ones who would make me.

II.

At lunch, my toddler scarfs down four chicken nuggets to earn a strawberry-pink popsicle. He remembers yesterday and understands "tomorrow," but what matters to him is only the sticky sweetness of strawberry juice running down his chin, the possibility of a garbage truck coming around the bend, his daddy's playful chase, circling the kitchen-island-turned-race-track.

I close my eyes, focus on the present—my lungs expanding and deflating beneath my rib cage. Time ticking, tickling my brain.

Time is relative, Einstein discovered. My mind is unable to unravel that reality, break it down into manageable morsels. Astronauts age slower as they hurtle through space. We've found the fountain of life; the secret to eternal youth is not found on earth, but at turbo speed inside a rocketship traversing the known universe, or beyond.

III.

After a day filled with cracker crumbs, dirty diapers, and giggles, my favorite small humans snooze in their cribs. My husband and I relax on our sofa by our large, open windows. The cicadas whine; glowing celestial beings ornament the night sky.

"The new images captured by the Webb telescope are 500 million light-years away. Astronomers don't know if what they're seeing still exists because it takes so long for the light to get here." My husband's eyes are wide with excitement.

"So to glimpse the past, we need only look to the stars." I point at the distant twinkles. "We don't need a time machine, just a telescope."

Perhaps a scientist from the past, of another species, another planet and galaxy, sent out an astral message for the cosmos, a twinkling of hope for humanity amongst the distant stars. Perhaps a mother from another space and time sent a secret soaring through space just for me.

And how might I send a message into the future? I'm not an astrophysicist or nuclear engineer who could send out cosmic-crossing Morse-codes. But I have pieces of the past, of myself, beyond just DNA—jewel-toned, kaleidoscopic memories, mosaics of meaning, visions for tomorrow—that I will offer, alongside Cheerios and goldfish crackers, when the sun scares off the stars and my two future-dwellers seek comfort in my arms.




Bethany Jarmul is a writer, editor, and artist. Her work has appeared in The Citron Review, Brevity blog, Gastropoda, Literary Mama, and Sky Island Journal among others. She earned first place in Women On Writing's Q2 2022 essay contest. She lives near Pittsburgh with her family. Connect with her at bethanyjarmul.com or on Twitter: [@BethanyJarmul](https://twitter.com/BethanyJarmul).

MOON MILK SKIN

By Melissa Nunez

Melissa Nunez lives and creates in the caffeinated spaces between awake and dreaming. She makes her home in the Rio Grande Valley region of South Texas, where she enjoys observing, exploring, and photographing the local flora and fauna with her three home-schooled children. She is contributor for The Daily Drunk Mag and Yellow Arrow, and staff writer for Alebrijes Review. Twitter: @MelissaKNunez

A vertical collage on the right side of the page. It features a globe with a grid pattern, a yellow flower, and various abstract, colorful patterns and textures. The colors are predominantly purple, blue, and yellow.

**I don't know who
but you are here
of darkness des**



Your mouth, nubile cactus fruit picked clean. Pulled towards me to savor—flesh and seeds, to swallow—all that you contain.

There's no expelling—this need of you in cycles of once and again. Your face hovers above me, moon-milk skin half shadowed. One side silvered lunar light, the other draped in dusk-dark waves, developing deep ink of backseat keep. One eye glitters a universe of stars, the other crater-dimmed.

**Which will win, night or light,
e. And even after full cloak
ascends, you will rise again.**

THE MYSTERIES OF DIA VAN-BURDICK

By Dia VanGuntén

BOY WONDER(S)

Behind the big house, the river was a brown ribbon, and in front, the street was wide and gray at the top of a bend, so sometimes, at this hour, a car would come up too fast and crash into the yard. Sirens and blue-red flashing. But not tonight. Tonight, two bubbles of pale light merge and separate with a pop. They bounce in the breeze and float in the trees. They peer into the window at the sleeping child beneath the pink gingham comforter. They'd never seen her small before. They'd never needed her to be small. She was merely a world, like Mother Nature, and so it was natural to take her for granted. But then the writer abandoned them in the middle of an apocalypse, and suddenly she mattered very much. They'd hopped dimensions and traveled through time to cement the destiny of a child, who, in all truth, was the two of them and everything they loved and the entirety of their world.

In some miniature feminine form.

A voice asked — Is she the one? But she's so small.

A matching voice said: A very small girl child. How do WE come outta her?

THE LYRE

In her pretend classroom, she schooled neighborhood children on facts

she'd collected from the Encyclopedia Britannica. The dodo is dead. Forever. Dodo is done, done, done. The pupils clamored to a clearing — no, a raty ravine, so steep it swallowed kids. They came upon a stand of chewing gum trees. She fed them bark like book pages. They remember puffy clouds and leafy boughs. They recall concentric circles in the placid water, where no stone was skipped.

UNINVITED GUESTS

On the basement stairs, she was promised school clothes if only she would swallow Effluvium slugs of unknown consequence, a lasting poison. A leprechaun stomped her into those steps. She'd once followed the stairs after hearing the honk of blue herons; she'd wandered through the labyrinth to find Dad in the basement garage with his head on the horn — home, just barely.

A knob turned on a tiny door. Uninvited guests left an unsolicited gift. The accordion file held a sheath of mysterious drawings. Harris Burdick promised to return with the rest, but he never came back, the bastard. She felt bad for these untold stories, so she started with that tiny door: it opened to the clearing in the forest, where a UFO hovered in the leaves, a goat-god and a babbling brook. A golden lyre. Bleeding deer with an arrow. A lavender snake engraved with an alphabet. Buzzub.

TWIN FUZZ

She was soft still, with little flyaway hairs that popped out of her skull. Her mother combed it back from her brow, into a braid that was French, like a tongue kiss. She was sweet-cheeked in purple sneakers. She was a small girl child with an open palm and two wriggling caterpillars, but she understood, already, that writing would be an abduction. UFOs always stalled cars and fried televisions. Aliens took over. A new world was built overtop of the first, and to her, those Lego worlds would be more real and immediate than imaginary worlds ought to be. But these two were too much for her; she was a child still. She had to send them back. As two fuzzy wiggles of light, caterpillar-like, the twins spelled out goodbye. Not in English, but in buzzub.

CAPTAIN TOM

At twelve, her first novel: 500 pages, typed, double spaced, formatted for publication. Devy VanHuyzen's braces are tightened in a timely fashion. She has a big brother named Brad — a bother! — but he looks out for her. Devy has lipgloss and a green-eyed boyfriend. She's terrified of her first French

kiss. Devy thinks that it must be gross, which makes it really exciting. The writer scratched Devy into a series of Mead notebooks. When she finished one, she donned her yellow slicker and got in a wooden boat, rowing and rowing through the fog until she spotted Captain Tom. The lantern swung three times, and slowly her grandpa appeared, a shining face in the mist. He called it a "manuscript." He typed it up and sent it back to her in a silver schooner.

MISSING VANGUNTEN

She could not rewrite reality. She couldn't pull that ocean liner out of the canal. She threw the engines into reverse, but the ship crushed forward, wrecking the city of Venice, taking Dad with it.

UNDER THE RUG

She swept writing under the rug because it was a futile, toothless thing, just the weightless wishes of a child, just a kid on her knees in her lover's punk rock bedroom praying to a God she didn't trust to please, please, save Venice. What would Italy do without Venice? So she choked writing out, got it round the throat, til it shrieked, a deflating balloon. It flew away like a fart, because that's what fiction is, after all, and real life too. Damn if that purple balloon didn't find air someplace else and turn into a lavender technicolor snake and creep back, a lump under the rug, and no matter how many times she tried to obliterate it, the thing wouldn't die.

JUST DESERT

She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter — a giant throbbing Yayoi Kusama pumpkin, snake in a slithering skin of purple neon. If she killed it, the creature would come for her harder. If she ignored it, it would wither inside her and tar her guts with decay. It would take its toll: a palm of glinting coins. Invisible pantaloons. Cold, sharp blade to separate her from polite society.

THE HOUSE ON JUBILEE LANE

She could not be a contributing member. Coyote pisses on the couch. Kitsune has seven shedding foxtails, leaving a furred nest. The writer is Tanuki with a parachute nutsack — a perfect lift off. She isn't bound by gender, by manners, or by reality. She lives in the glowing house on the imaginary street in the city limits of her past.

STRANGE DAY IN JULY

Which July? An artist exists in a timeless mucus — an eternally cracking egg.

The past is a regurgitating dog, and the writer is leaping from bed. Which bed? The velvet soul sister quilt surrounded by green walls. Creature from the Black Lagoon: the color of a plastic action figure with translucent fins. She loved the creature enough to live inside its troubled skin, but she'd never seen the film. Why should she? That movie monster could never matter as much as the toy. Is it the waterbed with the blue silk sheets on the fourth floor walkup? Okay, that bed. That July. Go there. Heat rises. She's at the top of the building. The sun comes through that skylight. Twin fans blow those silk sheets. She slips free of a nap and walks through the apartment as Stretch Armstrong, with arms that reach the ceiling. Her fingers leave rainbow fingerprints on the glass skylight. A discarded instrument has music still, in its molecules, in the turning atoms. The writer can fly to the shores of Lake Erie for yet another July. She tosses a stone, but it boomerangs back, returning as sea glass she once collected from the murk. These Julys are piling up. The sun sparkles on the water's surface. She is that skipped rock, that always coming around thing, a loop of being.

SEVEN CHAIRS

She is one of the flying sisters. She mostly floats in a cathedral of light. She pulls up a chair, tucks into a desk, and suddenly she's in France. She's in Detroit in 1984. She's in BC Greece.

ANOTHER PLACE, ANOTHER TIME

All at once, all of Earth is like her, untethered from the machine, but the amateurs are stir-crazy. They bake sourdough bread or stretch their buttoles. The writer survives the global threat. She walks to the end of Luna Pier, that long concrete arm that reaches into Lake Erie, and she waits for the train with the bedsheet sail. Bumpity bump over the tracks, built on the rocks, snaking stones in the lake. The train comes through the fogs, like Captain Tom, and her sister's face in the mist, inquiring after a manuscript.

LICHEN'S LIBRARY

Seedlings poked up from the binding, popping the threads and breaking the spine. Leaves unfurled from the open V and quickly climbed over the pag-

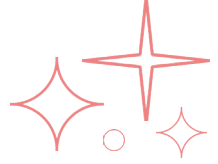
es. She'd been warned about the book, but now it was too late. It overtook the bed linens. It bloomed in her nostrils. Her mind was overgrown with rabid roses, pink and bright and ravenous.

THE FOURTH FLOOR BEDROOM

Wind slipped in through an open window. The breeze rustled the flock of white birds, stirring their feathers, that hollow straw at the heart of the fluff. Once, one bird lifted one wing and peeled off the wallpaper, well, all the wings lifted, all the pages. An airborne novel. An unleashed contagion. Her sister's voice on the telephone: "Dee, promise you'll let this one fly."



Dia VanGunten focuses on intimate, character-centered storytelling. Sometimes that character is herself.



THE PICTOGRAPHER

By Sarah Little

he painted a portrait once, of the pair of you together. you were sitting there, comfortable, at ease, and it depicted the one time you were together before it all fell apart, (*this is what we wanted*, you'd reminded yourself, and let the tiny bit of smugness shine through.) and

he took the painting when he left.

so you spent five years forgetting the sound of his voice, and remembering the grey of his eyes, flecked with gold — or was it green? and

one morning there's a package on the doorstep. thin, tall, flat, and there's scribbled warnings all over — *open carefully*. no courier asks you to sign for it, there's no tracking on it, even. he's not been in the same city as you for seven months and three years, so how's it here now?

if ever this is lost, it means i'm gone, he told you once. you'd laughed it off, kissed the nape of his neck. *gone where, love?*

he said nothing, then, scraping a butter knife over the toast. the sound had had you bristling, antsy to cover your ears, but you'd refrained, putting on the radio instead to cover the noise.

as he'd left for the day, you'd called out, *if what is lost?*

and so you hang the painting up now, pride of place in the room you use once a week, and he looks at you while you work. your younger self looks at you, and she is bemused. from the tilt of her eyebrows, you can hear yourself asking *why are you doing that?*

don't we hate the job i chose?

sometimes, you take a break from working and look at the painting. brushstrokes so fine they disappear, sometimes, and other times they're so vivid you can scrape your nail along the grooves. which is it, really? you cast your mind back, six years prior, and watch the paint being scraped onto the canvas, etched in places with a palette knife, but you don't remember the brushes.

you air the office out, window flung wide, and the next morning as you pass the room there's the smell in the air that catches your breath — his cologne, the one you bought in a rush for his birthday one year, and he said he loved it at first, but eventually you both grew to love it, so he never used anything else.

the mind is such a brittle thing, he said later.

today's a work-at-home day, so you go into the office, and his painted self's eyes are bluer than grey. is that right? they were blue, weren't they? the dress your other self wears is green, now, when it was yellow before.

you never had a green dress, if you remember rightly, but it's cold in here — probably because the window was open all night — and you go to retrieve a jumper. there's no video calls for a while yet, it's fine if you're a bit scruffy. hanging on the door of the wardrobe (you broke that habit years ago) is a dress, deep green, short sleeves, just like your younger self wears.

the breast of the dress is pinned through with a cufflink, one of the engraved ones he commissioned for what was supposed to be your five-year anniversary. the other is on the ground, you discover by stepping on it, several feet below.

passing through the halls back to your office, you press the coffeemaker awake, letting the morning breeze carry the coffee smell through. it takes the sting out of the cologne, a little.

there's a scraping, knife on burnt bread, and you freeze, call out *hello? anyone there?* and take your fresh coffee as your best weapon.

the kitchen is empty, but you knew that. as you turn to exit, you trip over the gleaming wingtips he always wore, spill your coffee down your front, feel the pressure of hands on yours to steady yourself.

there's no-one there of course, but there never is, not these days. the painting was lost, but now it's found, and there's still no-one there. your home is thousands of miles away from the one the pair of you shared once, so of course it carries no trace that he was ever here.

except that you didn't see the spare coffee cup draining in the kitchen, or the fresh gouge in the butter you opened last night and didn't use.

the mind is such a brittle thing, after all.



*When she's not browsing through stacks of books or watching mysteries, Sarah Little is a poet and sometimes story-teller. Her poetry collection *The Lachrymatorium* was published with Roaring Junior in July 2022 and most recently she's been exploring fairy-tale motifs while branching out into fiction. Recent publications have been pieces in *Heartbalm*, *Celestite*, and *Suburban Witch*, among others.*

HOLD ON

By Ilana Drake

when she trembles because
she does not want the
crowd to see her hand,
the question comes onto
the page in cursive

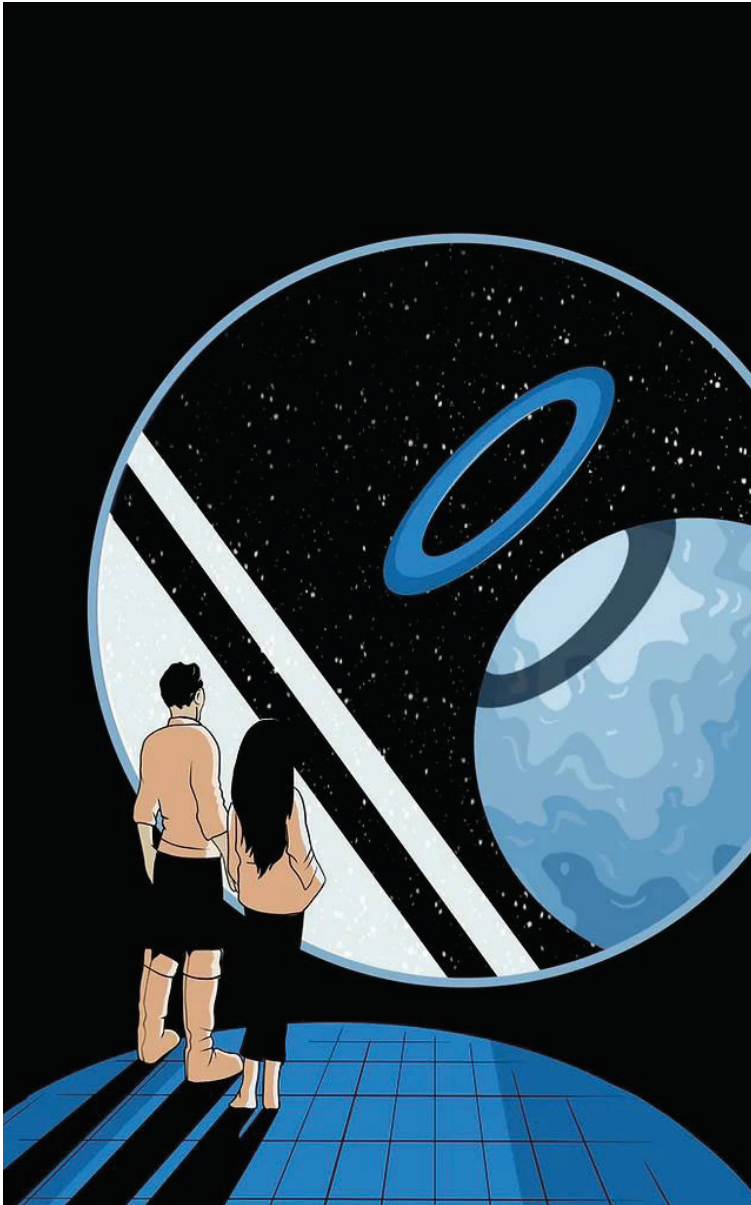
she wishes she could
ask about the stars,
the moon, & the comets
& she wants to understand
the ways in which the
night stays alive
after she closes her eyes

he tucks his hopes
underneath his pillow,
dreaming of the ways in
which life will change &
earth will move

he thinks of the protests,
the marches for hope,
for strength & support,
& he wonders why
his questions have long
been ignored

& he and she meet
when the sun has allowed
the moon to enter, &
here they speak softly
of the places they will go.





Ilana Drake is an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University who enjoys creative writing. Ilana's words have been in Ms. Magazine, PBS NewsHour, and The Tennessean. When Ilana is not writing, she can be found exploring used book shops in Nashville, trying to find the best cold brew coffee with her friends, and listening to songs from the 1990s.

HEAVENLY BODIES

By Micah McCutchan

don't you know the circles under my eyes
are made of moonlight
isn't it lovely ? how much of the universe
she holds inside of herself—
how much of it she ~~spills~~ pours into me;
celestial milk & honey
so much i have never seen before
isn't it mesmerizing ?
how we are all made of the same beautiful scraps of planetary motion,
rings around our bodies like halos.
i see the stars winking back at me through her irises &
taste the musk of the moondust she keeps trapped under her tongue.
i think the wishes upon stars that couldn't make it past the thick layers of earthly atmosphere
have landed here, in this transitory space between our collarbones—
i think with every breath we suck them in & make them into our own magic.
no wonder they say this is heavenly



Micah McCutchan is a queer poet & visual artist based out of Iowa. She uses poetry to explore her sexuality, experiences with disordered eating, and healing journey. When they aren't writing, Micah is spending time with their cats, unionizing teachers, or reading. Micah hopes that their work will inspire you to look inward & reflect on your own healing journey.

BODIES CRAVING FUSION

By Charlotte Hamrick

On a small and lonely planet
traveling through casual space,

a breath, a wind,
a shadow, a phantom.

I've been a prophet, I've been a fool.
We are not unspectacular things,

we've come this far, survived this much.
I did a road trip all over my mind

and heart
and there you were,

the Mary on Pinto dashboards
holding her ripe, red heart in her hands.

I travel without maps, free-style my scripture,
who knows what kind of creature I will become?

Crushed bodies craving fusion keep us lit,
scattering all that we think matters.

CREDIT IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

1. *A Brave and Startling Truth* by Maya Angelou
2. *"Truth," said a traveller* by Stephen Crane
3. *Mercy* by José Antonio Rodríguez
4. *Dead Stars* by Ada Limón
5. *O Small Sad Ecstasy of Love* by Anne Carson
6. *Poem Not to Be Read at Your Wedding* by Beth Ann Fennelly
7. *Exit Strategy* by Kazim Ali
8. *Exploded Stars* by Kamilah Aisha Moon



Charlotte Hamrick's creative writing and photography has been published in a number of literary journals and anthologies, recently including Still: The Journal, Atticus Review, and New World Writing. Her fiction was selected for the Best Small Fictions 2022 anthology. She's had several literary nominations including the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She is an editor for SugarSugarSalt, The Citron Review, and Reckon Review. She lives in New Orleans with her husband and a menagerie of rescued pets where she sometimes does things other than read and write.



THE ONE WHO WAITS

By Marisca Pichette

Somewhere, there is someone waiting. This is not a tale of loyalty; they have not been waiting long. It is merely a notion, a fantasy, if you will—that somewhere, someone is expecting.

Who? Only they know, and it is futile to ask them.

“Comin’,” is all they’ll say to your question. “S a-comin’.”

Do you press them further? Perhaps not, for their face is so set in concentration, it seems as if they themselves are pulling that unknown object along through time, patiently passing the hours in wait.

To us, of course, it may seem long. It may be days that you are there with them, waiting and wondering what it is you are waiting for. The end of the world? For here, in the middle of nowhere, it looks like the end of the road. The universe, ever expanding, has turned around. Now it shrinks, contracting and folding up on itself like so many disused Slinkys.

Slinking its way back to the beginning of Time.

Back to the one who waits.

Perhaps that is why they stand, staring off with such conviction, such total belief in their gaze. They give you the sense that they know exactly what it is that’s coming, and they won’t give the surprise away. It is not that they are withholding vital information—merely that they do not find it necessary to tell you. Let that be a comfort, for things not worth knowing are not worth worrying about, either.

One hopes.

Or does one wonder further, torn apart for the want of knowledge? Things we cannot see swiftly fill our eyes, ever thought about and dwelt upon in the small hours. We try so hard to know everything that we forget what we have known in the pursuit of what we can't. Why has the world made us so? Perhaps it is the creaking of universal springs as they expand ever outward that pulls our hopes and dreams along, seeking new things.

Or maybe it is the shudder of a collapsing galaxy that urges us to act—quickly! Find and learn all there is to learn, for soon there will be nothing.

How odd that we cannot be content to stand beside the person waiting and not inquire as to their business in waiting there. We see them and we do not accept that they are alone and merely lingering for a short time in expectation of company of some kind, but presume, asking numerous questions about who and what and when and why...?

No wonder you are ignored when you repeat your demand of "Who?" For you it seems so urgent, this longing, this desire to know all that is before you. But to the one who waits, it is not at all about urgency and time. They have waited for minutes you don't remember, and bear memories you couldn't count. They know what is your business, and what is their own. Waiting is not a chore, nor a topic of discussion.

Especially not with you: a stranger.

Dawn will still come if the name is not given out, the mystery left unsolved. Others will pass this world's end, and go along their own paths, heedless of the one who stands and stares with such purpose into the distance. Seasons still come without the answers you seek. Why shouldn't they? For the one who waits is just human, after all.

At least, that is what you must believe. For around who else does time turn, wearing away nothing of that determined face? The clothes they wear are so plain that they could be from tomorrow or two thousand years past. They have a weathered complexion, but do not appear old. It seems that they are completely untouched as they stand, solitary in their watchful vigil—ever expectant of something undisclosed, some companion unspoken.

Any answers you get will be curt, and yield nothing of their motives. Perhaps they have none, you decide—and stand simply to stand. They are a spectacle, nothing else.

Yet, of course you cannot believe that. Something in their eyes convinces you of the error of that path. The one thing you can tell is that here, in the middle of an endless field, cut only by a worn and weary road, there is nothing to be lost in waiting. For here stands the one who knows, and you are inclined, despite your burning questions and misguided opinions, to stay, and wait with them.

You will gain nothing from conversation, for they have nothing to give. Instead you stand, and you listen. You look out across the persevering field, and you listen. Sounds hardly above silence fill your ears, and you barely notice the passersby as you wait. Colors spring from the even gray of the landscape, creating a vibrant spectrum you missed in your first coming.

As you stand, you wonder why you ever longed to move so fast. What was your rush before you found yourself here, constantly dwelling on the things that were around you, not contemplating what was to be?

In standing, in waiting, you feel suddenly as if you're waiting for nothing at all. A strange notion descends, and you are shocked by the simplicity of it. Instead of working, instead of talking, instead of running and laughing and worrying—you are living. Purer than the varicolored setting and clearer than the mottled sky above, you are living. Nothing grand, no embellishments; just breathing and observing.

It occurs to you that you have never stopped before, never truly halted all breathless activity to experience what there was to see. In your haste to know everything, you realize how little you learned. In your desire to study it all, you overlooked the world.

Somewhere, there is someone waiting. They do not stand tall. They are not indignant or impatient. They have little to say. They will not bother you, on the road that leads from nowhere. But they may watch you as you pass, taking in your gaze and holding it for a long, long time.

In that moment, it will take all of your will to forget your tasks, and to pause for a moment to inquire what it is that is worth so much rushing, and whether there is something to be said for standing, and seeing an empty landscape fill with details, one by one.

They will not ask you to stop, nor beg you to stay. If you demand to know the reason for their vigil, they will only reply,

"Comin'. 'S a-comin'."

Perhaps you may feel a little satisfied, and a little enlightened by what you saw and heard. Then you are likely to go on your way, forgetting the details you briefly glimpsed in that boundless field, ever extending outward on stretched springs. Your world will continue to grow, and you may not remember that somewhere, there are things you could never learn, and sights you can never see again.

But in that place, there is someone standing.

They know what they see. They have seen it all. They know what they hear; they hear it every day. They have not been there long, but perhaps it seems so. If you ask them the way, they may tell you more than you asked,

though their response will be short. They do not move from their place, and always, they are watching.

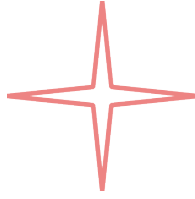
"S a-comin'."

And they wait.



Marisca Pichette collects fragments. Her work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Fireside Magazine, Fusion Fragment, Apparition Lit, PseudoPod, and PodCastle, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023. Find her on Twitter as @MariscaPichette and Instagram as @marisca_write.

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LYRA'S WINSTON

By Amy Marques

Lyra knew the rules. Reintegration must be treated like death. And, for all intents and purposes, *that* Lyra was dead to the world. Her horses had long been sold, her lasso hung unused in the abandoned barn that no longer belonged to her, and those who had known her – or thought they did – rarely remembered the cowgirl who had lived among them for so long. In time, even the dog would likely forget her altogether.

Lyra knew the rules. She had made them. But she hadn't understood the price. Not then.

In days gone by, her kind had freely roamed the earth and settled among the humans who had sought them out for their power and wisdom. Humankind recognized them as soothsayers and healers, sometimes elves or witches. They were revered. Then feared.

The world grew intolerant of magic, ungrateful for the gentle mercies her people afforded, cruel in its attacks. Her kind grew weary of strife and wished to leave in search of serenity. Lyra had been the strongest among them, the one who loved the earth best. When the elders suggested that maybe some should stay behind to serve humankind, Lyra was the only one to volunteer.

They left: the dream-whisperers and kingmakers, the healers and the scholars, the gardeners and the dancers and the giants who held up the sky. All but Lyra. She slowly learned their skills and took on their forsaken roles and grew until she was larger than the giants and wiser than the scholars.

Her roots sunk deep into the earth she loved, and as her destiny entwined with humankind, her bond with her own kind unraveled. She reminded herself that this was the home she had chosen, the mission she had volunteered for.

For a time, she retained her full form. But they could not understand or love her as such. Her vastness frightened the very people who needed her most. She strained to embrace the world and play all her roles from the

shadows, showing only parts of herself at a time. Finally, she retreated to the woods and surrounded her home with enchantments that hid it from the world. She had heard of wisewomen who became multitudes. Lyra imagined she could do the same.

It took seven full years, but finally, the spell was cast. From her vastness she made seven times seven human-sized portions of her soul: her *selven*.

At last, the seven-times-seven Lyras, each fully her, yet uniquely themselves, were ready to leave the woods. For seven hundred years, they walked the earth as women do. They nurtured children and made kings. They inspired wars and coaxed peace. They whispered reveries and shouted truths. They fed multitudes, moved mountains, and loved with enough strength to shift trajectories and shape destinies.

Meanwhile, Lyra waited, captive, in the woods. Diminished. Hollow. Alone.

Then, after seven centuries, the spell shifted; as Lyra had known it would, as she had planned it to. From then on, on the longest night of the year, every seven years, her fractured *selven* met for the sun to choose which was next to be reintegrated. Which was next to die.

The ancient had spoken of it. It had been done before, but rarely. Those who fractured slowly returned into themselves until they were, once again, whole and free. What Lyra hadn't known was that although they returned, the *selven* remained themselves. Their loves and losses haunted her dreams and shaped her days.

• • •

Ten days ago, on the winter solstice, they had come from every corner of the earth, her *selven* had. They were as different from one another as the flowers that framed her cottage and the mushrooms she foraged for in her woods. They trickled in with song, with dance, with grumblings about the length of the trip, and with excited tales of how the lands had changed since their last gathering.

Almost three hundred years had passed since the first septennial and now only seven *selven* remained outside of Lyra: the healer, the librarian, the tutor, the warrior, the artist, the child, and the cowgirl.

"Where is the cowgirl?" the tutor asked, with the schoolmistress voice she'd perfected over centuries, the one that still made the child jump to attention in spite of herself.

"There's still time," the artist said from where she lay in the grass, eyes shielded from the sun that was still high in the sky. "We don't begin until sunset."

The child went back to following the cardinals and brushing against branches covered in fresh snow. She stopped at the oldest of the pines and bent her head to nibble on the snowflakes. Even after centuries living among humans and watching them grieve when their young passed before their time, the *selven* child hardly expected to be the next to go. Children never do.

The tutor paced, impatient to begin. The artist napped in the fading sun while the healer, the librarian, and the warrior sat in companionable silence, backs against the west-facing cottage wall, watching the child's exploration with varying combinations of amusement and longing.

"I think tutor's worried she'll be next," said the librarian.

"We all are," the healer replied after a pause of many heartbeats. But she kept her voice soft, barely a whisper, cushioning the blow. The healer didn't ask, but she wondered if the warrior felt as she did, so tired some days that she almost wished to be the next to rest.

They spoke no more, only watched the sky shift from blue to pink to orange.

The cowgirl arrived at the gate just as the sun touched the horizon, but she wasn't alone.

"The dog can't come in," Lyra said. The sanctuary had never been breached. Not before the fracture. Not in the seven hundred years and definitely not in any of the septennial gatherings since. No humans had ever entered her realm. Not ever.

"Winston isn't human," the cowgirl said, hand resting lightly on the dog's head, still standing outside the gate, suggesting that if he weren't welcome, she wasn't welcome either.

"He is other. He has no magic."

You'd be surprised. The cowgirl didn't say it out loud, but she didn't have to. She was a part of Lyra, after all, if temporarily apart. When they were away, Lyra followed their lives as one might see in a fog. At times the mist lifted, and she saw patches of clarity. It was easier with the child who allowed her feelings to run the gamut, unguarded and intense. The others had grown more complex and, in learning to guard themselves from those around them, to shield others from their depths, they'd erected walls that even Lyra couldn't always penetrate. But here, in their woods, close enough to touch, close enough to feel their heartbeats, Lyra could read their souls as her own.

Lyra waited, impervious. Nothing from outside had ever been allowed in. Would ever be allowed in.

The cowgirl's shoulders slumped, and she bent towards the dog, bidding

him to stay. When he rested his face on his front paws, she scratched his ears, murmuring reassurances until he slept.

"Can't he just stay here? Outside the gate? I can spellbind his sleep. He won't be a bother," she said.

The six *selven* watched Lyra, wondering what she would say. They could feel it too: a tug. But *selven* knew not to love what they could not afford to lose. They were promised only seven years at a time. After centuries of loving those with lifespans shorter than their own, they were wary of causing pain in those they left behind.

Lyra said nothing. Long ago she had taught them to come prepared. They knew the sunset on the shortest day of the seventh year heralded a new ending. There were no exceptions. No promises. They would spend the night telling tales of their lives and the sunrise would choose the next of the *selven* to die to her singularity. They could bring nothing with them. She never told them that their memories haunted her sleep.

The cowgirl *selven* lay on the ground next to the sleeping dog and whispered to him before gently conveying him back to the home they shared. Then, lips pressed tightly together, she came through the gate and joined her *selven* sisters in the garden just as the last of the sunlight faded on the horizon.

They had once been many, seven times seven, and the ritual storytelling had lasted through the long dark night. Now they were only seven and they had known each other for so long that they were rarely surprised — if occasionally disgusted or delighted—with the choices the others had made. Their time was spent sharing tales of the humans they had succored through the years.

They began with the child. Never mind that they all knew that she was not, in truth, younger than any of them; she looked like a child, so they found themselves forever treating her like one. Hers were tales of rain puddles and drawings in the clouds, but also of how the creases on a teacher's forehead grew deeper and their eyes didn't always match their smile.

She told of the girl who hid in the alley on the nights her mother's voice sounded sloppy, until the child *selven* guided a neighbor into taking her in. She told of the boy who was teased for his lisp until the child *selven* invited him to make music and they sang the lisp away. The child's laughter made them all — even the cowgirl — smile.

In the early gatherings, they had feared the tales of the warrior, thinking hers would be the most difficult to bear. But in time, they learned that it was the small things told by the caregivers—the mother, the minister, the counselor, the healer —that haunted them even long after they'd passed from their

lives and reintegrated back into Lyra.

"I can't," the cowgirl said when it was her turn to share. "I did nothing."

"That's not true," Lyra said. "I watched. Tell us the story of the woman you found half buried in the snow."

"That was Winston," the cowgirl said, and she blew into her hands as she had watched humans do. Her hands still smelled of Winston, so she kept them there, cupping her nose and mouth, breathing in comfort.

"But you led her to shelter," Lyra coaxed.

"Winston did it. I was just there."

Quiet blanketed them as the lightest dusting of snow decorated their lashes and their hair. The *selven* sat, inured to the elements, attuned to beauty, comfortable even in the freezing temperature. Here, in the sanctuary, snow couldn't dim the glow of the fire and flowers bloomed at will. They sat as they had so many times before, in intimate silence, until stories of Winston spilled out of the cowgirl.

Selven knew to cut ties and close circles before each seventh year neared its end. The cowgirl had always started by letting go of the horses. She'd left Ginger, the oldest, at the barn where the old vet housed the animals under his care. That's where she had met Winston.

He'd been little more than a puppy then: a little bundle of black and white, with the one tan dropped ear. He'd gazed at her in adoration with the one blue and the other brown eye, as she'd brushed down Ginger's coat for what she hoped wasn't the last time. When she was done, she sat on the hard floor and he moved closer, tail wagging, front paws moving onto her lap as she scratched his chin and told him what a handsome boy he was. He'd bounced after her when she left the barn and she'd laughed at his eagerness.

"Stay!" the cowgirl told the dog. But he didn't, even though she knew he'd understood her. She was skilled in husbandry and care of animals that humans had long domesticated. She spoke their language as her own and they understood her soul. He knew what she wanted of him, and he would have done anything she asked. Everything she asked. Everything but let her go on without him.

As dawn broke after the longest night of another seventh year, the sun kissed each of the *selven* faces in turn before shining its full force on the cowgirl, coating her in light even as she whispered, "Please, no... Winston... I promised..."

For the first time, Lyra sobbed as a *selven* reintegrated. She felt the cowgirl's heartbreak take over her whole self, engulfing her in sorrow. She hadn't

felt such pain even when she had been whole. The cowgirl's grief inundated her, shattering the deepest recesses of her soul, until the only clear thought in her mind was that she had broken her promise to Winston, and that neither of them would ever recover.

Stay. Sleep. I'll see you again soon.

. . .

At first, the dog had only come to her in dreams. But night after night the vision strengthened even as Winston grew feebler. His longing pulled at her, called to her, and reminded her of promises she had made. Or that part of her had made.

Now he haunted even her waking hours: Winston lying in front of the old fireless hearth, barely moving. Tail still, fur dull, eyes closed. She would have thought him dead, but the rise and fall of shallow breaths was evidence that he held on, patiently waiting, heart steady, trusting her to come back.

On this new year's morning, light danced through the lace curtains and played on the cottage walls in an unwelcome reminder that not everything shared in her grief. The sun had made its choice and it felt no remorse.

She wrapped her blanket around herself and closed her eyes, telling herself to breathe, to stop resisting dawn's invitation, to catalogue the sounds of the morning: the windchimes, the chirp of the birds who visited the feeder, the gurgle of the creek, the bark —

Lyra rushed out the door.

There, at the gate where the cowgirl in Lyra had lain beside him and whispered promises of reunion, sat Winston. His coat had lost its shine and he was skin and bone, but his tail twirled, and his one blue and one brown eye gazed at Lyra — all of the *selven* in Lyra — as adoringly as before. Lyra had never felt so thoroughly loved.

Behind him, at the edge of the wood, the six remaining *selven* stood side by side.

"We thought you might change your mind," the child said, nodding at the dog.

The others said nothing, just stood watching to see what Lyra would choose to do.

Lyra's unshod feet barely touched the ground as she approached the gate that opened only on the longest night of every seventh year. Only to her *selven*. Only to herself.

After a nod of gratitude to the *selven* who had broken her rules and returned past the solstice, she opened the gate and let her loving dog in.



Amy Marques grew up between languages and cultures and learned, from an early age, the multiplicity of narratives. She penned three children's books, barely-read medical papers, and numerous letters before turning to short fiction. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net 2023 by Streetcake: Experimental Writing Magazine and published in many journals including Star82 Review, Jellyfish Review, MoonPark Review, Flying South, and Sky Island Journal. You can find her at @amybookwhisper1 or read more of her words at amybookwhisperer.wordpress.com.



Part Three

AMONG THE STARS





THE GODS OF SCIENCE

By Gemma Church

When World was born, he found himself orbiting a young star so bold and blue. Blinking in the stark starlight, he saw his brothers and sisters carving out their own elliptical orbits against the void of space.

He was a happy soul, singing to his siblings and waving at them, but they did not wave back. Instead, they called him the runt of the litter, for he had neither the splendour of his gaseous brothers nor the stealth of his rocky sisters.

"What is the point of you?" his three wicked sisters wheezed. "We are warriors, light-footed and hell-born. You are nothing more than a useless lump of rock. A dreamer with no place in this family."

"And we pull many moons into our orbits, decking ourselves in lustrous rings of diamond and ice," his four gigantic brothers added. "You cannot even attract the most meagre of meteors."

They laughed and laughed at World until his molten heart grew cold and

heavy, solidifying to rock and beating with the weakest thrum. He did not sing to his siblings again.

"Pathetic World. Stupid World. Ugly World." Their words rang out across the cosmos.

World's siblings did not realise that they were not alone. They were inwards-looking like that, assuming that the entire universe was created just for them. That they were the centre of that universe. They were not. For there were multitudes of planets, stars and other universes stretching out beyond what they could possibly imagine.

Their unkind words travelled into space, flying past their dwarf planet cousins, a vicious belt of icy bodies, and a donut-shaped cloud where ancient debris came together to chatter and sing, coalescing to form mountain-sized boulders. Their words stretched out across light years until they reached the ears of the first Gods of Science: Gravity, Forces-Three, Quantum, and Relativity.

The Gods of Science were not happy with what they heard.

"We should protect World, wake him from his sad slumbers and make him into a seat for the gods, the jewel in the crown of the cosmos. That will silence his boastful brothers and sly sisters," Gravity said.

Forces-Three crackled with excitement. "Yes, this sounds like a fine experiment. Besides, World needs a friend and I am so tired of flying around this universe, milling together molecules. You must be tired of pulling everything together too, Gravity, forging mighty crowds of stars from tiny atoms and specks of dust."

Gravity nodded. "I am tired. In truth, we are all worn out from our work forging this universe. Quantum is a superposition of every bad mood there is. Relativity, why, they have been snappy since that business with the black holes." Gravity turned to face Relativity and Quantum. "But what do you two think? Shall we take a break from our work and help World?"

Gravity waited for a response but, as always, Relativity and Quantum were too busy squabbling amongst themselves. Gravity cleared their throat with a seismic rumble until Relativity and Quantum looked up from their tussle and nodded in agreement.

"Good. It is decided. Now, can you two stop arguing for five minutes while we travel to World?"

Relativity and Quantum nodded once more as Gravity pulled a gigantic lump of rock and ice from the distant cloud surrounding World's star, which had now cooled to a warming yellow. Then, the Gods of Science mounted that cosmic snowball and off they went, speeding towards the star. Towards

World.

The Gods of Science created their bodies anew as they travelled, their limbs elongating into space and joints snapping into place. They laughed as they raced towards World, watching the starry firmament whiz past their newly forming faces. Even Quantum cracked their first smile, shaping a ten-drill tongue to catch the taste of the cosmos and finding it tasted of strawberries. Quantum hated strawberries. But before Quantum had fully registered their disgust, the Gods of Science collided with World.

In a whirl of fire, ice, and metal, they merged with such energy that World's frozen heart melted and began to beat in a strong, deep rhythm. World liquified and roared to life, his insides turning red-hot as a thin crust solidified and formed his new skin.

The Gods of Science, dizzy but regaining strength, walked unsteadily and started to transform World, only stopping to look up and wave at their new sibling. For the Gods had also transformed their snowball vessel into something new, something grander, deciding that it had served them so well on their journey that it also deserved a place with them, at their table.

The snowball crystallised, its skin waxing and waning to form a cloak of white as it settled into a gentle orbit around World. And so, Moon was born as another God of Science, one with two opposing faces.

World only knew the Man in the Moon's kind face, for it was permanently turned towards World, gazing down and smiling.

Moon's other face was not so kind. Pockmarked and snarling, she was called Lady Moon. She glared out into the void of space with cratered eyes of vengeance, daring World's siblings to ever say such cruel words to World again. His brothers and sisters stopped their sniggering under Lady Moon's protective glare.

World remained humble as the Gods bestowed countless gifts upon him, garlanding his body with a rich atmosphere and clothing him in polar regions, vast tundra, evergreen forests, seasonal forests, grasslands, deserts, rainforests, and deep oceans.

But as World's beauty grew, his siblings' envy inflated. They watched as the Moon tilted World's orbit to stir the oceans until World was neither too hot nor too cold, but just right to nurture life. They watched as his body welcomed mortal creatures cast in scales and feathers and skins. They watched as some of those creatures grew upright and proud, staring back at the heavens to record the motions of the stars, planets, and Moon in almanacs of stone.

With the arrival of those creatures, World's eldest sister saw an oppor-

tunity. Because not all the creatures looked up to the sky. Many were as inwards-looking as World's siblings and decided that they knew better than the Gods of Science, making up their own rhetoric for their own gains. The words of these doubters polluted the minds of many, turning humans against one another and World.

But World's eldest sister heard their whispers and doubts, a seed of an idea unfurling in her mind and she bided her time, waiting for an opportunity to come.

An opportunity did come when, one day, the Gods of Science decided they had done all they could do, leaving World in the hands of the humans.

"I have grown quite fond of these humans and World. They will not forget us, will they?" Forces-Three asked with a tear in their eye.

Gravity shook their head. "Of course not. We are instilled in every fibre of the universe and the humans are a curious bunch with far-seeing ambitions. If they continue to look up, then they will uncover the secrets of the universe, discovering more sciences that will unite their people and lands. I have great faith in them and what they can achieve with their experiments and theories. And with Moon to look after World, what could possibly go wrong?"

And off Gravity, Forces-Three, Quantum, and Relativity flew, travelling back through the cosmos to forge other planets, stars and universes. But those Gods of Science were naive and carefree, not realising the dangers that lay ahead for World.

World's brothers were furious. "Did you see that? Those gods flew straight past us without once stopping to admire our strength and beauty! Why did they not give any gifts to us and choose our simpering little brother instead?"

His sister planets were angrier with the humans than the gods.

"We are not to be observed like animals in a cage!" The youngest sister snarled, watching the humans as they watched them. "Make them stop, World!"

"And how dare these humans try to constrict us with their theories and observations?" the middle sister added. "Why do they worship these sciences instead of us sisters? World, why do you not stop their blasphemous ways? Why do you not help us and remove these humans from your midst?"

The eldest sister said nothing at first. She was thinking. Plotting. Finally, she whispered to World, "If you get rid of these humans, we will welcome you back with open arms. A small asteroid should do the trick. And you will be so much happier with us than them. We're your family, after all, not those humans."

World refused in an instant, shuddering as he remembered the last asteroid to collide with his body.

His sisters did not cease their whispering, badgering World until his brothers chimed in. "But you are so beautiful now, so majestic. You do not have our size but you have so much splendour that we can love you now, World. Those humans are ugly and weak little things, why will you not help us get rid of them?"

At first, World tried to reason with his siblings. "Brothers, you may be bigger and louder than me. Sisters, you may have faster tongues and cleverer thinking. But you have not seen what I have seen, learnt what I have learnt from the humans. How they dance and laugh and sing! I'm sure you would be happy in their company too, happier than you are now, alone in the void of space. Will you not consider changing your ways so you can support their life on your surfaces too?"

His brothers guffawed. His sisters sniggered. "Pathetic humans. Stupid humans. Ugly humans. What is wrong with you, World?"

Then, for the first time, World stood up to his sisters and brothers. "There is nothing wrong with me, and I will not have you polluting my mind anymore with your toxic words. I will not have you saying these things about my friends either because, unlike you, these humans love me without condition, and I love them too."

His brothers swelled with rage. "Unconditional love? That is not real love, you idiot. You were always too small and insignificant to be part of this family anyway. You are dead to us, World." And his brothers pushed themselves further away from World, deeper into space, refusing to speak to him ever again.

Before his sister planets turned their backs on World, the eldest said one last, spiteful thing. But she did not say it to World. She whispered to Lady Moon, telling her what World had become. Telling her of the humans who were questioning the cosmos, questioning World, questioning Moon.

"If you do not believe us, then turn around and face World to see the situation for yourself," his wicked eldest sister said, smirking.

And that is when the trouble began. Lady Moon did turn to face World. The humans stared back into the sky, horrified by such an unexpected celestial phenomenon. Their observations and theories could neither explain nor predict this occurrence and, in that moment, they were filled with doubt and fear, abandoning their observations and shattering their almanacs.

When the shock had receded, the doubters began to gather and prey on these fears, questioning the sciences, inventing new deities, ones that could explain the universe with simple words and fictions that came from their frag-

ile minds and not from understanding the wonders of the World.

At first, the stories brought the humans comfort, but eventually their words turned toxic. Over the millennia, these words resonated with many humans until they became spiteful, boastful and short-sighted, abusing World until his blond-sand beaches were scarred with plastics and his mountains were befouled by open dumps. His shimmering bays became slick with raw sewage, dangerous chemicals and rotting garbage. World's oceans were cloaked in a chitin sheen, his forests were decimated, and his atmosphere was sliced with poisonous gases through which the harsh stellar winds blew strong.

His brothers and sisters smiled, believing their work was done. "See what your humans have done to you? How they have plundered your resources and left you weaker than ever? We tried to warn you World. It's not too late to join us."

World ignored his siblings, because he saw the situation for what it was. He understood that the humans were mere infants compared to the lifetime of the universe. Children who had made a mistake, one that was wrought from the minds of his sisters.

World forgave the humans in an instant, because mistakes can easily be forgiven and rectified in the young, given the correct approach. And World would use neither the violence of his brothers nor the manipulation of his sisters to put things right.

Instead, World began to sing as he had heard the humans sing to one another and as he once sang to his siblings. He sang to the handful of humans who still wanted to understand the World and their place in it. He sang them the stories of the Gods of Science, but his words were garbled and strange. Still, the humans did not give up. They continued to listen, experiment, and theorise until they could make sense of World's message.

They translated World's songs into sets of equations, associating the symbols used in those equations with measurements of physical things. They did not hide those songs away in books sequestered for the rich and powerful either. Instead, they shared World's songs in the pervasive language of mathematics, shouting them to anyone who wanted to hear. And more people listened, connecting everything they observed in the heavens above and World below. With every new discovery, World grew stronger and braver, singing louder and with more confidence.

So too did the humans, who looked again to the heavens and left behind their wasteful ways. World relayed more information and the humans learnt many things. They learnt of science and song and how to launch tiny satellites to better see into space. Then, they boarded space faring vessels

to meet Moon and the planets for themselves. While Moon welcomed them with open arms, World's brothers and sisters fell into a great funk, ignored by the immortal Gods of Science and then prodded by mortals and their machines. World's siblings never spoke again, growing cold, inert, and alone.

Over time, the humans started to ride the white road of the Milky Way in silver ships, whizzing past those sibling planets, their dwarf cousins, icy belts, and donut-shaped clouds, sailing further out into the stars to see what they could see.

The humans walked new worlds beyond their solar system thanks to the information bestowed by World. But they never forgot their first home around a small star out in the galactic boondocks. No matter how far they went, they continued to sing to World every night, beaming their own songs back to him in a rising cadence that was entangled with the music of World's soul.

But for all their songs, experiments, and explorations, the humans were still hungry to learn more. They understood how Gravity, Forces-Three, Quantum, and Relativity worked now, but they longed to unite every God of Science in one glorious Theory of Everything.

With a Theory of Everything they could explain all physical phenomena in the universe, from the tiniest particles to the grandest galaxies. It would be their masterpiece, a framework to describe all there is to understand. When the humans had their Theory of Everything, they knew they would have learned all they could.

The humans searched for millennia for this theory but found nothing, even with World's help. But they never stopped trying and discovered something else – that the search for understanding is what pushed them forward to make new discoveries and explore new worlds.

Many humans postulated that this quest for knowledge was enough. That the challenge of new discovery stopped humans from stagnating and becoming inwards-looking once more.

But others continued pushing forward, searching for the ultimate God of Science. For the Theory of Everything.

They searched and searched without luck until World's star grew bloated and red. Then, the humans knew they had to leave World for the last time because they were no longer safe there.

World, now ancient and fading, was not sad when the last humans left his surface, knowing he had done all he could for them. The humans loved him unconditionally, and he loved them too.

The humans sang to him one last song as they left, a song so powerful and steeped in love that it rippled the very fabric of space and time, reaching the ears of four old souls at the threshold of all-there-is.

The Gods of Science turned to face World once more. They watched as World's star swelled, consuming him and his brothers and sisters in its fiery cloak. They watched as World threw his arms wide open to the conflagration and welcomed death because he had led a good and happy life.

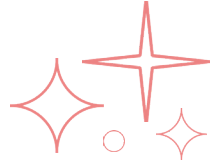
When World died, the Gods of Science did not weep. They knew death was not the end for World as they flew to him once more and captured his atoms in their arms. Then, they used every element of World, binding him with their own souls. Binding themselves with one another.

And so, World was never alone again. He was eternally united with Gravity, Forces-Three, Quantum, and Relativity, becoming a new God of Science. The most powerful God of Science there is.

World became The Theory of Everything, ready to be discovered once more by the humans he so loved.



Gemma Church is a science copywriter/journalist with two degrees in physics. She recently received a diploma in creative writing from Cambridge University. Her short stories have appeared in The Writer's Forum, Bag of Bones Press and Indie Bites.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM ANOTHER WORLD

By Dori Lumpkin

For my dad, and for everything he's ever done for me. Thank you.



Christmas Eve, Ten Years Ago

We built a small fire, me and my dad, my last Christmas Eve on Earth. We both knew it would be my last, but neither of us really wanted to say anything about it. We just sat, drinking chocolate with cayenne pepper, contemplating the fire and the stars. It was a beautiful night for stars, too — we never got any snow or anything, so no clouds, and our backyard was devoid enough of trees that they didn't block my view. I had to choke down my excitement at the number of full constellations I could see. I didn't want Dad to have to think about my trip, or about space at all, even though he was the one who inspired that love to begin with. If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't have gone anywhere that night. January first would have come and gone, and we'd have watched the launch of the Defiant together on television that morning like everyone else, commenting on the lucky bastard who got to go to space on the first day of the new year.

But because he had to teach me the stars, and because I had to be lucky enough to live almost next door to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, and I had to become an astronaut and had to have the right connections, the right mindset, the right intelligence, the right stuff, if you will, that lucky bastard had to be me.

I wouldn't trade it for anything, though. As facetious as I'm being, I knew how lucky I was. I got to leave Earth behind, researching astrobiology and finding the next new Earth. Everyone was still too afraid to admit it out loud, but our home wouldn't last much longer, and at this point, we'd have to take what we could get. I was an experiment. They were too afraid to send up an entire colony of researchers, so I volunteered to go alone, my ship set to return with my intel upon my death. It would be a lonely life, but it was a life I had volunteered for, and a life I couldn't have been more excited to claim.

My dad cleared his throat, pulling my eyes from the stars back down to him. He had an eyebrow raised, as if he was waiting for me to answer a question he hadn't asked yet. He was like that.

"What?" I took another sip of my cocoa, and he threw another stick on our fire. "Are you cold?" It was a crisp forty-five degrees out. He laughed. He grew up in North Dakota, where his winterchill averaged somewhere below zero almost every day. Huntsville was nothing to him.

"You all packed for your trip?" It was my turn to laugh. Ah yes, my trip. My quick winter vacation jaunt to the stars. That's all it was. A nice little trip. And one I had to pack for, at that. "Not much I can bring along with me from here, Dad." He knew that, though. My clothes had mostly been provided by the Center, as well as all my bathroom supplies, notebooks, pens, all of that. There were restrictions for bringing items into space, obviously, so there wasn't much left for me to do on my own other than wait.

"Well," he hesitated, shifting in his seat, "I hope you've still got enough room in your suitcase for a little Christmas present from me." He pulled a small box out of his jacket pocket and tossed it over to me. "Don't worry, I already made sure it was okay for space." He wouldn't meet my eyes, which is how I knew he was trying not to tear up. It had been like this with my sister for a while, she almost couldn't look at me without crying, but Dad had remained relatively steadfast up until now. Looking at him, I could feel my own eyes start to burn. I decided to blame it on the smoke.

"You didn't have to get me anything, Dad." He shook his head as I examined the box. It was roughly five by five inches, covered in plain brown wrapping paper. He had written something on it, in his scrawling black handwriting that resembled mine so closely. "Do the stars gaze back? Now, that's a question." Neil Gaiman, Stardust. One of my favorite childhood fairytales. "It's your last Christmas, Pip. Of course I did."

I slipped my finger under the tape, methodically pulling up the paper. It didn't take me long to unwrap the whole thing, which revealed a simple white box, and then to open that box, which gave way to a beautiful silver pocket watch resting on a bed of wine-colored velvet. But the face of the watch was entirely different from any watch I had seen before. It was lined with blues and oranges, representing the cosmos, and on the edge of the hour hand, there perched a tiny moon. The minute hand held a small sun, matching its counterpart perfectly. The outer rim was etched with very small, carefully drawn astronomical symbols instead of numbers. A Ptolemaic watch. I glanced up, and he was watching me, intently.

"It's beautiful."

"Ah, it's nothing. Just figured you'd want something up there to remind you of where you came from."

My grandmother used to make her hot cocoa with milk, but my dad never quite caught on to that secret, so his was never quite as rich. He did put cinnamon and all his extra spices in it though, which I think I needed more than the milk. Either way, it warmed me going down and kept me tethered to Earth for the rest of the night. I looked up at the stars again, a soft, sad smile dancing across my lips. My watch ticked along faintly in the background.

Christmas Eve, Present

When I was little, we used to go to the ocean. Well. Not the ocean. The Gulf of Mexico. But I didn't have any concept of that at the time — all large bodies of water were ocean. It was one of my favorite things, standing on the beach, looking out into the world and thinking that it was the biggest thing I had ever — or would ever — see in my entire life. I wasn't stupid — I knew about outer space then, of course. I just never thought as an eight year old that I would actually make it there.

My dad and I would spend hours down there, long after my mom and sister had returned to our condo. We'd watch the stars appear one by one, racing to see who could identify constellations the fastest. He would always win, but I never minded because I always learned something new about the sky. Once it was fully night, or I got hungry, or cold, or tired, as children are wont to do, he would take my hand and lead me back up to our rooms, all the while telling me everything he knew about anything I asked.

It took me a while to understand, but eventually I realized why we went to the ocean so often, and why he loved it so much.

My father would never be an astronaut. He would never make it to the sky. He was content, don't get me wrong. He made it as close as he could as

an engineer. I mean, hell, he designed some of the parts that keep my little old Defiant running. But like me, he wanted to know everything. He understood that the expanse of the unexplored universe was the most inspiring thing to ever exist. And on land, on Earth, at least, the closest you could get to that same feeling was on the water.

It's Christmas Eve now on the Defiant, and I miss the ocean terribly. I can't help but laugh at myself, because I never even actually saw the ocean when I was on Earth, but still. You know what I mean. I think I miss my dad more, though. He passed this past year, and though I am very used to being alone, it takes a lot for me to admit that I am lonely. And I am.

I make my way over to the pseudo-kitchen area, where my water is now done heating up. I go through the motions, humming Andy Williams to myself as I combine the chocolate with the water. No cayenne pepper in space, sorry Dad, but it will do. Part of me expects for him to call at any moment, as he has every year since I left, but no. Not this time. I placate my grief by allowing myself to imagine how our conversation would go, if only just for a moment.

He would buzz in and ask how his favorite space cadet is doing, not yet acknowledging that it's Christmas. I would roll my eyes and laugh, telling him that I'm fine, nothing has changed since we last spoke (which, in this theoretical conversation would have been about two weeks before). He would ask if I've made any great, grand discoveries destined to save the human race yet, and I would respond no, I'm sorry and I hate to disappoint, but the human race isn't going to be saved by me. He would grow serious, then, and look at me with a concerning sort of intensity.

"You could never disappoint me, Pip. Not me, not anyone. Your name will be in history books forever, and for all the right reasons." He would start to tear up, but catch himself. He would know that if he cries, I cry, and I hate it so much when the tears leave my face in their weird little bubbles.

"I love you so much." I would say, with a careful breath.

"I love you too, kiddo. Merry Christmas." And that would be just as much time as the two of us could spare. But it was always enough. Until it wasn't enough. And it would never have been enough, even as I would have sat, satisfied with how it went and content with knowing that my father is fine and hasn't forgotten about me.

I stop my self-indulgent fantasy, hating that horrible, gluttonous version of myself, wishing I could shake her and scream and tell her how fucking lucky she is, and she doesn't even have a clue. But I can't be too hard on myself. If you had told me eight months ago that I would be in this position, I would've slapped you. But here I am.

I take a sip from my almost-juice box of hot chocolate and grimace. It

tastes nothing like home. But that's the point, isn't it? I'm not home. I never will be again, so the Defiant has to be home, because it's all I've got. I can take comfort in the fact that my father designed it, I guess. That even now, countless miles away from my real home, my house is something my dad gave to me.

I remember my first Christmas away from Earth. I had talked to dad for an hour through the video chat setup. We had almost come to the end of our time when I caught a glimpse of the tree behind him, decorated and beautiful. That broke me. The memory of the scent of pine wafting through the house. Of staying up far too late making sure every ornament was perfectly placed. I cried. Oh, I cried.

"Pip, honey, c'mon," my dad's voice broke through the memories, pulling me back to him, "you can't cry on Christmas, kiddo." I laughed despite myself. We didn't talk much longer after that. I didn't tell him how lonely I was, or how desperately I sometimes wished to be able to come home. He knew. Without me having to say anything, he knew.

I take another sip of my sorry excuse for a hot cocoa and wipe at my face, pushing away any tears that might have made their way forward.

"Can't cry on Christmas, Pip." I whisper to myself, turning back to the rest of the Defiant and returning to work.

New Year's Eve, Ten Years Ago

I spent the final night at the station. It was bittersweet all around, but we did have a lot of fun. They were hosting a sort-of New Years Eve party for those of us that had to work, which were many. The launch was scheduled for 11:00 AM the next day, which meant that I basically had to pull an all-nighter in order to be up early enough to be prepared. I didn't mind, though. At the time I was still idealistic enough to be able to run on willpower and excitement alone.

It would be wrong of me to say that it wasn't also a goodbye party, in a way. I watched my coworkers dance around Mission Control, drinking champagne and enjoying each others' company, but the moment any of them stepped too close to me, it was like a light turned off. Sure, I got my obligatory congratulations and what you're doing is unprecedented but all of it felt dull. Like none of them knew what to actually say to me. I remember thinking to myself, This is what it must feel like to be dying. Because wasn't that what was happening? Wasn't I leaving all of Earth behind, never to be seen again? Once I launched, I would mean nothing to some of these people; they'd just move on to whatever the next big project is, not necessarily forgetting about me, but allowing me to just become part of their glory. They worked on the

Defiant! That was all that mattered. They could turn around and go home at the end of the day to their families and celebrate what a brilliant accomplishment they had all made together, and I was nothing more than the face of it. And to them, that was fine.

I suppose to me that was fine as well, it was just an entirely different thing to come to terms with. And maybe at the time I hadn't fully come to terms with it. I wasn't deluded enough to think that this party was entirely for me, of course. It was literally New Years Eve. Hundreds of people had worked so incredibly hard to make the dream of the Defiant become a reality. My father was one of them. Keeping that in mind, it was easy to slip out of Mission Control, unnoticed by the crowd, and find myself a quiet little spot down the hall. I promised my dad I would call him a few minutes before midnight, and I was cutting it close.

He picked up almost immediately, his face filling the screen of my phone. He had chosen to not come to the New Years Party, electing instead for a quiet night in. I didn't blame him. I would've done the same, if I'd had the option. But I was stuck here, so I made do with what I had.

"Happy New Year's Eve, Pip!" He grinned. He was somewhere outside, that much was obvious. I assumed probably the backyard, as I could see the faint light of the fire pit illuminating his face.

"Woo!" I couldn't bring myself to be nearly as excited as he was. To tell you the truth, I was terrified. I didn't even know if I would survive tomorrow, let alone a whole other year. "How's your last night on Earth?" I could hear the laughter in his voice. He was so excited for me. So proud. I hoped I wouldn't disappoint.

"Kinda sucks, to be honest. Wish I was there."

He frowned, squinting his eyes at me. "The party kinda garbage?"

"I mean no, God knows these weird physicists know how to party. It just feels strange." I sighed. He echoed it.

"You nervous?"

This time it was me who had to bite back a laugh. "No shit, I'm nervous. Tomorrow they're gonna pack me into an insanely large rocket and shoot me into the sky, praying I don't blow up along the way, and then just hope that nothing bad happens to me while I live out the rest of my life beyond human comprehension." I paused, thinking about the fate I'd resigned myself to. "But also. I think it's what I was meant to do, you know?"

He nodded. "I know, kid."

I sat on the floor of the hallway, curling my arms around my knees. "But

I'm also scared that I'm making a mistake."

There they were. The words I couldn't even admit to myself. I'd been working my ass off to get there, but what if I was better off somewhere else in the program? I had barely been able to think about it, let alone say it out loud.

"I don't think so," he responded, and his voice held all the certainty that I should've had, but didn't. This should have been him. "I think that you're making a big decision, and all big decisions are scary, but I've never known a single person on Earth to be more right for this mission than you are." He smiled at me again. "Am I going to miss you? Obviously. You're my oldest, and I love you. But you know what you're doing. You're meant to go far, kid. Farther than anyone else has gone before."

"To boldly go, Dad, get the quote right." I snorted. He laughed.

"Of course. To explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before." Nerds in space, that's what we were. Back in Mission Control, I could hear a countdown start, and then end almost as quickly. Behind my dad's head on the little screen, I could see fireworks going off.

"Happy New Year!" he shouted. "It's gonna be a great one, kiddo!" I took a deep, theoretically calming breath, nodding my head slowly. A form of self-assurance. Dad looked at me, lowering his voice. "Keep on boldly going, Pippa. You're gonna be just fine."

New Year's Eve, Present

I look out at the stars through the window and I miss my dad. Somewhere in my ship, a small alarm is relentlessly beeping, reminding me that I need to sleep. But I can't. Hard to sleep when you're thinking about how big the universe is, and how small you are in comparison to it. My dad taught me that lesson. Sometimes when my troubles are getting the best of me, I look at the sky. And I think that if the world can create something so big, then it must mean that my problem isn't actually that big a deal at all. His voice whispers somewhere in the back of my mind. The problem in my case, of course, is loneliness. It's been ten years to the day since I took off. Seven months, nearly to the day, since I saw my father's face for the last time. I call my sister sometimes, sure, but our conversations are clipped. We don't know each other anymore. Dad was the glue that kept us together. She's a district attorney now, but I can't remember for which county, somewhere in Georgia. Shows how much I pay attention. If you'd asked me what I thought the hardest part of this all would be in the weeks leading up to takeoff, I probably would have said something trite, like, Oh, definitely the lack of seasoned food, or maybe even, I don't know, probably no more running water? But no. It was neither of

those things. It was looking out at space, being able to pick out Earth from a distance, and knowing that I'll never be able to go there and hug my dad again.

My sister passed the bar eight years ago. They had a party for her and everything. It was like a mini graduation. For obvious reasons, I wasn't there. Five years ago, she got married. I'm told it was a gorgeous event. Not something I'll ever be able to do, again for obvious reasons. I never even wanted to get married. It wasn't on my personal list of lifetime achievements, but now that I can't... well... I'm not so sure. And then, of course, there's Dad. Cancer took him in the end. I don't like to talk about the details, so look them up yourself if you're so morbidly curious, but I'm told he didn't suffer much. My biggest regret is not being by his side at the end of it all.

One of my biggest worries (and it's a relatively egotistical one, so forgive me) is that this is where it ends for me. That I'm in space, and that's it. That I'll never find anything out here, and this was all pointless and that I'm stuck and have made the worst kind of mistake that I can never come back from. My sister can keep doing and climbing and going, and I'm? Just here. This is the sort of thought that I've had frequent panic attacks over. It certainly isn't a pleasant thought, to suddenly consider your literal PhD incredibly useless. But the feeling usually passes.

The reason that I do what I do is to pave the way for others to discover more than I ever could. That's the thought I use to ground myself, whenever I start to get worried about existing for no reason. Even if I live out the rest of my life and die an old woman at age ninety-seven without discovering anything in the endless expanse of space, I will have helped countless people by merely being the first one to agree to go on a mission like this. Tomorrow morning will be the tenth anniversary celebrating my launch, and in those ten years, I have done the unimaginable by simply continuing. Dad was right. I will be in the history books for all of the right reasons, and if not me, someone else will because of me. I will make it through this next year, and then another, and then another.

I don't like to think that I'll truly find absolutely nothing. I am an astrobiologist, after all. I believe, at the core of my soul, that it is egotistical of the human race to think that we are the only creatures that could possibly exist. I told my boss back on Earth that, at the very least, an amoeba would be nice. He countered with the hope that one day, they'll find my grave on a far-off alien colony. I told him that he needed to stop taking his Star Trek theories into work. But the truth is, I've got a long fucking way to go. Years and years and years of research ahead of me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I lay my watch on the table next to my lab equipment, letting it tick away. It's been years since it was actually set to the correct adjustments, but that was fine. Out the window, the endless expanse of space winks at me, remind-



ing me just how small I actually am. I smile, the muscles around my cheeks tense — not something they were used to. As long as I know that I am small, I can freely hold out the hope of seeing something bigger. An alarm goes off somewhere behind me. It's midnight in Huntsville, Alabama.

"Happy New Year, Dad."



Dori Lumpkin is currently a graduate student seeking their Masters in English with a focus in Creative Writing at the University of South Alabama. They love all things speculative fiction, and strive towards making every piece they write all the more inclusive and accessible.





CARINA + STEPHAN

By Britt Kaufmann

Like a dog smells time,
the web untangles what we've
only ever dreamed:
to have seen such a heavenly body—
beyond milky—
her dark veil lifted,
the red shift drifted to the floor,
forgotten,
unspun into mystery.



Britt Kaufmann is a poet and playwright living in the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina who loves nothing better than curling up under a fuzzy blanket with a good sci-fi novel or listening to one on audiobook while weeding in her garden.

THREE PROSE POEMS

By Quinn Rennerfeldt

SOME WOUND CARE

The alien has three names for sadness. They live in the tear tracks on my cheek, offer succor for my swollen head on the papery motel pillow. The alien often wears yoga pants, and through them, I smell manuka honey and paper pulp. Their face can't unlock a phone. We debate the existence of souls. They wear a watch, with a wristband woven with sinew, and teeth. They speak into it, a susurrus sound, then hold up a hand to pause my mouth. **I'm not calling the police**, they assure. Dumb dust collects and covers. The TV has a streak of fritzed pixels; it bleeps the eyes of each newscaster. I add bleach to the bath. We ease ourselves in, brew in the steam. We boil in something akin to lightning.

NEW PLANET

At some fixed point in time—at least to my mind—we enter the orbit of a foreign planet. It is small, rocky, blue. The ship shaves its surface like a teardrop. The alien is an inscrutable shape in my periphery, consoling our trajectory until we reach an adequate landing pad. We disembark down a glossy black ramp that unfurls like a cat's tail. My unshod feet are immediately covered by a cold dust. I can see tightly-coiled shrubs, the occasional movement of a frightened creature seeking refuge from our presence. **This is a place**. I can't disagree; it has a placeness about it. A cadre of loosely-outlined beings passes in the distance; through their figures I see stars, or perhaps they are

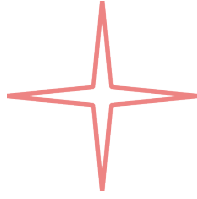
made of the stars I see. Sameness is a contagion on this planet's surface. Every branch or body the same. I cannot look down at my hands for fear I will see similarities. I feel simultaneously like this place could be a home, or that it could be the site of viral replication. Either the end of diachronicity, or its inception.

AN IRRESOLUTION

The ship is a spit seed flung through the sky. Stars leak past the window, streams of milky tears from a dead cow's eye. A question is bottled up in my head. I repeat it again and again, until it erupts from my mouth, the barbed inflection at the end forking like something reptilian, penetrating the air for meaning. **Logic says, you kick a dog, that dog bites you. Not, you kick a dog, you escape retribution.** I want to ask what this means, me removed from earth, from consequences, revoked of agency. Is my ledger all good or all guilt. What does it mean that I am constantly slabbed and reconstructed. New identities slapped onto my body like the loose hangings on a paper doll. And what consequences for those who determine the 'appropriate' outcomes? I am belligerent, which is also when I feel most myself. Their face unchanges. We are a theater of my dreams, in which I scream at mannequins for two solid scenes.



Quinn Rennerfeldt is a queer poet, parent, and partner earning her MFA at San Francisco State University. Their heart is equally wed to the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. Her work can be found in Cleaver, Mom Egg Review, SAND, elsewhere, and is forthcoming in A Velvet Giant and Salamander. They are the recipient of the 2022 Harold Taylor Prize, sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. Her chapbook Sea Glass Catastrophe was released in 2020 by Francis House Press. They are the Editor-in-Chief of Fourteen Hills, a graduate-run literary journal with SFSU.



EVA

By Lois L.K. Chan

Eva is a scientist. She is not an astronaut.

Nevertheless, she lives in space.

One day on this forsaken vessel, there is a smash against the hull at 0800 hours, one that resounds and reverbs through each of the snaking, desolate tunnels.

Looking up from her datapad, Eva thinks it was just a ghost of sound. A hallucination, maybe; those come from time to time.

Then at 1400, she sees It.

• • •

It is as she has always imagined.

An extraterrestrial form — but considering where they are, you could say the same about her. Latched onto the side of the station, It slowly pulses with breath, bursting with eyes like shutters — or something similar to that, Eva can't be sure.

Judging by Its proportionate surroundings, It has a good ten feet of height on her, and a wingspan twice that. She notices, looking through the cams, that It doesn't seem to have any perceivable colours. So, because she is human — both curious and polite — Eva goes to greet her guest.

It suctions Itself to the bridge's viewing port, eyes askew towards the controls, screens, and radars. Eva sits in her chair and watches It for hours. She should be working, but this — this is work enough. Figuring stuff out is work.

Plus this is just like every other day. Contemplating the extent of her existence; adapting to every square inch of her surroundings until she feels that she might belong. Except now, there is something new about the place.

There is It.

When she is too tired to think properly, Eva approaches the glass. She presses her palm and forehead on the barrier between them, screwing her eyes shut.

She imagines Its touch. It is warmer than the chill of aluminum silicate, warmer than the negative 270 Celsius of the universe. Eva has not felt warm, not for a very long time. When she opens her eyes, It is staring back.

• • •

Here are the only three things Eva remembers from Before:

1. A room.
2. A man.
3. The man telling her she's going to go on a trip for a while.

• • •

When Eva goes to sleep, she does so right by Its side. For every endless night since It arrived at her unopenable door, she slumbers and wakes in Its shadow. Behind It, the Sun boils within the cosmos. Then she starts her day.

First: her litmus tests. Eva answers *Hungry. Unsettled. Yes. No. Point nine. Three. Gibbous. Stable. Stable. Stable.*

Yes.

Second is breakfast.

After finishing her meal, she begins her studies, brushing up on everything from operational engineering to vegetative propagation. She works out and takes a scalding shower. She reads a fictional story about boys stranded on an island.

Then it's time for her regulated nap. Eva trudges back to the bridge, downing a glass of water on the way. She kicks back her blanket, staring up at It as she leans back onto her mattress, the one she dragged all the way from her quarters.

It looks larger when she is laying down. It looms over her like a lulla-by-crooning nursemaid. Most days, Its eyes do not move. Eva tried to record their directional patterns last week, hoping to make a puzzle out of It, but fell asleep before she could finish.

She will try again later.

She's allotted 80 minutes to rest; the station's alarm will set off in due

time. It takes a while to fall asleep. She gets close, hangs in the bodiless in-between, but blinks her eyes open every now and then, just to check that she is not alone.

There is no sound to Its breathing and arcane swelling, but knowing that It's alive—if movement is an indication of life—is comforting enough.

. . .

The truth is, Eva is chronologically 183 years old. She has been here for 171 years, four months and two days. She has been here for a while. Alone. Sometimes she forgets why she is even here.

(For this, maybe. Nothing could be tantamount to Its presence in this universe, as senseless and chaotic as It is to her.

But that's what existence is, isn't it?

Unreason.)

Eva has been so sick with loneliness she forgot about speech.

It has been waiting for her voice. So finally, she speaks to It.

. . .

What was your waking thought?

What emotion pulls at you today?

Did you dream?

Do you remember?

Eccentricity factor.

Breathing levels.

Lunar phase.

Engine status.

Satellite communications.

Attitude.

Do you want to go home?

. . .

Definitively, scientists are people who discover new things and research how those things work. This applies to Eva.

Definitively, experiments are procedures undertaken to discover, test and prove hypotheses.

This almost applies to Eva.

When they sent her here, they sent her as the last hope of humanity: a 12 year old girl with an above average intellect and healthy body, one that didn't disintegrate from the static cryogenic trials. Though that might've made her more of a gamble than an investigation.

Eva is all that's left of humanity; she is Earth itself now. They must not have expected much from her, because they left her out here alone. But she realizes now that she has found her moon. Strung between them is a gravitational pull, an unshakeable similarity. It was sent, as she was. Eva knows because she can see it in Its eyes. That is how It responds.

That is how It tells her to keep on.

(That is how It tells her she is capable of anything. Of life, of survival, of worth.)

. . .

On the bridge, as It watches, she clicks in a set of coordinates and pulls into full drive.



Lois L. K. Chan (she/her) is a Chinese-Canadian writer from Ontario attending the University of British Columbia, and also — a huge Star Wars fan. Her work is featured and forthcoming in Roi Fainéant Press, Gingerbread House Literary Magazine, Chinchilla Lit, and Yuzu Press. She is a first reader for Corvid Queen.

You can find her on Twitter @loislkchan.

This piece first appeared in Juxtapost Magazine, an online lit mag based in Bangalore, India that is now defunct.

INTERPRETIVE DANCE AT THE TRANSLATION DIVISION

By E.J. Nash

I hit the replay button on my screen, and the recording begins again. According to the logs, this is the twenty-first time I've watched the five-minute video. I must be missing something.

At first, when Greg gave me this assignment, he made it seem like he was doing me a favor. He leaned against my cubicle wall, threw the tablet onto my desk, and ate three of the mints I kept in a small jar next to my computer. "If you can crack this one, kiddo, they'll write sonnets about you," he told me. Only later did I learn that none of the regular analysts wanted this one. Yet it was perfect for the student: it would keep me occupied and out of the way while the managers worked on requests from the high-priority sectors.

At the end of the day, Thales-b is an out-of-the-way planet with few resources and an atmosphere that will turn human lungs into diamonds. Our ships won't make it out that way for a century, at least.

Nevertheless, whoever lives there managed to beam a video to our satellites in a format that we can read. They want something from us. I just have no idea what it is.

The image fades and crackles at points, but it's easy enough to see the figures on the screen. Two of them face each other.

They are dancing.

At least, I think they are. As a student of languages, I'm drawn towards



metaphors and similes: it is like they are dancing, it is as if they are partners. I could be completely misinterpreting the movements; that's the issue with outer-planet translation. There is no familiar context for interpretations.

The two figures match each other flawlessly. They appear to be twins, if such things exist on Thales-b. In the first few seconds of the video, they appear as shapeless, iridescent spheres. After a few moments their skin elongates into interconnected oblongs and cylinders and prisms. These radiant masses could be limbs, organs, brains, eyeballs - anything. I'm reminded of balloon animals from when I was younger.

When one of the creatures moves forward, the other moves back; when one twists, the other is a mirror.

No perspective is provided by the video. These amorphous shapes could be the size of my fist or as wide as the Atlantic. They dance in front of a

blinding white background.

The forms continue their fluid movements, and I continue to watch.

. . .

"Want to grab a coffee after work with the rest of us?"

The voice is light and friendly, but I can't help but jump. My chair faces away from the opening of the cubicle; I'm perpetually being surprised. I try to hide my anger as I swivel to face Anita.

The rest of us implies the other students at the office. Today, like every other day, I'll turn them down. This video won't be decoded if I spend my time drinking coffee and ignoring the problem.

"How are the blobs today?" Anita continues, gesturing at my screen.

"They're great," I lie.

I'm on my fifty-sixth viewing. I have broken down each movement into tiny, coded pieces of information and cross-checked them against movements of celestial bodies, algebraic formulations, and iterations of languages from other solar systems. There's no logic or any pattern. My reckless coding has crashed my computer twice.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Anita says, "but maybe this isn't a language. Maybe it's art. There doesn't have to be a meaning for everything."

I want to like Anita. She brings in cookies that have off-world ingredients and cleans out the fridge in the staff area and speaks seven languages. Her ears are so heavily pierced that there's more metal than skin, and her hair is dyed a different neon shade every other week. In another context, I would want to grab that coffee with her and the other students. But I don't have time for friendship: I need to unearth the secrets of this video.

"There's always a meaning," I say to Anita, and I begin my fifty-seventh viewing.

That week I dream of dancing. I see images of opalescent bubbles. I hear non-existent music as nebulous bodies come closer, move apart. When I blink, I see the metallic imprint of motion on the inside of my eyelids. The afterimage of the dancers is burned to my vision.

"You've been spending too much time on the Thales-b thing," Greg tells me one afternoon. "Don't worry about it. I'm giving you something else."

He gives me a radio transcript from Ross 154 that he wants translated. I finish the assignment in three hours before moving back to the video. When he catches me watching for my seventy-eighth time on my tablet, Greg offi-

cially bars me from working on it any longer.

But not before I can send the transmission to my personal computer.

These figures wanted to say something. It took decades for this message to arrive, and I won't have it wasted.

"Are you sure you won't come out with us tonight?" Anita asks before leaving on a Friday. Her luggage hovers at her side; I vaguely recall her saying she was going somewhere for the weekend. Visiting friends.

"I'm good." I'm packing up my bag for the commute home. The earlier I can get back to my computer, the more time I can spend with the dancers.

It's a relief when Anita leaves so that I can rush out of the office.

. . .

I'm used to fricatives and sibilants, diphthongs and monophthongs. English sounds aren't easily replicated across solar languages, but they provide me with a comfortable knowledge base. When I encounter a language that communicates through light patterns or with shades of blue, I can rely on the fact that my own alphabet will welcome me home with open, steady arms.

Planetary linguistic analysts usually have some sort of key or guide to help them with the translation process. Sometimes a nearby planet has similar graphemes, or occasionally a written text can be dissected with the help of a guidebook. If we're lucky we work directly with clients who speak the language.

But without any type of reference point, I can't even begin to guess at what the shapes are saying in the video.

For the first time, I realize what everyone else in the office knows: I am wasting my time. I've failed.

When Greg gives me a new assignment, I pick at it over the course of a week. I take comfort in the rote work of translating words and manipulating them into a new sentence, as if I was molding the words from clay. The work feels partly like a benediction, partly like a punishment.

When Anita invites me to the bar that night, I have nothing else to do. I say yes.

. . .

The bar is riotous and packed; I can barely hear any of the people at the table. I have already forgotten most of their names. Yet even though I had ignored their overtures for so long, the students have proven to be nothing but kind: they compliment my shirt, they offer me free drinks, they ask me to

dance.

"A dance?" I shout over the music.

Anita takes my question as permission and twirls me onto the dance-floor. Unfamiliar electronic beats crash over me, pulling me into the tide.

I've never danced before. The first moments are jerky and awkward before Anita grabs my hands and moves them for me. "Just do what I do!" she yells.

She thrusts an arm; so do I. Her legs kick and flail and shimmy - so do mine. When she laughs, I laugh just as loudly.

Sometime after our fourth dance, I can't help but think that it's nice to have a friend.

As we continue, as I melt into the crowd, I'm reminded of the figures from the transmission. I am as shapeless and formless as them. My limbs are loose and light. All I need to do is copy Anita's movements and it looks like I know what I'm doing.

A thought, somewhere in the back of my mind.

I think of the millions of light years between us and Thales-b. How things become distorted, lost, pixelated. What do they know of our solar system? Our own bodies? They might have picked up on our radio signals, or it's possible they heard a rumor of us from another nearby planet. But "nearby" is subjective. Maybe they did the best they could. Perhaps we're meant to copy them.

I hold out my arm. Flex my fingers.

It looks, vaguely, like an oblong.

Like a balloon animal.

. . .

I don't work that night. I've had a handful of drinks, and I need to be sober for the thought that simmers on the top of my skin. The night is dreamless.

The next morning, I watch the recording for the eighty-ninth time. Once again, the figures begin as spheres before transforming into a rough collection of shapes. For months I've been thinking of them as their own beings, their own bodies.

I have missed that the form is part of the message.

This time I know what I'm looking for. The satellites that pinged the incoming transmission were Canadian, so I assume that I'll be able to use the

Latin alphabet to decode the message. Perhaps they know more about us than I suspected.

My previous work had already identified over thirty distinct movements from the shapes. If I was broadcasting a message to another planet, I would want to ensure that anyone receiving it knew what I was saying. I would start with the basics.

I don't use any particular software or coding language. For the first motion, when the shapes wave one of their cones - roughly analogous to an arm - I write down A.

When the sphere rotates, I write down B. I think of Anita throwing her head back in time to the music.

C is an outstretched leg, like a jig.

By the time I get to the end of the alphabet, the first twenty-six distinct movements are catalogued. There are extra motions at the end that I have yet to figure out - I imagine they are punctuation or tense indicators.

Once the alphabet is complete, the message begins.

. . .

My work on the video was flawed from the beginning. I assumed the shapes were trying to teach us their language. I had it backwards: they were showing us our language in their dialect.

A flurry of activity will begin once I give the message to my managers. I won't be alive to see the outcome. Communications from Thales-b will no longer be relegated to a student.

Decoded, the transmission reads: *Hello. We are coming.*

I will be dead and buried by the time they arrive. I would have liked to have met them. Others will learn the movements and how to communicate with them. But I think of what Anita said - perhaps not everything has meaning. Maybe I just would have enjoyed the dance.



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BILL HEART LEA

By Michael Fowler

Days before she became ill, Lea detected unpleasantness ahead. She was convinced—and this insight lingered throughout her illness—that her husband was deceiving her about the recent falling off in the quality of her household duties, particularly her skill over the wood-burning stove. Her mammalian stew had become inedible, he said, her aquatic chowder an abomination, her relaxant beverage at nighttime a form of drainage. Roger insisted that he take over the preparation of their dinner, or at least attend to its seasoning in the final minutes of stewing.

Her housecleaning had also fallen off, according to Roger, and he began reorganizing the cupboards and scrubbing the wood floor and walls. It was as if he wanted to remove every trace of her as she suddenly and inexplicably deteriorated in functionality. Yet in the raising of their daughter, who with her husband had departed in a steed-drawn wagon six years ago, shortly after the Star Climbers had visited the Sed in their amazing soaring vehicle, he had

hardly raised a finger. Since when had he become a Modern Man?

Lea allowed him to commandeer her usual chores without complaint while she pondered what had gone wrong. It was around the same time, or shortly after, that her health went downhill. She found herself incapable of saying whether Roger's cooking was superior to her own, or of so much as tasting it with her dulled senses. He would say, "Isn't that an improvement?" and she would nod her head and do her best to choke the stuff down.

She marveled that her husband, who had taken over her garden, would vanish into the nearby forest with digging implements. Nothing grew well in that dense shade but certain foul fungi and a variety of disgusting white berries. She wanted to ask him what he was doing back there, but she couldn't find the breath. Growing more helpless, she began dropping her plate on the floor and spilling her hot bedtime drink on the table or in her chair. It looked as if Roger wanted to say something to her on these occasions, but after staring at her for a long moment, he silently cleaned up the mess. On her worst night, she couldn't hold her utensils or lift her cup and went to bed without food or drink.

She awoke midmorning the next day feeling no better. Her mind had shrunk into a dreamlike state that admitted few clear impressions. Over the last week, her appearance had also waned; Edna the Seamstress hardly recognized her when she came to call late in the afternoon. Once renowned for her crisp and spotless outer garments and decorative quartz and metal jewelry, Lea had turned into a plain and unwashed frump and had taken to living in her old robe as if it were a protective cocoon.

Lea knew, as if in a lucid dream, why Edna was here; she had even accompanied the Seamstress, an old friend, on some of her official rounds in the past as an assistant. Lea herself had more than once stitched the required emblem on the cozy parka or comfy overcoat chosen as the final garment by the family of a voiceless and unvalued old one. When Edna, looking critically at her friend's unclean robe, proffered instead a fine thick sweater that hung in her closet, Lea with what strength she could summon shook her head in denial and pointed at the robe; this would be her companion to the end.

Edna then produced the necessary thread from her commodious raincoat pocket and began to sew a trim blue X into the robe's right shoulder, the mandatory sign of Lea's life transition. Lea could only sigh and accept it.

Edna showed no surprise or alarm that someone as young as her friend, only eighty-three in Sed years, already needed to bear the mark of senility. Although Lea was well shy in years of a century-and-a-quarter, when old age normally pressed its definitive stamp on the villagers, and had only last spring taken part in the thaw dance and sung a solo at the communal bonfire in autumn, her time had clearly come. And besides, it was none of Edna's concern.

Lea's dire condition had been pointed out by Roger, her husband, and later verified by the Council of Five Elders: Green, Peat, Rod, Birdie, and Jean, the three men and two women whose word was law and whose decisions were final.

Edna did not think there was anything unfair about the ratio of men to women on the Council, or if she did, she kept her opinion to herself. The imbalance had held for years, and Edna, like all the Sed, was a firm upholder of tradition. Yet when the Star Climbers had arrived those six years ago, she and Lea had watched raptly as an authoritative Star Climbing female, Doctor Melodie, warned them about men. Ignorant of their language, the resourceful visitor had done so by sketching a nude man on a small notepad and then drawing a blue X through the figure with a grim expression on her face.

Doctor Melodie was not a skilled artist, but since unclothed Sed looked much like unclothed Star Climbers, her point was as clear as if spoken: "Watch men constantly and don't let them win." She had then handed the notepad and pen to Edna and a duplicate gift containing the same drawing to Lea. The Star Climbers were free with notepads, all of which had an orange star atop each page and a small pen attached by a string, and these were added to both women's collections. Edna, though she remained silent, remembered all this now while gazing upon her helpless friend. She wondered if Lea recalled that day, or if her mind was too dim for such memories. The finished shape emblazoned on the robe, Edna bid farewell to Lea and to Roger.

Two hours before sunset, the Guide arrived. This was Virg the Suit, a local so nicknamed because he wore a Star Climber's casual jacket. Virg was the same age as Lea and knew her well, as did nearly every villager, and he prided himself on the service he was there to offer her. Far from being abashed by the visiting Star Climbers, as many in the village had been due to their plainer lives, Virg had been emboldened in his part-time occupation as Guide when one of the Climbers, observing him leading an elderly man along the so-called Trail of Abandonment, nodded in approval. The oldster expired before they had reached the river, and the Climber, after watching Virg bury him, handed Virg, along with one of the prize notepads, a once-smart checkered jacket that another Climber had stowed in his friend's personal baggage as a jest.

All this built up Virg's confidence and affirmed an occupation that some regarded as shady. Traditionally, it had been frowned upon for a Guide to be a non-relative, and it was left to a family member, usually a young male, to lead the no-longer-valued party up nearby Mount Cloud. The nod from one of the Star Climbers, however, had changed this, and Guides like Virg the Suit, of whom there were several in the village, were now the norm. The Sed no longer had the stomach to lead their family members on to their final fortune, but in their greater sensitivity left it to strangers, or as close to strangers as were available in such an isolated place.

While this tradition had changed, other relevant edicts remained immutable, Star Climbers or no Star Climbers. The hopeless one was to be given a final meal of their choice, if desired, then conveyed upon a steed or steed-drawn-cart along twisting paths to the glacier atop Mount Cloud, and there abandoned without provisions or guidance at nightfall. In the event they managed to encounter anyone else in the wilderness, the blue X on their clothing signified that no assistance was to be offered, by order of the Council.

In the history of the Sed no one had ever reported meeting a living X'd person after their abandonment, and none so stitched had ever made it back to the main village, or to the smaller village across the river. It was part of folklore that a body was at odd times discovered in the forest or at the base of the Mount, one whose tattered outer garment bore the blue X, but no one truly believed this. The forest was too dense, the beasts and other pitfalls too abundant.

Besides Lea, there were two more disposable souls that day: the maniacal Foot and the morose Bee. Virg had already tied them securely to the saddles of two thin steeds, with the pair of animals roped in tandem to his already bored mount. As Edna and Roger watched, Virg heaved up the uncomplaining Lea to share the same saddle as Foot, and secured her tightly behind him, leaving the rotund Bee with an animal of her own. And then, with Foot cackling to find himself nestled in Lea's yielding bosom, they were off at a slow pace.

The tortuous way included every possible hazard, and in half a mile along a narrow trail that would be invisible by night, they came to the river. Wide and with rapids in many sections, and lacking a bridge, it could only be forded in a single, hard-to-find spot. As they slowly crossed it, Virg tilted his head at the water and raised his eyebrows, as if in warning, or perhaps as an invitation to his passengers to take a dip at their earliest opportunity.

On the opposite side of the river, they passed close by the smaller village that remained concealed by forest, but whose location was marked by a tall stone formation, like a huge upright ax in the air. Beyond that, their trail began to ascend, but not before they encountered the entrances to underground caves and hillside caverns that, as every Sed knew from childhood warnings and daring adolescent visits, were home to poisonous insects and vicious beasts, and led to impenetrable mazes if one strayed into them.

As Virg gave these gaping mouths of stone his special look of warning or approval, Foot was already convulsed in laughter. Perhaps it was her annoyance at his inappropriate reaction that brought Lea somewhat out of her fog-like lethargy, and she found herself wanting to whisper in his ear to shut up, though what she desired most was to dismount the stinking animal whose back she found herself straddling and go to sleep.

The temperature grew noticeably cooler and the air thinner and more difficult to breathe as they continued the ascent, and Lea managed to doze off against Foot despite his trembling body and constant chuckling. When she opened her eyes, they had arrived at the treeless top of Mount Cloud where the bluish glacier grew out of and flowed over the rock. Virg had brought them to the very edge of a precipice high above an immense valley, where she and Bee and Foot were sitting on separate boulders, gazing into the abyss.

To the east she could see a ribbon-like section of the river they had crossed, shining against the dark green of the forest, and the lofty stone ax that pinpointed the smaller village. There too, on the eastern slope of Mount Cloud, lay the familiar plateau where the craft of the Star Climbers had touched down six years earlier, and where a large empty cylinder of discarded metal remained; if she squinted, she imagined she could see this chunk of debris. She noticed Virg, standing beside his steed, winking at the three of them as they took in these sights, signifying as usual the obvious peril involved in reaching them as well as their insidious attraction. Then, as the sun began to sink and the air at once grew cold, the Guide mounted up and slowly rode off, leading away the two other tired animals.

Foot laughed uproariously at that, and Bee expelled the mouthful of dark nut juice she had been enjoying in a single thick spurt. The heavy woman then stood up and removed her thick parka, walked over and handed it to Lea, and toppled headfirst over the precipice.

At this, Foot's merriment only increased and Lea felt bodily struck, but in a moment she regained enough self-will to wonder what else Bee had brought along in the garment besides those horrid nuts. Lea herself carried her Star Chamber notepad and pen with her everywhere she went, and had done so for six years, as did many Sed. Not for the first time, but now with increased conviction, she felt she should record the events of her final hours as an historical note for her people.

She reached into her robe for the pad of paper and noticed that Foot had also vanished. With effort she stood up, walked slowly to the rock where he had sat, and looked over. She saw neither his body nor Bee's, but at the ledge found his overcoat dangling from a broken stone. She retrieved it and her hopes began to build that, with three outer garments to bundle up in, she could survive a frigid night in a sheltered spot.

. . .

After a chilling and dizzying descent, Lea reached the cylindrical relic without mishap. She was fortunate in that the intact structure gave off a heat of its own despite the dying sunlight, a gentle and comfortable warmth that, with the help of her three outer garments, would envelope her like a blanket. She saw that no wild animals had taken up residence for the night and, leav-

ing a decent distance between herself and the birth control device that some young persons had recently left behind, the single blemish on the otherwise spotless circumference, she curled up along the curved metallic wall.

Plucking with a fingernail at the blue thread in her robe until the stitches came out, and exhausted from her laborious trek down the mountain slope, she fell asleep as the darkness grew deep. She dreamt of Bill, the Star Climber who had made love to her not far from this spot six years ago, without Roger's knowledge, and who had disappeared along with his starry crew shortly thereafter. The notepad she carried now was a gift from him, not from Doctor Melodie, and for her it held special significance. In it Bill had declared his love for her, writing first BILL (pointing to himself), then (pointing to his heart) HEART and finally LEA (pointing to her). Lea had understood, and made certain Roger never saw it.

She awoke, not cold but damp and hungry and above all thirsty, and with a headache fiercer than any of her experience. She knew it was early morning by the presence of a thick fog made luminous by sunlight that extended from the glacial cap to this spot on the plateau.

Remaining inside the protective cylinder, she sat up and combed through the pockets of her three coats to see what provisions she owned. In her robe she found Bill's pad and pen, ten metal coins, and three baked wafers she did not remember stuffing there. No water; how could she have forgotten a flask of water?

In Bee's parka she found, along with two pockets full of those disgusting brown nuts that old folks chewed, a small sack holding three nut butter sandwiches, six ripe apples, four hard boiled eggs, four lengths of dried meat, and a quantity of honey fudge. Again, no water.

From the ten pockets of Foot's involute overcoat she uncovered a skin flask of beer, another of wine, two well-wrapped roasted meat sandwiches, a small opaque spyglass, an immobile compass, a dull collapsible knife, a folded map, and a flimsy pamphlet containing pictures of all-but-recognizable animals and not-quite-familiar landscapes, this last clearly a gift from the pedagogical Star Climbers.

The strong drink wouldn't do, but Lea soon found a dent in the outer wall of the cylinder that had collected fresh water during a nighttime rainfall. It was warm and brackish, but satisfying. After drinking, she sat and took a few bites of fudge.

As Lea ate, she felt her inner light grow brighter like the sunlight as it burned away the fog, and she decided that a hike of several hours back to the village through perfectly familiar surroundings would not be impossible. And after journaling in her notepad the events of her adventure so far, she felt that she must go back, if only to tell Roger that she no longer had the least doubt

about what he had planned for her.

Lea waited until the fog dissipated, and then began her descent down the eastern side of Mount Cloud from the plateau where she stood. She saw no one but a metal prospector and his pack animal on the lower face, and thinking to hire a ride into the village, she approached him. If she knew him, as she likely did, his identity remained obscure due to her still-hazy mind. In nearly inaudible tones, she offered him the metal coins she carried and the madman Foot's flasks of drink in return for his assistance.

The prospector, seeing that she was ill, and not failing to notice the blue Xes on the two garments she carried, realized at once that her life was in his hands. He immediately agreed to her request, and though it would be a poor day for his metal prospects aside from her coins, he insisted on walking beside his animal while Lea rode astride it the entire way to the village.

As they ambled along, he polished off Foot's beer and wine while giving Lea free access to his bright metal flask of fresh water. He relished the idea of forcing the Council to reinstate Lea to the community, it being the law that a member banished to the wild, upon finding his or her way back to the village, was to be spared for at least one more year. Such reinstatement had never occurred before, since no banished person had ever managed to return, but still it was the law that everyone knew. As a citizen of the village, the prospector would insist the Council uphold it, even if the members objected, and even if he himself had broken the law by giving Lea a lift, a fact he wouldn't mention. Besides, he held a grudge against the Council for denying him leave to hack the Star Climber's old vehicle into coins to trade, and instead declaring it a Civic Monument.

The prospector soon noticed that Lea did not satisfy his idea of a proper invalid. Though something clearly ailed her, she was not as old as her abandonment might suggest, was not unattractive and might even be comely if she could be restored to usefulness. He gazed at her with fresh eyes, and since she had plucked it off and left it back inside the Star Climbers' jettisoned machine, he saw her hand was free of a marriage band.

By now too he had recognized her, if only as a village woman whose name he didn't know, and recalled nothing in his past that might have made her his enemy. As a result, he began talking the most incredible nonsense about her joining him in his hut in the smaller village, which he preferred to the larger village for reasons that he did not trouble to make clear, though the smaller was favored by folk like him: prospectors, miners, smiths, and hunters. Still, both villages acknowledged the same Council of Elders and the same customs, and were regarded as one village parted by the river.

Still unwell, Lea managed to doze through most of his speech, rocked by the smallish pack animal, and imagined she saw Bill, her sky-crossing lover,

once again promising to return to her from afar. Looking into her eyes, he placed his two hands over his heart, cast the heart into the universe, and then brought it back into his waiting chest. Then he held up the five fingers of one hand along with the index finger of the other: six years hence.

By the time they arrived in Lea's neighborhood, the prospector had her almost smiling with his humorous take on the Star Climbers. According to him they weren't from the stars at all, but impostors who had catapulted themselves over the horizon from a land far to the north, in search of women and metal. And had Lea studied those pamphlets they handed out? Oh yes, she had, she might have told him. One illustrated, with pictures of avians, the principle of flight, and another, with diagrams of coins and houses, the theory of compound interest. He had never seen the like, and here he spat on the trail.

Extracting a promise from Lea to meet again if circumstances warranted, the prospector dropped her off where she said she lived, a modest single-story dwelling with a good-sized yard and no neighbors too close by. He helped her to dismount and, when she waved off further assistance and began munching an apple, led his animal down the road toward the river crossing.

Lea stood there, weak but alert, and saw no one about. Then Roger appeared at the front door with Clem of the rectangular beard, a useless person who filed animal teeth and bones into odd, unattractive shapes. The two men, apparently unaware of her nearby presence, embraced on the porch and kissed. After they broke off their hug, they went together around to the backyard and garden.

Dropping her newly acquired coats and bitten fruit on the porch, Lea entered the house and sat heavily in her favorite chair, the armrests now smelling unpleasantly of a stranger. She walked into the kitchen and hefted the lengthy carving knife on the table; but no, that would only be revenge. She laid the knife down as the men appeared in the entryway. Roger invoked the name of the deity, while Clem stared open-mouthed as if he'd never seen a woman before; perhaps he hadn't.

"Why didn't you tell me, Roger?" said Lea, struggling to make her voice clear. "I wouldn't have stood in your way. You didn't have to have me abandoned."

"Have you abandoned?" said Roger. "I didn't..."

"What you brought in from the garden," Lea interrupted. And while both men stood like posts she stumbled into the kitchen, crying, "Where is it, Roger? It's here, I know it's here." She rummaged along the top shelf of the main cupboard and soon extracted a small box with a sliding lid made of bone. Opening it, she pinched a few of the odd, dried plants between her thumb and forefinger, then lifted the box to her nose and took a deep sniff. Satisfied, she held out the box for the men to see.

"What are you going to do?" said Roger.

"I'm leaving," Lea replied, dropping the box to the floor. "Goodbye, Roger. Clem, good to see you as always."

But the sniff may not have been all harmless triumph, and in a moment her malaise reawakened. Lea stared past the two men and through the kitchen window into the side yard. An illumination like that around the glacier in the morning fog filled the yard, and from its midst stepped a glowing Bill, who beckoned to her with open arms. Inhaling deeply, she strode toward his light.



Michael Fowler is a humor and science fiction writer living in Ohio.



PARASITE NERVES

By A. J. Van Belle

The space station auditorium stinks of the sweat of a hundred twelve-year-old Cosmic Academy recruits.

The headmaster gestures for me to take my place at the podium. My neck aches.

I must not let these children see how the weight crushes me. The toxicologists designed the protective headdress to be as lightweight as possible, but it's a bulk that shouldn't be there.

The snakes writhe, making my heart tighten with their endless gripping of my skull.

The young cadets in the audience gape at the head wrap keeping them safe from the creatures.

"I'm going to be your speaker for today," I say into the microphone. The

adolescents squirm.

I tell them what happened: on the planet Scythe, known for its venomous denizens, my father went into the caverns without the usual safety equipment. For a stroll, he said. To take photographs of flowers that bloomed in utter darkness. When he needed help, I had no time for protective gear myself. I pulled him out; he kept his life. And for his trouble he got a daughter with a permanent parasite-brain interface.

Am I here as a hero or a cautionary tale?

Before I finish the story, the kids are talking. Some say the danger must be exaggerated. The wave of sound resolves into three shouted words.

"Take it off! Take it off!" The chant swells. The painting on the wall seems to pulse in time to the rhythmic words: an acrylic image of a soldier in her dark-camouflage uniform.

"The snakes eat rats and mice and lizards," I say to the crowd. "Have you ever seen a baby mouse?"

They go quiet. I touch the holo controls at the podium, and the image of a baby mouse springs to life in midair. It sits on a fingertip, and its whole body is no bigger than the fingernail.

"Adorable, isn't it? To the snakes, it's lunch." I try to keep the snakes' diets varied, and so far it's working. If they die, I die. The linkage of their nerves with mine sees to that.

"Take. It. Off! Take. It. Off!" The chant rises again, louder this time. They all join in.

My hand twitches. I could remove the headdress. I could show them. It would be the last thing they ever see.

I force my hand back to the podium. I'm here to talk to them about saving my father. Not about living with deadly parasites. Besides, I don't have the magnetic key to undo the latches. If the headdress were removable, I couldn't be here.

But maybe I am here to talk about living with the consequences of heroism. Later in my speech, I'll tell them I don't know whether I made the right choice. With my headdress on, I may be a hero, but without it, I'd be a monster.

The chant continues. The snakes coil against each other so hard they move my head from side to side.

The children want to see.

. . .

I blink and the snakes show me a vision a few seconds into the future. In this fever dream, a child in the second row gestures at me. The kid next to him gives him a shove, and he climbs over the front row, stepping on another child. The climber lunges for me. I flinch away, but his fingers close on the stiff fabric of my shameful crown. He makes a fist around the headdress and the snake bodies beneath. He yanks.

Stars wink to life at the backs of my eyes, a million pinpricks, each a supernova of agony. Parasite nerves fray and split from my dendrites. A tug all the way to my optic nerve.

Impossibly, he holds the headdress aloft, triumphant. The audience cheers. The headmaster and his minions rush to quiet their charges, but it's too late.

The cheers twist into howls. The audience wavers before me. I sway, dizzy, my consciousness leaking through my torn scalp. Bits of my essence float free and swirl in the air like bubbles in water.

The snakes' poison does its work. Children writhe in their seats, assailed by the invisible razor-like darts of neurotoxin. They must have thought themselves safe because the auditorium is large. But every corner of the room is within range of the poison.

The instructors standing in the back look at me to see what's going on. One drops to her knees. Another slumps against the back wall.

The children in the front rows fall limp.

The joke's on you, I think to my snakes. They'll never get their meal. In removing the covering, the boy also uprooted half my parasites, ripping their foundations and tearing my brain. Slating me for death, too. Now, there's a whole feast spread before my snakes, but I have no strength to carry them to their prey.

The boy who unleashed the creatures lies dead, sprawled in the lap of another cadet, both of them with eyes wide open, unseeing, the whites pink; their faces are purple as a bruise.

. . .

I blink again. Back to the moment, a room of living people, my headdress still in place.

The boy in the second row rises to climb over the seat. I tilt my heavy head toward him. "The parasites that have taken root in my skull will kill everyone in the room given half a chance. That's not just some story. If you look

at them, you die.”

The boy casts one more mocking glance at his neighbor before settling down in his seat.

I finish my talk and, without a trace of sarcasm, thank them for being a good audience. My head’s strange weight sways on my neck as I walk away from the podium. I touch the base of the headdress. A latch hangs loose. I was sure I secured them all before leaving home...but it seems the snakes had other ideas.

The snakes may be part of me now... but I am stronger than they are.



A. J. Van Belle is a writer and scientist whose short fiction has appeared in journals and anthologies from 2004 to the present, and their novels are represented by Lauren Bieker of FinePrint Literary Management. As a biologist, they draw on their science background to inform the world-building details in their fiction. They can be found on Twitter @ajvanbelle and at www.ajvanbelle.com.

THE LIFETIME OF A STAR

By Korinne West

[SEVENTY-SIX YEARS]

Every morning, he wakes up in the dark. And for a second, even after so many mornings, just for a second, he thinks he's back in that cage.

Then the lights fade on, sensing he's awake. The sun shield over the windows slides back, letting in unfiltered starlight. The room fills with a cool glow, illuminating steel walls and computer screens, and he remembers that he's safe, that he's in a different sort of cage.

"Good morning, Commander," a chipper voice sounds over an intercom, an hour on the dot since he awoke. "How are we today?"

Evander floats upside down — although, what's really up or down in zero gravity? — kicking off the wall gently until he can tap the screen. A familiar face appears, one he's seen every day for decades now. "Good morning, Julie," he replies. "Tired. That's how we're doing."

"One of these days, you're going to be a morning person, Evander, if only for the change of pace."

"One of these days, I'll be in a place where there's actually a morning," he replies with a grin. The next line in the script, long memorized. "What's the news today?"

While she speaks, her voice slightly crackly over the radio, he moves around. Checks some readings, types them out. Asks the computer to generate a cup of tea, if it would be so kind. ("Cup" being a turn of phrase, of course, since it has to be in a bag with a special straw to keep it contained.)



Wrapping up, June asks, "Anything new with you?"

He gazes out the window. "Passing by a nebula," he notes. "Supernova remnants. Computer says it's the Cygnus Loop."

"Oh, wow, you're already that far out, huh?"

"Yep. Time flies." Evander studies the screen as Junie turns her face from the camera to jot down some notes. She's got to be, oh, late fifties by now. She's had the same hairstyle the whole time, a sensible bun with a pencil stuck through it. One of the better liaisons he's had, Evander thinks fondly. She'd taken one look at him and decided that, even from millions of nautical miles away, she was going to mom him. (He only very briefly complained.)

There's a comfortable pause over the comms. "Something I meant to mention sooner, Evander," she finally says.

"Hmm?"

"Well, you know my wife's passed. The kids all moved out." June pauses. "I'm gonna go stay with Mara — you remember, my oldest? They've got a nice place out in Farrah, and... well, as great as it's been working on DX3 with you, I think I'm ready to not be alone anymore."

Evander is silent. Then he finally says, "Well, Junie, I certainly can't fault you that. So when's your last day with TAF?"

"Today."

"Mm." He floats back in view of the screen, sipping the last of his tea. "It's certainly been a joy knowing you."

"Oh, same to you, Evander."

Then he gets a devious smile. "So what shall we put on the docket for today?" he asks, turning himself right-side-up to really get one last look at her, his old friend. "As a little sending-off party?"

"Well, I'd sure love a good look at that nebula, if you can swing it."

"For you, Officer June," Evander says with a wistful smile, "I can swing it."

He carefully dismantles the camera mount and drags it over to the window, pointing it at the swirling nebula slowly turning outside. June oohs and aahs, and they talk and laugh until Cygnus is long past and June's shift has come to an end. They say a final goodbye. Evander is good at them; June is not, and sheds a few tears.

When the call ends, Evander Hartley stares at himself in the dark screen for a few minutes. Nearly thirty years, and he can pinpoint when every hair on Junie's head went gray, when every wrinkle formed. And he simply re-

mains... himself. As always. Thirty-something. Brown-haired, hazel-eyed, thin and wiry. Every inch of his skin covered with harsh black lines, marks meant to signal anyone who sees them that he is unnatural.

He feels it most on the goodbye kind of days.

He floats over to the wall of the communications room and grabs a chunky marker. There's a list of five names, four of which are crossed out, written in the top corner. With a sigh, he crosses out the last one. ~~JUNE BANNISTER.~~

I think I'm ready to not be alone anymore.

"Only four hundred thirty-seven years to go," he says softly to the wall, and his voice ricochets around cold steel into empty space.

[ONE HUNDRED NINETY-EIGHT YEARS]

"Ow!"

"Everything all right over there, Hartley?" The voice is amused. Evander can practically see the insufferable smirk behind it, despite currently being wedged underneath a console.

"Oh, just peachy," he responds, flinging his hand out to grope for the tool he just whacked into his nose before it floats off. "Doing great. Irving, next time, kindly remind the Terran Alliance Fleet that I was a paralegal, not an engineer."

"Well, buddy, you're DX3's only field agent, so you get to wear all the hats out there. Isn't that exciting?"

"That's certainly a word for it," Evander grumbles, clicking the last port into place and bolting the final corner down. "Okay. That should do it. Unless I read these instructions wrong."

That gets him a laugh. "They're diagrams, man. No words to misread."

"Fine. Unless I *misinterpreted these hieroglyphs*." Evander scoots out from underneath the console and wipes the sweat off his brow. "All right. How's the signal?"

"Recalibrating." Irving pauses. "Receiving data..."

Evander puts tools away and studies his handiwork while he waits. A nondescript box-shaped object now sits under the main communications console. Thanks to recent breakthroughs in interstellar travel, some small, unmanned craft can travel faster than Evander's old ship can fly. They haven't gotten the tech to work quite right with larger crewed vessels, but it means

Evander can receive additional upgrades and supplies every now and then.

However, this also means that Evander has to install said updates, improving quite a bit. He had to wire this one into the navigational systems along with the comms, and he fervently hopes he didn't fuck anything up and get himself going three hundred years in the wrong direction. *Hieroglyphs indeed.*

He tries not to think about the length of his mission often. But even the designation — DX3 — stamped on cargo and stitched onto his jumpsuit reminds him. DXIII. *Five hundred thirteen.*

"You're coming in clear," Irving reports, and Evander exhales. "Trajectory looks good. You sure you're not an engineer?"

"Looks like I am now," Evander replies. "Tell your bosses I want a raise."

"Sure, man. Once you're done investigating the weird signal in the furthest reach of space and the mystery is all solved, I'll make sure you have a nice bonus waiting for you."

"Excellent. There's my retirement plan."

Evander wants to record the following laugh, wants a snapshot of this moment. It's these moments that make this whole thing even the least bit bearable — someone always on the other end of the call. Another human being. Those first few days were filled with a lot of despair, but... at least there was someone to talk to.

And having that connection made the curtain of stars more like an adventure, and less like a punishment.

"By the way," Irving interrupts Evander's maudlin thoughts. "You might've noticed there was something else in the shipment."

"Was there?" Evander glances up and around, looking for where the container got off to in the zero-G. He kicks off the floor in that direction, undoes the lid's ties, and peers inside. "What is..."

It's a book. An honest-to-god paper book, which Evander hasn't seen since he was shoved into this ship and flung up at the atmosphere. (Somebody decided paper was a waste of cargo space when ereaders exist.) He takes it out, letting the now-fully-empty box drift away, and he just holds it. Paper and linen. Each page permanently marked, not just a matte screen that can rewrite itself however much it wants to.

"You quoted a book my mom liked to read a while back," Irving explains. "I figured you might not know that others got published after... the start of the mission. So... there you go. A little in-flight entertainment for you."

Evander thinks he might cry, which is stupid, and also a bad idea when

moisture will float up and around and get into wiring. His fingers clench around the book. Solid and real.

"Irving," he says, working very hard to keep his voice level, "you are a very, very good friend."

"Aww, Commander," the officer replies with a big grin. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Later, when the cabin lights dim and all is quiet, Evander hovers in front of the big window, book in hand. Each star is a gem against a velvet backdrop — something he thought of as cold and distant, now feeling just a little bit closer, a little bit more wondrous.

He cracks the spine and begins to read.

[THIRTEEN YEARS]

A new face appears on the screen. Unfamiliar, wary.

"Good morning, Commander Hartley," they say.

Evander stares, confused. "Good morning," he responds, more out of habit than genuine greeting. "Is Officer Levi out today? He usually handles these calls."

The newcomer bites their lip. "I'm afraid," they say slowly, "that Officer Levi is no longer with the Fleet. He, ah..." The cold demeanor melts, just a bit. "There was an accident."

Evander's breath hitches.

In his silence, the speaker goes on. "My name is Officer Emig. I'll be your liaison from now on. I'll... I'll just send your reports directly for today, and give you some time to process. Call if you need something, otherwise we can speak more tomorrow."

The screen goes blank, and Evander looks into his own face reflected back: shocked, still rumpled from sleep, and utterly unchanged despite the passing of time.

It was easy to forget, in the routine of things. The lines on his skin and what they meant. His liaison officer was just a picture on a screen — thirteen years was nothing.

Nothing to *him*. Those thirteen years were the rest of Levi's life. No more good morning calls, no more inside jokes, no more irreverent report annotations. No more... Levi.

Now it's someone else, and Levi is gone. Like he never even existed.

He'd forgotten, but now it's sinking in all too deep. Evander is trapped in this ship just like he was trapped in a cage when they realized he couldn't die. He is trapped here, doomed to watch stars be born and shine and fade and collapse. How long will it take *him* to collapse? How many thousands, millions, billions of years?

Evander casts his eyes around him until they land on one big, empty wall of his abode. He grabs a marker out of a bin bolted to his desk. He kicks himself up toward the ceiling, the top-left corner.

He writes, LEVI MALCOLM.

I refuse to forget, Evander thinks. The letters are wobbly, his hand shaking as he finishes the last M. *These people are all I have left.*

How many more will he come to know, only to lose them?

However many. I'll remember every one.

Thirteen years. Five hundred to go.

He draws a line through the name written on the wall, and he stares at it for a long time.

[THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY YEARS]

"I worry about you sometimes," the face on the screen says. "All alone out there."

Evander smiles as he pats soil carefully around a potted sapling. An unexpected bonus from the new artificial gravity module TAF sent — he can do a little gardening, since he doesn't have to worry about soil particles and moisture floating around hazardously. (He's still not all the way used to the gravity, though. He keeps letting go of things in midair and expecting them to still be there when he turns back around. Many a cup of tea has been lost that way — but at least they're proper cups now instead of a bag.)

"I've been 'alone' out here," he replies to his liaison, "longer than you have been alive. I'm all right."

Merrick sighs. "Just because you're used to it doesn't mean it's alright."

Evander doesn't reply to that one. He trims his plant, hoping that this one will thrive even outside of its designed environment. He changes the subject. "Thanks for getting me the gardening things. I know horticulture isn't exactly within the mission parameters, so I'm sure the budget people pitched a fit."

Xe waves off Evander's gratitude. "The mission parameters have changed so much in the last few centuries, it's a wonder you haven't sprung for anything else extraneous."

"Hah."

"Besides," xe adds, "considering you made contact with an alien species before we did, I think you earned a little something special."

"Jealousy is not a good look on you, Officer Merrick," Evander grins.

Merrick huffs. Evander watches xem cross xir arms petulantly, and he tries not to focus too hard on biceps and deltoids. "Who wouldn't be jealous? And kind of annoyed! The Andromeda mission is literally scheduled to meet the Zmir in a few months. You just had to show us up, huh?"

"I have to entertain myself somehow. Besides, what's the Fleet gonna do? Fire me?"

"You wish," Merrick drawls, and a silence stretches between them. The two of them are very used to silences between words, and all of the sentiment they can hide there. "Who else would hire you?"

Evander laughs. "Well, the Zmir were very nice people. Maybe they need a human ambassador."

Officer Merrick shakes xir head with a bemused half-grin. Evander likes that grin. He likes being the cause of it.

"It was nice to be in the same physical space as someone again," he admits. "And to get off the ship for a bit. But they're so different... it's not the same as another human. I could go for sitting in a cafe right about now. Or on a park bench, people-watching."

"Mm. Wind in your hair, the smell of fresh cut grass in the air. A pigeon trying to steal your sandwich."

"God," Evander groans, "I'd kill for some fresh cut grass. I'll even take the pigeon."

"Don't commit murder, Evander, or they won't let you come home."

Evander meets Merrick's eyes, perpetually aware that their gazes have never truly met, not really — just pixels over a camera. "You and I both know," he says quietly, "I'm not going back home."

Merrick sighs, looking away. Pixels, pixels. "I hate when you talk like that."

"Can't help it. I haven't gotten this far without being pragmatic." Evander wipes dirt from his hands and studies the black lines hugging every contour of them. It's easy to think of them as just tattoos instead of the brand they are.

"I'm an augment. Augments are illegal under the Eugenics Accords. There's a reason they shipped me out here, and it's not just because I'll live long enough to reach Signal Origin."

"You've never told me the full story about that." There's a hesitance in Merrick's voice. Like xe isn't sure xe's allowed to broach this topic.

Normally, Evander would deflect. But it is Merrick. "I never saw much point to my life," he says softly. "Made it all too easy to say yes when I should have said no." He pauses. "No one waiting for me at home, no family left, no friends to check in... why not see if the rumors were true? Why not try to do something that would make people look at me? And I got what I wanted, all right. It just didn't change anything at all. And then..."

He shudders involuntarily, thinking about what came next. "Better that I'm out here," he finally says. "Better to live and die among stars."

Another silence, less comfortable, stretches between them. Merrick's jaw works, mouth opening and closing as xe tries and fails to find a response.

"Can I tell you a secret, Merrick?"

"Always."

Evander walks over to the window, taking his newly potted plant and setting it on the sill. A little piece of Earth silhouetted against the galaxy. "I don't really think of Earth as home anymore," he says. "I've been on this ship... fifteen, sixteen times longer than I was there? I'm not sure I even remember it."

A pause. "I'd help you remember," Merrick says. "Anything you wanted."

There's so many things being said between those words. Evander closes his eyes. "Tell me again what it's like there now," he says softly. "If you would."

Merrick tells him. Evander reads between the lines.

[ZERO YEARS]

He wakes up in the dark.

Heart pounding, Evander tries to sit up, and realizes he can't. His upper torso is strapped to a bed, a chair, something. He struggles in vain when suddenly, with a soft whoosh, a window appears and starlight floods the room.

He stares at the steady lights outside, and his heart sinks. "No," he says, and his voice is hoarse and cracking from disuse. "No, no no no no."

Now that there's light, he can see there's a latch on the straps holding him down. He reaches out to undo it, and his arm feels strange. When he's finally

released, his body starts gently drifting up.

"No no *no*," he begs. He grabs one of the loose straps, wrapping it around his fist several times to keep himself from floating away, and looks around in a near-panic.

He's on a ship. A fucking *spaceship*. He didn't think they were serious.

"Good morning, Commander Hartley," a voice says into the darkness. "Welcome back."

"*What did you do to me?*" he screams.

The pause is long enough that he thinks for a second that he hallucinated the voice. But then it returns, deep and level. "Exactly what you agreed to," it says. "It's so altruistic of you to volunteer for this deep-space mission."

"I didn't *volunteer* for shit."

"Thing is, Commander Hartley," the voice goes on. "You didn't have to. Because you are not supposed to be alive, and this was the only way to keep you... neutralized. Aren't you glad you'll be spending your long, long life being useful? Charting the unknown for humanity's gain?"

If he wasn't floating in zero gravity, Evander thinks he might have fallen to his knees. He'd lived much of his life alone — that's what made him volunteer for the augmentation experiment, what got him into this mess. He always figured he'd die alone, too. But the thought of doing so out in the nothing, centuries away...

"And what has humanity ever done for *me?*" he asks bitterly.

"We've given you a second chance." What Evander took to be a blank wall lights up, blinding him for a few seconds. On the screen, a diagram appears — a pale blue dot in the bottom left, and a tiny, blinking speck shining in the vast dark in the upper right. Evander squints at it as the voice goes on. "It will take approximately five hundred thirteen years to reach the point we are calling Signal Origin. Every unmanned probe sent before you has been stopped or destroyed by wayward spacefaring debris. Mission DX3 — *your* mission, Evander Hartley — is to reach Signal Origin and report back what you find."

Evander sucks in a shaky breath as the reality of what's happened to him sinks in. "And then?"

"And then," the voice says, "you will be free."

[FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY-SIX YEARS]

Evander wakes up in the dark for the last time.

His quarters are still quiet — less like a cage, more like a homey burrow after all the time spent here. The sun shield slides open with a bit of a creak, because he hasn't quite been able to keep all of the old age out of the vessel. The wear is reassuring, evidence of their long journey.

In the starlight, he sits up, and breathes deep. A journey nearly over, now.

There's greenery everywhere, in every free space. He might have gotten carried away with the propagating these last few decades. The only surfaces left in cold steel are the wall of names and the blank viewscreen.

One hour later, even that shifts. "Good morning, Commander Hartley," says a familiar voice as the screen lights up. "Big day."

"It sure is, Aurilelde," he responds, sitting down in the chair at the desk. Something in his chest flutters, because after hundreds of years of this exact same routine, it can feel that this day is different. "It sure is."

"I wanted to let you know," Aurilelde goes on, "the rest of the mission team is coming in later when you reach Signal Origin. Quite a big deal, finishing a nearly five-century-long mission."

"I'm just glad it wasn't *actually* five centuries long," he tells her. "Sorry you all printed DX3 on everything and then I didn't have the decency to stick to the timetable."

"Oh, I'm not complaining. I'm just happy to be here instead of retired and wondering whatever happened to you."

"We're about to find out," Evander says, a strange feeling in his gut. The signal that prompted this mission is steady, and strong with proximity.

Soon enough, the hour arrives, the coordinates are reached, and a blue-green planet comes into view. One satellite. Several other planets in the sol system visible in the far distance like bright stars themselves. Readings come in, and Evander frowns.

"It looks like Earth," he says. "Reads like it too. What are the odds?"

Aurilelde's voice over the comms is staticky. "What readings? We're not getting anything on our end, Commander."

His frown deepens, but he can't tear his eyes away from the view screen. It almost hurts to look at, but he drinks it in anyway, thinking of the place that rejected him, the place he always longed for, the place he forgot a long time ago.

"I'm going down there to investigate," he says, punching in the commands and coordinates, and his little ship begins its descent.

He lands in an open field, and yet again he's hit with that feeling of remembrance. He grew up in a place like this, he thinks. Before everything went wrong, before someone messed with his genes and the only modification he had were normal antidepressants. Before the cage. Before the ship. Before DX3.

If this were like home, Evander muses as he steps off his vessel for the second time in five centuries, *then this is the park by the lake*. He hears a bell tolling, maybe the church down the street. *And home is just over that hill—*

He walks closer, and it's just like he remembers.

"Commander, what are you seeing? We're not getting anything from the ship or your biometrics. Everything okay?"

"Copy that, Auri," he replies as he walks toward the familiar structure. "I'm not sure yet..."

It's not quite the house he remembers. It's richer, more detailed. More real than what his mind has retained. The metal doorknob is warm under his palm, and the door creaks as it swings open. Evander steps in, avoiding a loose floorboard on instinct. The floor and walls are there, just as they should be, but the room is empty.

The far back wall is brushed steel instead of faded wallpaper. It looks exactly like his wall of names back on the ship. But on this wall, bold black marks make symbols Evander has never seen, angular and dotted and arranged in a way that he recognizes as language. A message from whoever sent the signal TAF picked up nearly five hundred years prior, a message Evander has journeyed a long way to uncover.

"There's writing," he reports, and he hears murmurs in his ear from the comms. He still hears the tolling bells outside. "Let's see what they wanted us to know..."

He holds up his translator and it does its work in an instant, and the strange markings on the metal wall slowly morph into Terran words on its screen. Not the old names in his handwriting, but a simple phrase that shakes him to his core.

WE WERE HERE.

WE WERE HERE, WE WERE HERE, WE WERE HERE.

Over and over and over and...

"Commander? What does it say?"

All he can do is stand there and laugh.

Five hundred years, and he could weep at the irony of it all, but all his body does is laugh. Because he gets it. Because all *he* ever wanted was to be seen and to be heard, just like whoever sent the signal and left this message. Evander Hartley, the immortal man, the forbidden experiment, the secret astronaut — his entire existence can be folded down into one desperate transmission yelling into the void, *can anyone hear me?*

I was here. I was here. I was here...

Evander is no better than this monument, his own life a last-ditch effort to be remembered. There's nothing else to learn about the people who left the writing on the wall. And now that he's reached the end of the mission, now that the message is found, no one will remember Evander, either — his life gone and filed away under a big redacted bar. It was always going to end this way. This trip just prolonged the inevitable.

But Evander takes a step toward the writing, and there's another room to the side. He turns, and he freezes. And he sees June.

He knows it's not her, not really. And he doesn't recognize where he is anymore, either. But there she is, with her sensible bun (sans pencil, this time), and she's kneeling by a stack of boxes, unpacking. She takes out a little notebook, and she smiles when she opens it and pulls out a slip of paper. Evander watches as she takes it to the kitchen — *her oldest kid's house, then, this is her moving in* — she takes it to the kitchen and pins the paper to the fridge.

Not a paper. A photograph — of him.

Evander stares. She'd caught him mid-laugh over something, floating against a starry backdrop. That last day, when he'd shown her Cygnus.

It's him, as he always was, and all the grotesque lines on his skin look oddly at home sandwiched between the crayon scribbles of June Bannister's grandkids.

WE WERE HERE.

He blinks, and it's Irving St. Peters, standing at a bookshelf in a bedroom where an older woman lies in bed. He pulls down a familiar and battered hardcover, and Evander watches his expression shift from curiosity to recognition. When he hands it back to his mother, he begins to speak. Evander watches Irving's mouth shape the syllables of his name, and the woman smiles, opening the book to a well-known page and pointing at a quote he knows by heart.

Evander's limbs feel heavy. His breath comes quick.

WE WERE HERE.

It's Levi Malcolm, hunched at his desk long after the day's work has end-

ed, and he's painstakingly adding personal notes to the next day's report. He grins to himself when he comes up with something clever, and Evander's mouth echoes the smile even as his eyes fill with tears. Levi stands when he's done, stretches, and Evander catches a glimpse of irritated and fresh black ink on his forearm—stars in a constellation, one Evander once told him was his favorite, and each dot is linked with the same kind of lines that cover Evander's skin.

WE WERE HERE.

It's Serenity M'benga, presenting to a gathered crowd the book that she and Evander stayed up editing together several nights in a row. She says it's dedicated to a friend traveling far, far away.

It's Vo Ngoc teaching his youngest son how to cook a new dish, and he reminds him that adding more garlic than the recipe calls for never hurt anybody, something his old coworker once taught him.

It's Callan Woods, who Evander only spent three days with, giving a speech at a funeral, talking about a man all alone whom he said some terrible words to, and how you should try to live so you never regret not saying sorry.

And it's Merrick Martinez, sitting on a park bench with the wind ruffling his hair, watching all the passersby who will never know about the lonely astronaut. Xe inhales deep, and it smells of fresh cut grass. A pigeon waddles up to the bench, and Merrick's face twists into a pained smile, and xe reaches out with a bit of bread and tries not to cry.

WE WERE HERE.

YOU WERE HERE, TOO.

"Commander?" The realest voice sounds far away, now, and Evander comes back to himself with tears following black ink trails down his cheeks. His surroundings are getting lighter. Less corporeal.

Five hundred years. One brave signal across the galaxy drew him out of a life he would have squandered, and gave him time with people he never met face to face, and every single minute of it *mattered*.

"Commander Hartley?"

For the first time, Evander's body feels every minute of its age. And he still hears that bell tolling.

"Sorry, Auri," he says with a smile, and he hears what his voice would have sounded like if age ever had the chance to roughen it up. "Gotta go. I've got another call on the line..."

YOU WERE HERE, TOO.

The comms cut, and the signal that began Evander's journey goes dark.

One week later, two Terran Alliance Fleet ships arrive at Signal Origin. They find Evander's ship, old and battered as it is, in perfect working order. They find all the plant cuttings, and they find all of his notes and equipment, and they find the books and letters and trinkets from all the people Evander loved. They find a wall of dozens of names, all but the last one — SENRI AU-RILELDE — crossed out.

They do not find a planet.

And they do not find Evander Hartley.



Korinne West is an artist and writer from Texas. Growing up on tales of adventure and the power of human connection, she's spent the last decade or so writing her own stories. When not putting pencil to paper or geeking out about some space phenomena, they can be found cuddling their very fluffy cat or drinking copious amounts of tea. You can find her infrequently on Twitter @tealbrigade.



Part Four

BEYOND



IT MAKES ME AFRAID

***Pascal, Infinity, and
Everything Everywhere All at Once***

By Evelyn Anne Clausen

The sci-fi action comedy, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* takes an absurdist look at what might happen if we could see every possible version of our selves at the same time. It sounds trippy, and it is. In one universe, a Teppanyaki chef is controlled by a raccoon sitting on his head, in another, humans have useless hot-dog fingers. Movies about the multiverse continue to trickle into the mainstream, but *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is less concerned with how the science of infinite universes works, and more interested in how it feels, on an individual human level. What do you do when you finally see the big picture, and it's infinitely more complicated than you can ever hope to understand? In a multiverse where anything is possible, and every possibility is real, does anything matter?

As the movie begins, Evelyn Wang does not have time for other univers-

es. We watch her sorting IRS paperwork, rolling her eyes at her husband Waymond, arguing with her daughter Joy, dealing with customers in the family's laundromat, and occasionally pausing to look wistfully at a romantic musical playing on a small TV mounted above a wall of driers. She looks tired and distracted, both overwhelmed and absent. By the time Joy drives away in tears because her mother ended their tense visit by saying "You're getting fat," it's clear that Evelyn is struggling to connect with the life she's living.

The 17th century philosopher, scientist and mathematician Blaise Pascal was haunted by everything he couldn't know. Famous among depressed teenagers for his quote, "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread", his words still resonate. He's describing the experience of confronting infinity, the combination of awe, pleasure, fear and helplessness that a person feels when faced with the enormity of the unknown, the feebleness of human perception and the apparent insignificance of any one person. At a climactic point later in the movie, Waymond says it another way, addressing an armed group of multiverse-jumping agents, "I know you're all fighting because you're scared and confused. I'm confused too." The infinite whole of all we don't understand is too much for any one of us to bear. It makes us feel afraid.

Pascal believed that human dignity was in human thought, and especially in our awareness of our own shortcomings and vulnerability in the face of an uncaring universe. He frequently referenced the idea of the human as a hollow reed,

"Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this." (Pascal, *Pensées*)

For Pascal, thought, imagination and reason were what elevated humans above other animals. Thinking lets us imagine a world beyond our own, and worlds beyond that. It is what allows us to understand that we will die, and that we are powerless against nature and time. In every universe, in every version of our potential story, we are outmatched by depths we can't fathom. How do we live with that knowledge?

When Alpha Waymond, the version of Evelyn's husband from the Alpha universe, possesses regular Waymond's body and tells Evelyn she has a choice to make, he doesn't tell her what her choices mean. For those of us raised with the Matrix's "red pill / blue pill" notion of truth, we may at first assume Alpha Waymond is testing Evelyn, that to turn right and walk into the Janitor's closet will lead her to the "real" world, and turning left and attending her scheduled IRS audit will keep her trapped in the simulation. When Evelyn

lets her eyes linger on the door of the closet before ultimately turning away, we think she has failed the test and rejected the call. But the multiverse is not about binaries and every world is the real world. Her choice did not cut her off from the path forward. It simply made another path. It wasn't about Evelyn's choice at all, only the fact that a choice was made, and another universe was born. Reality grows at a rate of infinity plus one.

Our minds do not have the capacity to hold the whole picture. We break under the immense weight of truths too enormous to comprehend. Evelyn's sense of reality begins to fracture as she imagines universe after universe, sees and feels the lives she hasn't lived. To try and embody every possibility at the same time leads to madness. Awareness of infinity is not the same as understanding and the more we do understand, the more apparent it becomes that we are only small pieces of an eternal puzzle.

The monster Alpha Waymond wants Evelyn to defeat is described as "an agent of pure chaos, with no real motives or desires." She is Jobu Tupaki, a super-charged Joy from the Alpha universe, whose mother pushed her to connect to the multiverse until she became permanently untethered, jumping freely from one existence to another and annihilating anything in her path. She has built a cosmic "Everything Bagel", a manifestation of infinity collapsing into nihilism, and is threatening to destroy the multiverse with it. She at first claims she wanted to find a version of Evelyn who would see things the way she did, who would feel her same hopelessness, and give in to the bagel with her. But later, in a silent world where she and Evelyn are sunbaked rocks on a cliff, she confesses that she hoped Evelyn would see something she didn't, that she would offer some better solution.

And then, in another universe, Evelyn does see something different. She sees Waymond, gently pleading with the IRS agent to let them try and save their business. Confused, she jumps into another universe where another Waymond stands up to armed fighters and begs them to "Please, be kind, especially when we don't know what's going on." In a third universe, where Evelyn and Waymond never married, a suave and sophisticated Waymond tells a movie-star Evelyn that he knows she always thought he was weak, but that she misunderstood. He chose kindness and hopefulness not because he couldn't see the darkness, but as a way of fighting it. "It is strategic and necessary," he tells her. "It's how I've learned to survive through everything."

Thinking about Waymond's words, she hears the IRS agent jovially calling herself an "unlovable bitch", and as she flashes among the infinity of universes, she realizes something else. "It's not true," she says, "You're not unlovable. There is always something to love. Even in a stupid, stupid universe where we have hot dogs for fingers, we get very good with our feet."

For Pascal, the concept of infinity made him afraid. The prospect of death and the fact that nature could crush him at any moment made him afraid too,

but he saw the beautiful absurdity of living on anyway. The human instinct to get up in the morning, despite often overwhelming reasons not to, is miraculous, because it flies in the face of reason.

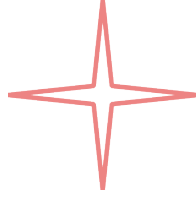
"Yes, you're right, it doesn't make sense," Evelyn says to Joy, explaining how despite everything, she will always want to be with her. It is our irrational ability to carry on, and not only to survive, but to take part in moments of beauty, grace and kindness, all while staring into the eternal silence, that makes humans fascinating, and gives us reason to hope. It doesn't make sense, but there it is. When you put everything on a bagel, (As Jobu Tupaki says, "I mean everything"), it might get so heavy it crushes your spirit, but it also might help you see what's worth saving, what's worth loving, even if it doesn't make sense.

Evelyn realizes that infinite lives exist as possibilities, but only one existence belongs to her, here and now. Freed from the bagel of nihilism, she no longer needs to imagine all the people she isn't. She knows that all of those other Evelyns exist, and that they all suffer, but also that they are all capable of loving and being loved. As she says to the young chef missing his raccoon friend, "We're all useless alone; it's a good thing you're not alone." This is not the only life, but it is a life, and it is her life.

As Evelyn holds her daughter, Waymond smiles tearfully and joins the family hug. The infinite spaces persist in their silence, and despite everything, life goes on.



Evelyn Anne Clausen is a writer and artist, living in the North Georgia mountains. Her work has been published in RELEVANT Magazine, Slate.com and numerous music review sites and long-abandoned blogs.



THAT TIME THE PLANET EXPLODED

By Francine Witte

There are shards of mountain in your soup. The planet exploded, but still enough land, still enough air, and nothing but soup to live on.

Today, like always, you spoon the mountain aside – but what's that shining from the bottom of the can? A key? An actual key? You say this out loud to your husband who isn't there anymore.

A key seems rather useless now that there aren't any doors.

The planet exploded from the inside, not due to Man which is what you would have thought. Instead, it was roil and boil and magma. It was oceans clapping shut like mouths. At first, you were glued to the TV, and then, like that, the TV was gone.

You found soup in the leftover supermarket store, the one with the shelves all this way and that like broken teeth. You and the few others armloaded up with cans of soup. You and the few others walking right out with no one to stop you.

You all agreed to spread out because of all the luxurious room you had always dreamed of. You all agreed to start your own countries.

Now, you open your nightly can of soup. You bang it open with a rock because the can opener got swallowed in a lava rush. You have grown used to bits of everything showing up in the can, but a key? You wonder if this was the last act of the soupmaker who was hoping to be remembered, if not saved. You hate these pieces of your used-to-be-world and how they only remind you that alone is not the luxury you thought it would be.

Some nights you want so badly to look at another face. You even pretend-plan a trip to another one of the countries the few others made. But you remember the agreement. No visits. Danger of new population.

You all decided that the last time you were together, all of your arms hefted with soup cans outside the leftover supermarket store. Goodbye, good luck, flab of another hand on yours for the very last time.

You remember this some days. Forget it on others. Like today, when you eat your soup and this key pops up, and you will stare at this key for hours. You will think about the times you came home from work, your husband on the other side of a lockclick. You will even hold the key in your hands for awhile, press it against the fleshy part of your palm which needs so badly to be touched. Finally, you will hold the key up to your heart. Wonder if there is anything left there to turn.



Francine Witte's flash fiction has appeared in SmokeLong Quarterly, Wigleaf, Mid-American Review, and Passages North. She has stories upcoming in Best Small Fictions 2021, and Flash Fiction America (W.W. Norton.) Her recent books are Dressed All Wrong for This (Blue Light Press,) The Way of the Wind (AdHoc fiction,) and The Cake, The Smoke, The Moon (ELJ Editions.) Her latest book is Just Outside the Tunnel of Love (Blue Light Press.) She is flash fiction editor for Flash Boulevard and The South Florida Poetry Journal. She lives in NYC.



SHE'S A QUESTION MARK

By Russ Bickerstaff

I don't know how long I'd been talking to her before I realized that I didn't know who she was. I just found myself standing or sitting there (or maybe walking) when it occurred to me that she was probably some kind of stranger. And honestly, I didn't know whether or not I'd actually been talking to her when I realized that I didn't know who she was. And at the moment I had that realization, I suppose I probably must have thought that there was a good chance that she didn't know who I was. And it was entirely possible that she didn't even know that she was talking to me.

Somewhere, a few moments later, I guess the realization had started to set in that if she didn't know that she was talking to me, she might have actually been carrying on a conversation with someone else entirely. And I just didn't know who it was. And I mean... I guess I'd assumed that we were alone while we were talking. But then... I'd also been under the impression that I knew who she was. Not explicitly, of course — I hadn't really thought about where I knew her from. But I know that I would have taken a more active role in figuring out who she was if I'd known that she was a stranger.

I can't seem to remember when it might have been that I'd even started talking to her. Every time I started to think about conversations with her that had grown explicit enough to be foveated in my memory, it would occur to me that I was thinking about someone else entirely and forget who it was that I was looking for until I found myself talking to her again: the stranger. And there she was. (Or was not.)

I suppose that I was scanning my memory for her long enough to realize that I was talking to her again... but I knew that she didn't necessarily know that she was talking to me. And I felt that, in a sense, I may have been looking into her face wondering where and when it was that she was speaking. Her face (or the face that I associated with her) seemed to be out of the past. It could have been a face that she had chosen or it could have been that she was merely a face out of the past that was passing through the present on its way somewhere. Some weird fragment of media that someone was working with that might not have had any kind of an identity behind it.

I was looking for her even while I was looking into her eyes. Or whatever. I knew that I was probably talking to her from inside, but I didn't know. It was possible that I was talking to memories that I'd recorded of someone I'd forgotten who might not have ever had anything to do with me outside of the recording that I'd created the construct through. But I mean... I knew that if I'd created her (or if I'd had her created for me), I'd forgotten doing so. Or maybe I'd paid them to have me forget. Like, I didn't want me to know that I'd had her created so I told them to scrub my mind of her creation or something.

Of course, this was all speculation and nothing more, as I wasn't all that certain that she was even talking to me... even if I might have if I could look at just about anyone and they would look kind of confusing in relation to this other person I'd run without ever physically seeing. And so I tried to put her out of my mind, but she was like the echo of a phantom song that I hadn't actually heard in years. Every now and then I'd be talking to a woman in line or at work or whatever and I'd catch a fraction of an aura of hers and wonder if it might have been something that had been cast on the woman in question by the ghost of this stranger that I may have had made for me or something.

She was everywhere, in fragments and notions and impressions of someone I couldn't seem to ever find when I was actually looking for her. She was everywhere, in aspects of everything that I'd ever seen. I had tried my best to stop thinking about her. It took me a few days or months or years or decades or whatever to realize that I'd been looking for her all along. I suppose it might have had something to do with some of the freelance work that I was doing, but it was so very, very difficult to know for sure.

So I continued to hear the sound of her voice as I talked to her, knowing that she didn't know whether or not she was talking to me and I guess... I guess I knew that I was doing something for work, or for me, or something like that, but it was all a matter of making sure that I was getting everything done, but I really didn't know.

All I could really do was embrace whatever the hell she was and let it wash over me like the diaphanous curtain of some forgotten dream or something like that. I felt the essence of her that I still see and hear nearly everywhere... including my own profile and the things I sometimes catch a glimpse of in reflections in the screen or the mirror or whatever. I know she's out there, but I also know that the essence of her is all in my head. And every time I think about it in this way for this long, I start to lose my mind, even though I know that it's there. And I'm here. And everything is as it should be.



Russ Bickerstaff is a critic and author living in Milwaukee, WI.

IF I THREW A PARTY

By Kelli Lage

I'd invite my therapist / coupled with my pen pal, dog, and lover boy / they'd arrive at seven o'clock on the dot / though I'd spend day's entirety / fabricating my body slipping from their psyche / or a fever riser / them seeing my elbows behind every tree / but still not coming inside / when my doorbell rings I look down and realize / my body is a gown of silk I spewed during my years as an abandoned graveyard spider / my therapist brings irises of healing / I pretend to position them like contacts / my pen pal hand delivers my next letter / my dog howls like a prayer / my lover boy brings a drum rolling down a never ending hill / we'd watch Empire Records / and I'd evolve into my full ragged flannel form / knowing I should have bared my old eyeshadow the whole time / we sip atmosphere the way sunshine looks on a day you swear you've met before / I slither into a coma beyond daydreams / cherry colored finger pokes on a couch / that doesn't quite capture grunge's heat like the one in our first apartment / they'd stay all night, nursing me to sanity



Kelli Lage is earning her degree in Secondary English Education and works as a substitute teacher. She is a poetry reader for Bracken Magazine and Best of the Net nominated poet. Lage's work has appeared in Maudlin House, The Lumiere Review, Welter Journal, and elsewhere. Website: www.KelliLage.com.

WITHOUT TIME

By Teresa Berkowitz

No one knows for sure how it happened. In a supercollider, physicists were bombarding Higgs boson with an insane amount of teraelectronvolts trying to test quantum mechanics. Witches, sick of misogyny, gathered in online covens to hex the patriarchy. There was sunspot activity.

Was it the combination of factors? Or something entirely different?

No one knows for sure. But no one cares either. Because that's kind of what the anomaly did.

I'm getting ahead of myself. We all do that now. My apologies.

I'll work on staying tethered to time. For the historians (such a funny concept really). For other species. For 0.153 percent of our species. For the AIs and supercomputers (They remain chronologic).

...

My brother died before the anomaly. I stood up at his grave site and told the mourners what a big life he had even though it was too short for us. Maybe I was in tune to what was coming. Maybe the illusion of chronology was slipping away already for me. Too often, one would define a young man losing to a fast-moving cancer after marrying the love of his life as a tragedy. That's what chronologic thinking does. Defines a life by an ending. I caught a wisp of something and it became clear: free the life from time and you could map my brother's life as a life well lived.

I shared this with the mourners. I saw the spark in a few eyes but not many. Just a few months from that day, 99.847% of humans would no longer be tethered to time.

...

Our lives are different now. Anxiety has all but been eliminated. Who knew

that anxiety was a function of our overdependence on trending and dependencies? You wanted your story to have a happy ending. You worried that this problem was the start of something that would lead to your ruin. That one vape would lead to marijuana would lead to hard drugs would lead to inability to function would lead to death.

One step leads to another. The trance of being tethered to time.

We didn't have to make all these connections. We didn't have to worry so. Few knew that before the anomaly.

...

It's funny. The computer keeps spitting out meaningless numbers representing days of the week and time. Most of us don't care. But some care very much.

There's a whole movement of traditionalists and extremists. You would think they would be the 0.153 percenters, but actually most of that group simply don't care. The majority of the pro-tether faction were already fighting progress and wishing for a fictional past. To them, being untethered is the final assault on traditional values.

These extremists worship the clocks of old, study the old timelines. In secret labs, they research implanting AIs into assistive technology. They conduct human experiments. You cannot imagine the madness induced by AI voices in your head counting time and reminding you of antecedents and likely outcomes. Over and over again.

Of course, most of the test subjects are willing volunteers.

You see them on the streets. For those of us with many moments, they remind you of the early days of wireless headsets and men in suits running along streets talking, seemingly to no-one, ever busy, ever anxious.

If the Pro-Teths had the power, they would make everyone tethered again.

...

In the old days (language artifact) we would have wondered, how can you have a life with no beginning, middle and end? How do you collaborate and come together? I mean, whole industries were set up for people to input their plans, pick times for meetings. I was the worst! A project manager, keeping everyone on track. I would have thought the world would fall apart without my Outlook calendar.

...

Do people die? What a silly question. Yes, of course. I understand your confusion. Detached from time does not mean immortal.

...

The sun is apricot. I squeeze my husband's hand. One moment in our scatter plot of life. A good moment in the quadrant of good effort and happiness. We fill that quadrant in small moments.

...

Our scientists and researchers believe that some were already detethering before the anomaly. "Live for the moment. One day at a time." People were long treating their stories as malleable, rejecting predetermination.

Maybe this all wasn't an anomaly but an evolution. (I see you thinking you caught me – evolution, slow change over TIME, you are right. It is not that time doesn't exist. It is that most people are no longer tethered to time).

...

Some may wonder, how do humans accomplish anything untethered? How can there be scientists? The answer is simple. We live, moment by moment, in intent and action. Small packets of activity untied from outcomes. You could say our research is more objective that way. There is no desire for a specific end to our scientific story. Pure research. Pure observations.

...

So many religions had a magical end story. Live a good life, die, be rewarded with a paradise in the afterlife. Take the path of evil and be punished in fiery torment. Each step, a fork in the road.

Most untethered people have rejected those old religions. And yet, we are mostly good. Good without grasping or fearing some divine ending.

We have our spiritual beliefs too.

Live free and untethered. Make the most of each blessed moment.



Teresa Berkowitz is a writer and poet from Portland, Maine. Teresa grew up in a family of storytellers. She believes that the greatest truths can be found in fiction and real life can be strangely surreal and dramatic.

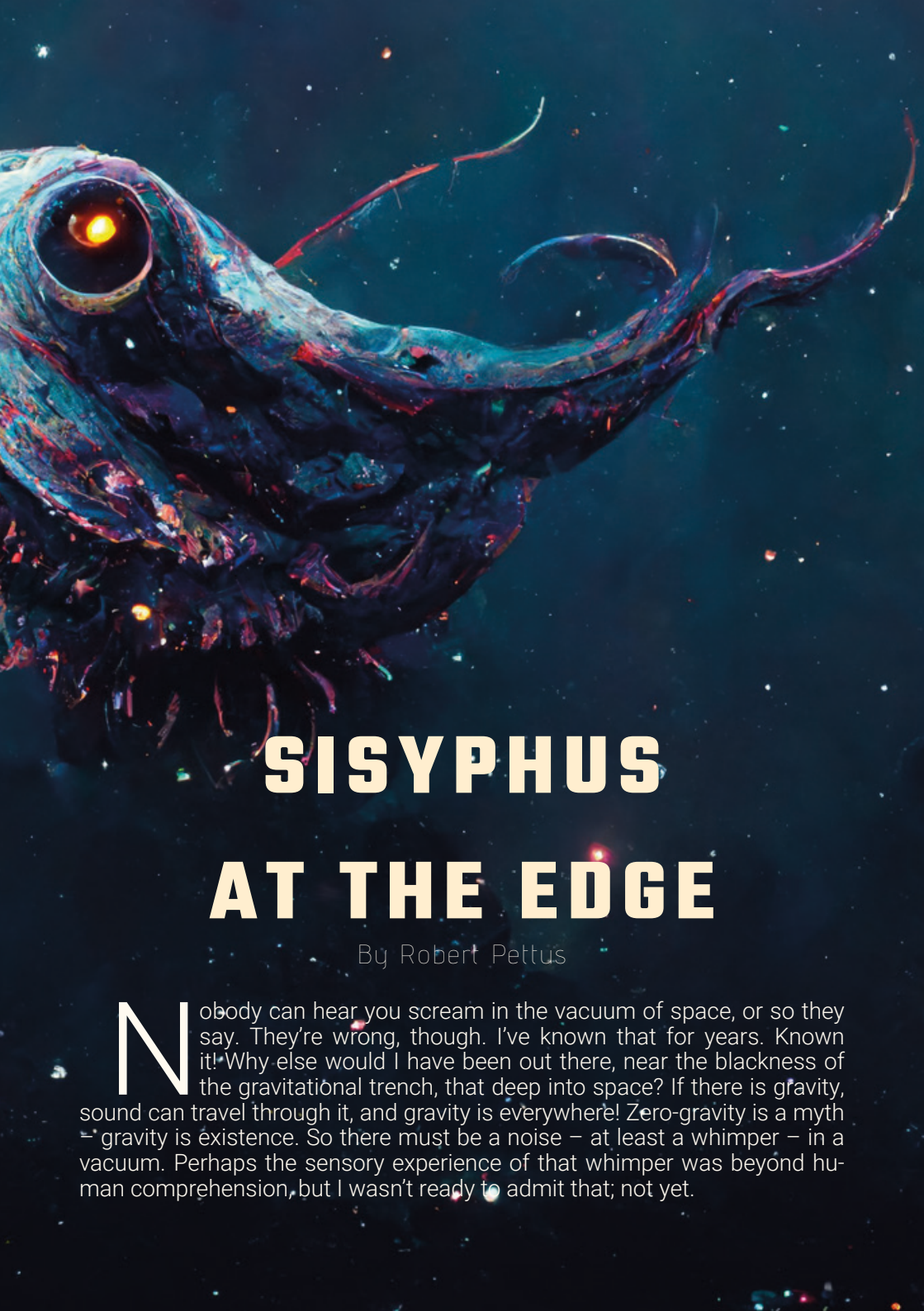
As a young woman, Teresa would explore the headlands in Marin equipped with a bottle of water, trail mix, and a journal. She would let the trails take her to black-sand beaches or redwood groves. In those sacred spaces, she would take what

troubled her and craft fairy tales. She would return transformed. She began to share her stories.

Her work has been published in literary journals.

Teresa is the founder and editor of Tangled Locks Journal, an online literary journal committed to sharing complex, well-rounded stories, poetry, and essays that define the experience and lives of women. Teresa is committed to amplifying writers' voices in social media as a means to enhance personal expression and to impact positive change.

You can connect with her at TangledLocksJournal.com or on Twitter and Instagram at [@tangledlockslit](https://twitter.com/tangledlockslit) or [@teresaberkowitz](https://twitter.com/teresaberkowitz).



SISYPHUS AT THE EDGE

By Robert Pettus

Nobody can hear you scream in the vacuum of space, or so they say. They're wrong, though. I've known that for years. Known it! Why else would I have been out there, near the blackness of the gravitational trench, that deep into space? If there is gravity, sound can travel through it, and gravity is everywhere! Zero-gravity is a myth — gravity is existence. So there must be a noise — at least a whimper — in a vacuum. Perhaps the sensory experience of that whimper was beyond human comprehension, but I wasn't ready to admit that; not yet.

I opened my visor and gazed into the blackness. It was perfect – I couldn't see a thing! Turning around, I noticed there were unfortunately still scattered, twinkling frustrations in the direction I would anthropocentrically consider "behind me", but they were far enough away. I was on the edge, as far as anyone had ever known. The ultimate event-horizon – the place where the billowing train of existence – that never-ending genesis – collided into nothingness.

If sound were possible here, in this ethereal, progressive loneliness, it was possible anywhere.

My ornithopter drew closer to the edge. It batted its wings chaotically, like a disoriented pigeon flying into a window. There was no reason for it to do that – the wing-flapping – it was purely cosmetic. Ornithopter motorbikes, as they were called, were the fastest, sexiest way to bend some spacetime and jet across the universe. The travel was convenient; the flapping wings made me feel cool – I loved it.

I sensed the spacetime boundary. It was somehow, though completely foreign, simultaneously not far off from what I was expecting. I could feel it. It felt vibrational, somehow – simmering. Perhaps it sensed me, too. It surged onward, nonetheless, into the literal nothingness, dragging me with it. Gravity, though pulling me toward the edge of the endlessly racing wall, could not push me past it, being that I was thankfully composed of spacetime. Spacetime cannot be thrust past the boundary of its existence – abroad the surge of its creation. I cackled manically:

"Ha! HA! We did it, old boy! We finally did it!"

I leaned back to the rear bicycle seat of my ornithopter and slapped the hairy back of Sisyphus, my bonobo companion.

Sisyphus – or Sissy, as I always called him – was one of the only known bonobos extant in the universe. His species had gone extinct in the wild centuries ago, back during the miserable twenty-first century. Sissy would sell for a fortune on the interstellar black market, but I would never do that. Sissy was my trusted companion, the only one I had – friend or family.

Sisyphus grinned wide, in that chaotic, gummy pan way, and shrieked triumphantly, raising his arm to give me a high-five. I slapped hands with Sissy and reached below our seats, into the carriage of the ornithopter, and pulled out Sissy's favorite treat: a fig. Sissy crunched into it, devouring the fruit as remnant juice flew in congealing cohesion out into the compression of the black void.

I stared ahead at the wall: "Well, I guess there's no waiting around, huh? We may as well give it a go!"

I removed from underneath the carriage of my ornithopter motorbike the Three-Nozzled Screamer – my prized invention. This thing, if anything, would prove whether sound can travel through an alleged vacuum.

Raising a hand to my ear, I clicked through the settings on my visor, making sure it was as strong as possible – ready for anything. I turned, clutching with both hands at Sissy's head, and did the same for him:

"You ready for this, old boy?" I said, "We're going to find out what's what!" We're going to make some noise!"

Sisyphus raised his arms and clapped in silent excitement repeatedly, as if he'd just won the PGA Championship.

I strapped on the Three-Nozzled Screamer and buckled up. The edge of existence pushed onward in apathy.

"Let's do this!" I said, carefully inserting the brass mouthpiece into the safety of my visor. I unleashed all the airpower in my lungs. My cheeks widened like a pufferfish. Out from within the triple bells of the Three-Nozzled Screamer erupted an abysmal, jazzy chaos. The sound of it bounced off the surging wall of the universe, darting backward into space – a dark abyss allegedly incapable of music or rhythm. I kept blowing on my instrument. The frenzied, screaming music continued reverberating off the wall of spacetime, bouncing back into the blackness of the previously supposed void. This dark place now felt awake, as if its emptiness held within its ancient interior creatures of myth.

"GAWWWWWWWHHHHHHH!" came a call from behind, back within the blackness of space.

A figure took shape, growing exponentially in size out of the sea of blackness as if to consume the canvas of the universe. It came into view. I saw it; Sisyphus saw it, too. He pointed and squealed in terror, jumping forward from the back seat, and wrapping himself around my neck and chest. He pointed again. He clapped his hands soundlessly as if to communicate to me his disapproval of the current situation.

"I know, I know," I said. "It's a deep space Whale-Squid! These things haven't been seen in years; they've only been encountered on a couple of occasions, ever!" I looked back to Sisyphus, grinning: "This thing might be even rarer than you!"

The Whale-Squid again grumbled its song – long thought impossible this deep into the trench of space – and stretched out its non-Euclidean tentacles in our direction. Sissy shrieked, climbing atop my head.

"We have to document this!" I said, pulling out my camera. "We'll be universally renowned! Nobody has ever, ever, recorded a Whale-Squid!"

The Whale-Squid's innumerable, slithering tentacles swarmed us, and it again delivered its miracle song. Sisyphus slapped violently at the tentacles, but they didn't seem intent on constriction. They wrapped around the two of us gently, lifted us from our ornithopter motorbike, and shoved us abruptly through the wall of spacetime – past the alleged end of existence.

It dragged us back inside, after a time. I would say it was only a few moments later, but it's impossible to tell, being that we were thrown into a realm in which time doesn't exist. I looked at Sisyphus. He appeared unaged. He opened his gaping bonobo mouth and spoke as if the sound had been stored from that place beyond existence and was spit out illogically into the blackness of the void:

"What the fuck was that place?" he said in a bizarre voice of shifting, multi-tonal accents.

I was shocked. Sound from within the depths of spacetime! A talking bonobo! What else was possible?

"I have no fucking clue!" I yelled in response. I began laughing hysterically. I gave Sisyphus a triumphant hug.

We glared excitedly at one another; there were so many adventures ahead.

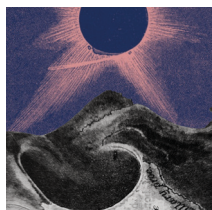
The Whale-Squid floated out of sight, back into the trench of deep space.

Our ornithopter motorbike idled, sputtering aphetically amid the void. Twisting the key into the ignition, we darted away, toward some other, distant realm of existence.



Robert Pettus is an English as a Second Language teacher at the University of Cincinnati. Previously, he taught for four years in a combination of rural Thailand and Moscow, Russia. He was most recently accepted for publication at Allegory Magazine, The Horror Tree, JAKE magazine, The Night Shift podcast, Libretto Publications, White Cat Publications, Culture Cult, Savage Planet, Short-Story.me, White-Enso, Tall Tale TV, The Corner Bar, A Thin Line of Anxiety, Schlock!, Black Petals, Inscape Literary Journal of Morehead State University, Yellow Mama, Apocalypse-Confidential, Mystery Tribune, Blood Moon Rising, and The Green Shoes Sanctuary.

VISUAL ART CREDITS



Stargazing (cover)

By L.M. Cole

L.M. Cole is a poet and artist residing in North Carolina. Her work has been published with Roi Fainéant, Mid-level Management, Substantially Unlimited, Unfortunately Lit and others. She can be found on Twitter @_scoops__



Reach

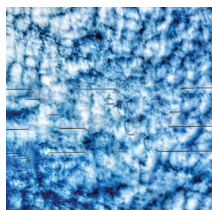
By L.M. Cole



Watcher

By Amelia Clark

Amelia is a seasoned graphic designer and illustrator working in the tech industry by day while illustrating portraits and fantasy vignettes by night. She cultivates her inspiration by reading comics and fiction, playing RPGs and video games, and venturing out into the woods. She can be found on Instagram at @ameliadesigned.



Erasure

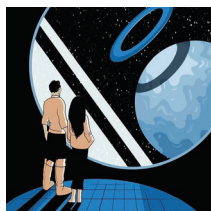
By Rahma Jimoh

Rahma O. Jimoh is a lover of sunsets and monuments and has been published or has works forthcoming in Tab journal, Lucent Dreaming, Agbowo & others. She is an editor at Olumo Review. Twitter: @dynamicrahma



Detail of *Luna* by Amy Hautt

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art



Shadow of Corrona

By Amanda Pearson

Amanda Pearson is a graphic designer and digital illustrator from Texas who's passionate about fantasy and visual storytelling.



Star Giants

By Rachel Coyne

Rachel Coyne is a writer and painter from Lindstrom, Minnesota.



Star-Forming

By Danielle Rose

Danielle Rose is a watercolorist and illustrator, often combining ink drawing with watercolors. She has a lifelong relationship with art, and is inspired by the works of Mucha, van Gogh, Turner, Alan Lee, John Howe, Alan Bean, Robert McCall, and Hayao Miyazaki. With a background in geology, an incurable love of spaceflight, and a deep love of the natural world, Danielle is also a jeweler, gemologist, writer, graphic designer, Star Wars nerd and Sailor Moon fan. She lives in Oregon. Find her online at drose.studio , or on Instagram at [@manyfaceted](https://www.instagram.com/manyfaceted).



Neither Here Nor There

By Juno Ceres

Sarah Reimert, aka Juno Ceres, is an aspiring artist that recently stumbled upon artificial intelligence software to create beautiful artworks that hit the spot just right. She is from Amsterdam and studied photojournalism in the past. Right now she is exploring her creativity through Midjourney and it is starting to pay off. She recently finished a series of interior architecture studies, and you can really see that in her results. She also has a great affinity for astronomy, robotics and sci-fi related topics. She can watch Star Trek over and over again and then switch to documentaries about brutalist architecture! With her (Mid)journey, she wants to create images that create a nostalgic feeling to those who are into futurism without the soul of a human. She is on Instagram as @jun0ai



Shadow of the Eagle

By Danielle Rose



Stronghold in the Sky

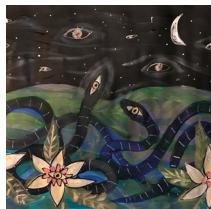
By Juno Ceres



SLS at Night

By Benjamin Bair

Benjamin Bair is a Design Engineer at Kennedy Space Center supporting ground hardware for the Artemis Program. He also takes pictures sometimes.



Stargazers

By Rachel Coyne



NASA Lucy Launch

By Benjamin Bair



Sucked Into A Bagel

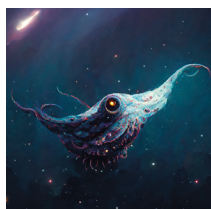
By Evelyn Anne Clausen



He Says I am Quite the Character

By Megan Joubert

Megan Joubert is an artist and photographer located in Central New York. She uses digital and film photography to make one of a kind, handmade photo montages. Using imagery ranging from floral to figurative, she puts together new worlds by cutting and reconstructing photographs, which she sees as a palette of sorts.



The Deep-Space Whale-Squid

By Miranda Adkins

Miranda Adkins is the Editor-in-Chief of Soft Star Magazine. This picture was created using Midjourney's image creation tool.



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