

CONCORD WRITERS' NIGHT OUT 2018

AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITERS AND WRITING



IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE
NEW HAMPSHIRE WRITERS' PROJECT

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An Anthology of Writers and Writing

*in conjunction with the New Hampshire Writers' Project
edited with an introduction by Ian Rogers*

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The New Hampshire Writers' Project (NHWP) supports the development of individual writers and encourages an audience for literature in our state. We are a nonprofit literary arts organization funded by our members as well as organizations and businesses that support our region's writers and literary heritage.

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Introduction

A few years back before I joined the New Hampshire Writers' Project I belonged to a smaller writers' group I'd organized with some friends. Like me, they wanted to share their writing, and the three of us met monthly at one of our kitchen tables for discussions sandwiched between dinner and a board game—usually *Pandemic* or *The Settlers of Catan*. The group not only allowed us to share and receive feedback, but it gave us all incentive to, you know, actually *write*. Our meetings were simple, fun, and unabashedly casual, which was why it surprised me when one of our members told a coworker that she belonged to a writers' group and was met with the disinterested response, “Oh, that sounds like a wine and cheese thing.”

I should probably clarify that the only cheese at our writer's nights could be found in the occasional macaroni and cheese bake, and we never served any kind of alcohol out of respect to one of our members who didn't drink (though if we did, it probably would have been something cheap). That anyone could have classified our throw-together kitchen-table meetings as something out of high society became a source of endless amusement, and we jokingly dubbed ourselves the Wine and Cheese Writers' Group and began taking exaggerated sniffs from our ginger ale glasses.

The link some people draw between writing and a higher social class mystified me then, though I now recognize it as indicative of a certain estrangement from the art itself. The coworker in question seemed to imagine books and writing as something far beyond her reach, an idle pastime of the rich belonging to a cartoonish world of stone-faced butlers and marble statues. Such associations stem from the same lack of familiarity we all experience with different aspects of the world around us: I, for instance, know almost nothing about quilting, ballet, or skateboarding, and would be hard-pressed to make an accurate judgment about the hard work that goes into any of them. When we view activities like these from afar, we're less likely to observe their many nuances and more likely to notice the types of

people who do them, and if we perceive the resulting social structure as alien, of course we'll be prone to shy away from the activity itself.

I have no doubt that some of the people who enjoy reading and writing are the same people who enjoy wine and cheese tastings—perhaps even at the same time!—but claiming that people who tout the importance of *The Scarlett Letter* are also reading Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the latest David Sedaris collection, and pirate adventure romances from the '80s quickly becomes an exercise in absurdity. Despite all the links we draw between books, there exist as many kinds of writing in the world as there are people reading and creating it.

Those of us from the Concord branch of the New Hampshire Writers' Project come from a similar breadth of ages and walks of life, united only by our geographic location and desire to write. We work in fiction, nonfiction, memoir, poetry, sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, historical fiction, humor, horror, romance, and everything in between, and we come to learn from one another and share ideas about writing. Some of us are widely published while others are writing for the first time—though just by looking and listening you'd have a hard time telling who was who. Our meetings are a way to meet writers we'd otherwise never meet—and though there's never any wine or cheese, a few months back someone brought a plastic tub of cookies to share.

The idea for a Concord writer's anthology emerged through our meetings as a way to share our widely different projects, not only with each other, but with the greater community who may not know who we are or what we're working on. It's only by reading—by engaging with the actual work itself—that we come to understand the writing world in all its varied styles and discover the work that most strongly resonates with our experience. This is the world we present in this collection: a world where everyone can find something to enjoy.

Ian Rogers

A Few Notes

All of the pieces in this collection were submitted by members of the Concord Writer's Night Out group, a loosely defined monthly meet up organized by the New Hampshire Writers' Project and coordinated by NHWP trustee Gary Devore. We meet at 7:00pm at the Concord Books-A-Million on the first Monday of every month, though if you'd like to drop by you might want to email first to make sure we'll be there. See nhwritersproject.org/writers-night-out for more information.

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Stuck in Mud

from The Water Rabbit

CLAUDIA ALTEMUS

Let me tell you a story.

It happened long ago, but not so long ago that it has been forgotten, and far away, but not so far away that we can not still catch a glimpse of it from where we are. You may want to wrap your hands around a cup of something sweet and steaming, and sit yourself down in a favorite chair before I begin. If your chair resides in front of the hearth you are doubly lucky because it is always delightful to read in front of a fire, and because you will find it easier to imagine the scene I am about to describe.

The fire that our hero, Marten Treadle, sat in front of burned inside a kiln loaded to capacity with clay jars, each one destined to hold its share of an overabundance of sunflower oil. In the meadow where he and the kiln sat, the blades of grass bent low with the weight of dew and the sky was beginning to turn that shade of murky gray that announces the inevitable coming of the dawn. There was no need to add more wood to the firebox; the kiln had already reached the desired temperature and was radiating tremendous heat. Back home in his family's pottery, Marten had loved this part of the firing, when all the work was finished and there was nothing to do but sit back and wait for the kiln to cool down. Now, though, try as he might, Marten could not relax. The grand adventure he had started on so many weeks before had lost all its magic and certainly hadn't brought him any. He was anxious, and angry, and sick and tired of everything that had to do with clay.

He had not always felt this way; once clay had been a magical substance to him. His earliest memories were of his mother's palms and fingers shaping, lifting, and transforming clay into beautiful and useful objects. He had been given his first lump of the magical mud when he was just a tiny boy to keep him entertained while his parents worked. Mud and Marten took to each other immediately. He believed that each lump of clay already knew what it wanted to be; the trick was getting it to tell you what that was.

A conversation between the clay and young Marten would go something like this: “So, you want to be a dragon cup?” he would say in his merry little voice, his small fingers busily hollowing and pinching the clay all round. “And you want a pointy snout? Yes, I like pointy snouts too. How ‘bout some spikes on your tail? Alright then, you can have scaly plates instead. Now I’m going to scrape your belly a little where your legs go on and stick them tight with some of this slippery stuff. It might hurt a little, but Dad says it will keep your legs from falling off later.”

The conversation would go on in this way, while Marten’s hands went from slip bucket to creation and back again, until he was covered with mud up past his elbows. It seemed that the quality of his work was directly proportional to the amount of clay covering his person, so if he was coated from head to toe when he cried out, “And now we are finished!” it was worth looking at what the little lad had come up with.

One afternoon when Marten had reached the golden age of childhood that is seven, he sat atop a tall stool, nose almost touching the lump of brown clay on the table before him. Pushing his fingers gently into the soft clay he felt, for the first time, a faint fluttering sensation; the heartbeat of the living clay. He sat motionless and listening as his own heartbeat and the clay’s drew closer together, became stronger, and finally beat as one. Marten took a deep breath and nudged the clay forward and up with his fingers and the heels of his hands, forming the long arching back of an animal he had never seen before. He pulled his hands back in surprise. Then, with another deep breath, he placed his hands on the clay again and waited until its pulse and his too came together. “Wings,” he said to himself, and began pulling the clay outward from the top of the back, but as he did he felt the pulses move apart. “You don’t need wings to fly, do you?” he said.

Marten cleared his head and waited until he felt just one strong heartbeat again, then the clay and he worked as one to make powerful back legs ending in long, wide feet. Soon, short, stable front legs came into being, then a blunt-nosed head, tail, ears, and finally large cherry leaf-shaped eyes. When all was smoothed and finished, he looked into the magical face of the animal he and the clay had made and knew that it was looking back at him.

In the weeks, months, and years that followed Marten and the clay worked together to create sculptures of many animals, each embodying the true magical nature of its subject. He decorated them with swirling

colored slip designs before giving them over to his parents to fire. Marten gifted his pocket-sized creations to friends and family who derived great comfort from them and found it easier to be guided by their own true natures when they carried them on their persons. The only piece Marten was unwilling to part with was the little creature he had made the day he first discovered the clay's heart. He put it high on a shelf to dry and never felt the need to decorate or fire it.

Marten might have lived in the magic of clay and in the bosom of his family forever if it had not been for the great size of that family, his wanderlust tendencies, and the events of one fateful fall morning.

"What happened to you yesterday afternoon?" his father said to him that morning. "I thought you were going to help me chop wood for the kiln."

"I must've forgot," Marten lied. Now that he was older he was expected to shoulder a larger portion of the type of work he considered boring, repetitive, and offensive to his free-spirited thirteen-year-old sensibilities.

"Is that so?" Mr. Treadle raised an eyebrow. "Then let me remind you that it's your turn to shift clay this morning."

"Right," Marten grumbled.

A short while later he stumbled through the doorway of the pottery with a heavy sack of dry clay over his shoulder. "Maggie, he screamed, seeing his little sister hunched on the floor. She was surrounded by shards of dried pottery, shards that were all that was left of the precious creature he had made the day he found the clay's heart. "What did you do?"

"He wanted to come down and dance, but I couldn't catch him," Maggie sobbed.

"You had no right! I told you never to touch him!" Marten yelled.

"But you don't play with him, and he looked lonely. I didn't mean to—"

"Get out!" Marten hissed, giving his sister such a ferocious look that she scrambled to her feet and fled from the room. Marten stooped to gather the pieces of his magical creature but did not have the fortitude to drop them into the slip bucket, the mixture of water and soft clay that would someday become new pieces of pottery. After sitting on the floor and staring at the wreckage for some time, he instead gathered the pieces in a cloth, wrapped it tightly with cord, and stuck the bundle in his pocket. On a mild morning in early autumn seven years later, when

Marten and Maggie prepared to venture into the wide world, Martin still carried that bundle with him.

It must be understood that in the days of long ago, a family's trade and farm could not be expected to support more than four adult children forever. Marten and Maggie's older siblings had already found their magic at home and were essential to their family and community. Two of them were married and Mr. and Mrs. Treadle were expecting grandchildren any day. Thus Marten, now twenty, and Maggie, who had just turned seventeen, neither having made themselves indispensable in pottery, house, or garden, were given the proverbial loaf of bread, hunk of cheese, and three gold pieces and sent out into the wide world to seek their fortunes.

Their father and mother tried to make the wide world a little narrower and less daunting by instructing them to follow the west bank of the Still River until they came to Riffle Town, where their Aunt Catherine could take them in and help them find work. Maggie had shown some promise as a seamstress and her mother thought that she might assist her aunt in the tailoring business. In truth, Maggie had shown promise in a number of things, but never for very long. Making her responsible for her own living, her parents hoped, might help focus her efforts. As for Marten, he could be a hard worker when he wanted to and was a decent potter, if not an inspired one of late.

The heartbeat of the clay, which had once been so clear, had grown fainter and fainter until one day Marten found he could not hear it at all. This silence became so unbearable that for a time he set aside the clay altogether and began looking for work elsewhere in his village, with very little success. There is only a small group of parents who have the patience to watch their children flounder without interfering. Marten's parents did not belong to this group, and so they sat him down one day and suggested that he might have a better chance of living up to his potential in a larger, less remote village.

The cluster of two dozen or so houses and adjacent fields that made up Mud Glen was isolated and remote to be sure. Set deep in the Norther Forest, it was connected to its neighboring villages only by rivers or long narrow forest tracks. Its residents did not consider this a disadvantage and when the time came to send two of their own out into the wide world, they all stood proudly together at the edge of their village to see them off. Marten and Maggie were dressed for their adventure in traditional walking clothes made of simple fabric

embellished with intricate needlework. Forest people were famous for embroidery; they were so devoted to it, in fact, that women, men, and children carried pouches containing sewing tools wherever they went. It was not uncommon to see them employing their needles at social gatherings or while fishing or when sitting on their front stoops chatting with neighbors, and consequently they could never be accused of engaging in what we might call “idle conversation.”

There were no horses to carry Marten and Maggie into the wide world, or mules, or goat carts for that matter. They would have to rely on their feet. Their sturdy packs had bedrolls wrapped in oilskin tarps strapped to their tops, and inside they held extra clothes, supplies for making camp, and food, including apples, cheese, boiled eggs, bread, nuts, jerky, meat pies, tea, and a sweet, dense blackberry cake—Maggie and Marten saw no reason to leave behind the good food just because it weighed a little more. New leather water flasks, the traditional gift for those leaving home for the first time, hung at their sides, and deep in their pockets each carried a handful of coins made from metal that was decidedly not gold.

The coins were considered to be the least valuable things they carried, but not just because they were made of inferior metal. Everyone knew that only those with no useful goods or skills to barter needed currency, and it would have been unthinkable for any self-respecting parents to send their children out into the world without the knowledge needed to take care of themselves and others. Their father hugged them goodbye, pressing small folding pocket knives into each of his children’s hands. Carved into the handle of Maggie’s was a singing catbird; Marten’s was engraved with a leaping rabbit.

After all the embraces were given, tears shed, and goodbyes said, Marten and Maggie set off down the trail leading to the Still River. Their loved ones looked on until the travelers were only two bright-colored dots in the distance surrounded by the towering ancient trees of the forest. Few words passed between them as they hiked down the track; a jumble of bittersweet thoughts and emotions, the kind that always accompany farewells, kept them lost in thought.

Maggie was the first to pull herself away from her internal wanderings and focus on the bright world about her. She gazed up at the leafy canopy and exclaimed suddenly, “First kettle of broad-wings!”

Marten roused himself, look skyward, and saw a hawk with wide, white bands on its fan-shaped tail circling in a brilliant patch of blue.

Above, its companions rode the warm air currents that rose from the Still River, some circling so high that they appeared only as specks. Marten had spotted other migrating hawks but he knew that when the broad-wings got the notion to form kettles and ride the winds south it was a sure sign that autumn had officially commenced.

“Your point,” conceded Marten.

Marten and Maggie had played the “First Game” since childhood. The object was to see who could spot the greatest number of new signs of the season first, and there were hundreds of them. Points were awarded for sighting the first skunk cabbage shoot, turtle hatchling, cicada song, or for the first thistle flower to burst into down. The game began on the last full moon before the vernal equinox and ended when the first snowflake fell, at which time a winner was declared. It was the perfect contest for those who had never seen a paper calendar, and were more likely to call early autumn “aster time” than “September.” Now, however, on this new adventure, their childhood contest seemed somehow inadequate. “What do you say we change our game a little,” Marten suggested.

“You’re not just saying that because you’ve lost the last two years running?” teased Maggie.

“No, it’s just that I thought since it’s our first real adventure, we should have a new game to go with it. I propose a contest where we get points only for things neither of us has ever seen before.”

“Hmm,” said Maggie. “And what if we see something new at the same time?”

“Then, we both get a point, just like in the old game.”

This was agreeable to Maggie, and so the revised version of the game commenced. Nothing seemed very new to Marten at first. He felt ill-equipped for what lay ahead, and couldn’t help thinking that before long he would muddle things up one way or another, but this feeling of inadequacy was not new. He suspected his chance of finding magic out in the wide world wasn’t much better than it had been in his little village. Magic was the thing all young people were meant to discover, but only those who hadn’t inherited it from their parents, or latched onto their own unique type of magic, were sent out into the world to seek it. He had always been somewhat baffled by the whole idea of magic. What he did know was that everyone knew whether you had it or you didn’t and he was certain that no one in his village believed he did.

His friend Isaac had it. He seemed to have caught cobbler's magic from his parents and demonstrated it every time he crafted a pair of shoes. The walking boots he made for Marten fit perfectly, put a spring in his step, never gave him blisters, and were so light and comfortable that he often forgot to take them off before climbing into bed. There was no doubt that Isaac could make magic, at least with leather. Marten wondered if the magical Isaac would miss him at all now that he was so preoccupied with his new intended. Yarrow was her name and she had magic of her own, which she had used to get what she wanted, and what she wanted was Isaac. Not so long ago Marten had mistakenly imagined she had wanted him instead.

"What's that?" Maggie whispered loudly, interrupting Marten's bout of self-pity.

She crouched down and pointed at something beneath the tall bracken that grew densely on either side of the track. Marten stared hard, but saw nothing at first. Then slowly he began to pick out the outline of a small animal. Its gray-brown coat and black-tipped ears camouflaged it well, but Marten was almost certain he was looking at a rabbit. Now you may be thinking that seeing a rabbit would be a commonplace event, but to the people of this realm, rabbits were considered to be almost mythical. Although most people knew what they were, it was rare indeed to find anyone who had actually seen one.

"Is that a rabbit? If it is, I want ten points!" Maggie whispered, afraid if she used a louder voice it might disappear.

"I think so!" answered Marten crouching down beside her. "Sure looks like what's carved on my pocket knife."

The animal, which was indeed a rabbit, eyed them suspiciously, nose twitching. Without warning, he made a magnificent leap into the air, spun round, and streaked down the path in front of them. Maggie and Marten exchanged a brief glance and sprinted after him. The path became muddy and sloping, sending them slipping and sliding. Observing the clumsy locomotion of his pursuers, the rabbit came to a stop a short distance ahead, slamming one of his large hind feet down disapprovingly. The resounding thump gave Marten and Maggie a start. Satisfied he had gained their attention, the rabbit proceeded down the path at a more leisurely pace, making it easier for his pursuers to remain upright. Soon the Still River, named for its slow, meandering ways, came into view. The travelers intended to turn south upon reaching the river

but the rabbit had different plans, and nearing the bank he sped up, took a sharp turn upstream, and dashed into the undergrowth.

Maggie and Marten came to a winded halt at the edge of the river and, looking in the direction the rabbit had gone, saw him pop out of a tangle of blueberry bushes a little way upstream. As they watched, the rabbit casually loped out onto a fallen tree that extended over a mud flat and into the water. He perched himself on a wide section of the log, shook his paws, and began cleaning his face.

There are very few behaviors rabbits exhibit that do not enchant the average human being. Maggie and Marten were no exception and they were charmed and mesmerized by this display of lagomorph hygiene. It may be that the rabbit had intended to produce this very effect, and in retrospect it seems very likely that he had, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Do you see that?" exclaimed Marten.

"You mean the way he scratches his ears with his back paws. That's adorable! I can't believe that rabbits are as vicious as they say."

"Maybe not," replied Marten, "but I'm not talking about the rabbit, I'm talking about that odd-looking thing sticking out of the mud."

Without further explanation, Marten began making his way up the bank, pushing aside the tangle of high-bush blueberries as he went. Maggie followed. In his excitement to reach the mysterious object, he abandoned all good trailblazing etiquette and sent branches flying back into his sister's face.

"Watch it!" she protested.

If Marten heard her he showed no sign of it, and continued to charge forward single-mindedly and oblivious. Reaching the log, he halted, but not before sending one more branch flying back at Maggie, who skillfully dodged it. She had gotten the knack of ducking and weaving after the second branch whacked her in the neck, and so arrived at her destination with fewer injuries than she might have. The only sign of the rabbit when they reached the log was a few footprints leading from the thicket to the log and then back into the thicket again, but Marten wasn't looking at the prints.

"You almost put my eye out!" Maggie scolded, but fell silent when she, too, caught sight of the shape outlined in the mud.

from Dead Leave

K. DALTON BARRETT

“Hi, it’s Steve,” Nash said quickly before his boss could interrupt him. “I’m not coming in today. I’m dead.”

“WHAT?” Jimmy exploded.

“Yeah—” Nash started, the reaction worse than he feared.

“Are you kidding me? You’re telling me you’re *dead*?”

“I’m pretty sure, I—” Nash sputtered.

“Pretty sure? Are you dead or aren’t you?”

Nash checked his FitWatch again. Still all zeroes, even with a new battery. “Technically, yeah.” He could feel the buzz of his biopowerpack implant, like a mild electrical charge through his nerves, but nothing else.

“Goddammit. How long you gonna be dead?”

“How do I know? I’ve never been dead before.” Nash took a breath and got up from his couch. Pissing off Jimmy even more was not the way to get this call over with quickly. “Right now it’s just the biopowerpack keeping me going.”

“Well, don’t burn it out.”

“Wow,” Nash said, his pacing halted. “Thanks for your concern.”

“I *am* concerned—”

“About your investment,” Nash blurted.

“Dude. What the actual hell?”

“Sorry,” Nash said as sincerely as he could manage. “I’m kind of stressed here. Don’t know where that came from.” He did know where that came from, but he was just surprised it came out of his mouth.

“Okay. But I *am* worried about you. If the ‘pack is what’s keeping you going and you burn it out...”

“I know, I know.” *Which is why I want to get this over with quickly.*

To Nash’s relief, Jimmy exhaled some anger. “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know,” Nash started, wondering how much he should say. “I was working on the Henderson project.” That much was true. “Gave myself a few boosts with the biopowerpack, you know, to keep going, get the proposal done.” Mostly true. “And then I heard, like, a pop. In my chest,” he added, touching it through his Deadpool t-shirt. “Then my FitWatch went to all zeroes. I changed the battery, still nothing.”

Nash leaned against the back of his couch, thinking about that pop, how it had felt, like a massive burp but without the gas.

“Jesus! You popped your heart?”

“But the proposal’s done,” Nash offered, hoping that would end the call.

“Did you send it? I haven’t seen it.”

“No.” *Damn it.* “I’ll do that now.” Nash waved his hand and the data table in front of his couch came to life. “Hold on.”

Documents and spreadsheets slid across the glass like they’d been tossed onto an icy surface, some of them obscured by rings from glasses, mugs, and bottles. The files and windows took on the configuration he’d left them in as he turned the table off to concentrate on this apparent death thing. There was the data visualization he’d been working on, right next to the game app he’d been playing. He dismissed the game window in case Jimmy connected to the data table.

“How long you been up, anyway?” Jimmy asked.

Crap. He tapped and swiped frantically to get the damn files sent. “Um...” Did he really want Jimmy to know how long it had taken him? Especially since half the time had been spent gaming? “Before you left for Singapore...”

“Dude. You been up for a week and a half?”

“It *was* a huge—” Nash stopped himself before he said *dungeon*.

“Dude. It wasn’t *that* big a proposal. I mean, what the hell? We agreed when we had the ‘pack put in you wouldn’t stay up for more than, like, three or four days. It’s only rated for two anyway, right? Why’d you stay awake so long, man?”

The loot was amazing, Nash almost said. “Just wanted to get it right, you know? And the dragon had your face, so I kept re-killing it.” *Crap, that was out loud.*

“What the hell are you talkin’ about? Are you all right?”

Never should have customized that boss. “No, actually, I’m dead, remember? And the files are all sent, okay?” *Can you shut up already?*

“Thanks, I see ‘em. You call a necrologist?”

“Not yet. You were the first call I made.” *For some stupid reason.*

“Well, shit. I mean, thanks for letting me know right away, but you really shoulda called a necrologist first. I’ll talk to HR about putting you on *short term* dead leave, all right? Get *undead* soon. We *need* you, man. I need you.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep you posted.”

Nash ended the call. He didn't know much about being dead, but he was pretty sure he shouldn't stay dead for long. He didn't even like saying the word. He wished there was a better one for it, whatever this weird state he was in actually was. *I can't be dead, I just called my boss. But the FitWatch.* He looked at it again, even tapped it a couple of times and shook his wrist. Still zeroes. *Maybe it's broken?*

He remembered the pop he'd heard, that he'd felt, right there in the center of his chest. He pressed his palm against it, moved it around. Nothing. He checked his pulse, trying to remember how they did it in movies and shows. Nothing. *Would I even feel my own heartbeat? My own pulse?*

He went to the bathroom, grabbed a towel off the floor, wiped the mirror, pressed his nose against the clean spot, and opened his mouth. No mist appeared. He didn't feel like he was breathing, but did he ever? Only after exercise.

He jogged out of the bathroom, into his bedroom, hopping over the piles of clothes, down the short hall to the living room. Around the gaming chair, back around the data table, over the half-built model of the Death Star, then around the couch and end tables. He continued on to the front door, back around the living room and the bedroom, then dug under the bed for his hand weights, brushed the dust off them, and swung them back and forth while he ran in place. Finally, he ran back to the bathroom and leaned against the mirror again.

Nothing. His heart wasn't pounding, his chest wasn't heaving. *That's more exercise than I've had in years.*

He took a deep breath, then let it out. *So I can breathe on purpose.* He took another breath, then more and more, trying to hyperventilate. But he didn't get dizzy. When he stopped breathing deliberately, he just...stopped. No movement in his lungs.

"I can't be dead," he said to himself in the mirror. "Can I? Shit."

He ran back to the living room and grabbed his phone off the data table—not that you could see through it much anymore. He scrolled to his primary care doctor's number and hit it but couldn't connect; the network was down again.

"Come on, come on," he urged the phone.

The nice thing about having some money was having access to multiple networks, even the fly-by-night ones. He kicked off the app that would navigate through the airwaves and satellites, make connections, and charge his bank account in various currencies

accordingly and repeatedly. The app popped up a confirmation button, and as he pressed it he wished it had a *Yes, Dammit!* button.

“Dr. Emell’s office, this is Amy, how can I help you?” Her voice had a cheery, sing-song quality that always made him feel a little better. Probably why hers was the first voice you heard.

“Hi, this is Steve Nash.” He pushed down the panic.

“Oh, hello Mister Nash. Can you say your identifying phrase, please?”

“Sure.” He tapped his foot rapidly until he heard the *beep* that told him the system was ready. “All your base are belong to us.”

A pause until the confirmation tone. “Thank you, Mister Nash, how can I direct your call?”

“I’m dead,” he told her.

“Oh,” she said like she’d found something on her shoe that she couldn’t identify. “Let me put you through to the nurse.”

“You’re killing me,” he muttered under his breath.

And suddenly he was listening to an ad for an anti-cancer implant. He was surprised to hear the ad mention FDA approval. *Like anybody still cares.* He supposed doctors had to pretend it still mattered.

“Mr. Nash?” The nurse’s voice cut into the ad; she was an older woman with a no-nonsense tone.

“Yes.”

“You say you’re dead?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, my FitWatch is all zeroes—and yes, I put in a new battery. I can’t feel a pulse and I’m not breathing.”

“Hm. Do you mind if I connect to your FitWatch?”

“Go ahead, but hurry, please.”

It was on the same network as his phone (which reminded him that he should probably check his bank and ecoin accounts) so she connected quickly. He held his wrist up and watched the yellow numbers, letters, and symbols play across the black screen, then the display returned to all zeroes.

“It does seem to be working, and is not registering any life signs,” the nurse said.

“Um, why isn’t my brain activity considered a life sign?”

“We don’t make the laws, Mister Nash,” she said, not answering the question. “I see that your insurance covers necrologists.”

“Great,” Nash said, relieved she hadn’t asked more questions. “Can you give me a referral?”

“First I have to ask if you’ve had any modifications or new enhancements since your last visit?”

Crap. “Um...yes...?”

“Such as?”

“Well, I, uh, I had a...” He cleared his throat. “A biopowerpack put in about a month ago.” *Please, please, please be an accepted enhancement.*

“Oh.” While the receptionist had sounded like there was something under her shoe, the nurse sounded like something was crawling up her leg. “May I ask who did the installation?”

“Earl’s Enhancement Emporium.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“But I—” He was cut off by a message about how to recognize and protect yourself from the Rejuvenation Virus.

“Sudden weight loss accompanied by firm, tight skin?” asked the recording.

He pinched his belly fat through his t-shirt. “Nope.”

“Increase in muscle mass?”

He squished his bicep. “Nope. I really should work out—what hell am I talking about? I’m dead!”

Finally, the nurse came back on.

“Sorry for the wait. Unfortunately, we’re not going to be able to refer you. The biopowerpack is not on our list of accepted enhancements. Also, it appears that ‘Earl’ has fled the country and the ‘Emporium’ is closed.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you follow the news?”

“Not much.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Well, what am I supposed to *do*?”

“I can give you a number, but they’re not in the network.”

“Okay, fine, I have to do *something*.”

“So, you acknowledge that you are aware that the number I’m about to give you is for someone not in our network, that any work they do will not be covered by your death insurance, and that this does not constitute a referral?”

“*Yes.* Please, just give me the number.”

“Very well, Mister Nash. No need to be impatient, we have to make sure you understand and accept—”

“I do, I do. I’m sorry and I accept. I’m just a bit rattled. I’ve never been dead before.” Then the world went dark for a second.

“I understand. Are you ready to take down a number?”

The light came back. “Can you text it?” *What the hell is happening now?*

“Certainly.”

Again, the brief darkness as he heard the *bing* of an arriving text.

“Did you get it?” the nurse asked.

He could see again. “Yes, there’s the notification. But…” Darkness. “It’s getting hard to blink.”

“Oh, dear. Rigor mortis may be setting in.”

“What? Rigor mortis? I’m really *dead*?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. You’d better hurry.”

“How long do I have?”

“If rigor mortis is starting now, you’ll be unable to move within a couple of hours. Call that number. Quickly. They should be able to help. But be careful with them, Mister Nash,” the nurse said and ended the call.

“What the hell does that mean?” he shouted at the phone.

The nurse’s words bounced around his head during his long, slow blinks. Darkness. *Rigor mortis.*

Light. He thumbed the number she’d sent. Darkness. *Unable to move.*

Light. He confirmed the call request. Darkness. *Couple of hours.*

Light. He confirmed the network search and put the phone to his ear. Darkness. *Be careful with them.*

The phone rang as his eyes opened again.

“Whole Life Storage and Restoration,” said a woman with an Indian accent. “How may I direct your call?”

“Hel’ me, I’m dead.” Nash felt his jaw tightening and the darkness returning. *Rigor mortis. Oh, god, I’m really dead!*

“You say you’ve recently been de-lifed?”

“Yesh, ‘lease hel’.” The blinks were getting longer.

“We can help with that. We have a staff of fully-trained Life Restoration Consultants. Would you like to make an appointment?”

“Ahointment? I got ‘igor ‘ortish!”

“Oh, dear. You’d better get here quickly.”

“Can ‘ou cong ged ‘e?”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t offer a pick-up service. Are you having trouble seeing?”

“Yesh,” Nash said in the dark.

“Very common in your condition. When your eyes open again, hold them open if you can. They should stay that way after a moment.”

“Udding ‘ou on sheaker,” he said as he set it down and hit the speaker button now that he could see again. He quickly put his thumbs and forefingers to his eyes, holding them open.

“Are you still there?” asked the lady on the phone.

“Yesh. Hol’ing eyesh o’en.”

“You’re holding your eyes open?”

“Yesh.”

“Good. It sounds like your jaw is tightening as well.”

“At ‘ave ‘ou ‘at i’ea?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Yesh.”

“I see. There’s not much you can do about that, except perhaps work your jaw with your hands. You should have an hour or so before you start to feel stiffness in your limbs. Try letting go of your eyes now.”

He did. They stayed open. “I ‘an shee.”

“Good. I advise you to get here as quickly as possible. I’ll text you the address.”

Bing went the phone.

Nash checked the text between lengthening blinks. They were just on the other side of town. He texted his contact info back.

“Ah, wonderful,” said the lady, “You’re nearby. See you soon.”

“Yesh. I ho’e,” Nash said and ended the call.

Nash pulled up his favorite ride service and entered the destination. The stylized wheel spun for a second, then was replaced by a red X. Beneath it was a message reading, “We do not provide rides to this destination. The closest our drivers are allowed is one block (100 feet) away. Do you accept?” Under the message were *Yes* and *No* buttons.

He pressed the *Yes* button.

“Are you sure?” asked another message with buttons.

“Yesh!” Nash shouted as he pressed it.

“You accept full responsibility for being dropped off one block (100 feet) from you chosen destination?”

“I akshept,” he growled as he pressed.

“Your driver, Carl, is on his way.”

Nash hurried to get ready, every movement becoming more difficult. He threw on a shirt but struggled with the buttons as his fingers stiffened. “Shit, shit, shit,” he muttered through his tightening jaw.

Thankfully, he didn’t encounter any of the building’s tenants on the three-floor elevator ride down from his apartment.

The car pulled up. Nash fumbled with the door handle. When he finally opened it, he all but fell in.

“Steven?” asked the driver, a young, tanned guy with dark hair and goatee.

“Yesh. You Carl?”

“Yeah...” The driver eyed Nash suspiciously.

“M nod drunk,” Nash attempted to explain.

Carl adjusted the mirror, watching Nash as he pushed himself upright. “You dead?” Carl asked.

“Yesh.”

Carl nodded, pressed the route button on his phone and started driving.

“How you know?”

Carl shrugged. “Stuff I’ve seen? Dead’s pretty mild, actually. ‘Sides, my sister went through the same thing.”

“Eally?” said Nash.

“Yeah, rigor like you got and everything. I mean, I wasn’t there. She told me. See, my sister, now she gets that biopowerpack thing implanted, then maybe two weeks later, she gets mugged. Killed. Stabbed. Boy were they surprised when she got back up and kicked their asses. That was before the rigor, though, you know what I mean? Yeah, you know what I mean. I’ll make sure you get there okay. Okay? Okay.”

The rest of the ride consisted of Carl relating stories of how his sister became something of a daredevil after her first undeading. “Tried to tell her how much she was changing, you know? We all did. It was like, every time she came back, she didn’t come back all the way, you know? She wouldn’t listen. She figured as long as she could pay the necrologists, she might as well have fun. But there ain’t a necrologist in the world who can bring you back after you fall in a volcano,” he concluded.

He went silent for a bit after that, getting a little choked up. Nash looked away, letting Carl have his moment.

The silence was broken by the simultaneous dinging of their phones, indicating they'd arrived.

"The app tracks me," Carl said, as he pulled the car to a stop. "Can't go any closer. Plus, I already got another ride." He turned and put his arm across the seat. "You sure you want to go there?"

"Yesh. Gud no choish."

"I hear ya, man," Carl said. "Let me help you."

Carl got out, opened the door, and helped Nash to his feet. Carl had to steady him for a moment, since Nash could barely bend his feet and knees. On his first step, Nash almost fell over. Carl caught him just before he face-planted.

"Can't 'ove vast," Nash told him.

"How about this?"

Carl helped Nash get his arms out in front of him and helped him straighten his legs.

"There ya go!"

Nash started off, walking from his hips with his arms stretched out in front of him.

"Good luck, man!" Carl shouted as he jumped in his car and drove off.

Luckily, the ground was level. Nash staggered along the sidewalk, catching glimpses of people looking at him, staring at him, moving away. He half expected there'd be a group with pitchforks and torches behind him.

He finally arrived at the address. An old brick building that looked abandoned, except for the sign that read *Whole Life Storage and Restoration* in projected light. Someone had tried to whitewash the old signs, but they bled through: *Yablanski's Spiced Meats. We Know How the Sausage Is Made*. The anthropomorphized, dancing kielbasa made Nash rethink his options.

The door opened. A petite woman in a colorful hazmat suit appeared. It was the kind of stylized protection suit people were into these days, but she had added hand-painted flowers and ducks.

"Hello," came her voice through a tinny speaker in the helmet. "Are you the gentleman who phoned?"

"Yesh."

"Come in, come in."

He shambled for the stairs. She signaled inside and a couple of young men in grey, undecorated hazmat suits came out with a stretcher, helped him onto it, and carried him inside.

They bustled him in through the lobby and into a small room with a cot, a table, and a chair. As they helped him onto the cot he kept reminding them that he didn't have money or insurance. The ducks-and-flowers lady made reassuring sounds that might have been words, but he couldn't be sure. He was fading. *Dying? Really dying?* Candles and incense were lit, aromas passed under his nose and he was out.

Breathe

PATRICIA S. WILD

I breathe into my evolution.
Memories flood my vision,
shape-shifters inviting exploration.

I breathe,
growing, changing, adapting,
ever seeking, searching the horizon.

Red shoes dance my way
into the circle of possibility.
Soft moon lights my way,
giving me strength.

I breathe.
Fear yielding to authentic understanding.
Alchemy knitting treasure
from fragments and holes.

I breathe,
using everything, the whole.
Coming full circle,
I breathe.

Irish Dawn

PATRICIA S. WILD

The strand.

The scent takes over, wraps its musk around your face, permeates the nose, up into your brain.

It lurks there like a strong, insistent, cloying cry.

In and out with every breath.

Pleasant, unpleasant.

Fresh, thick.

Earthy, salty.

Echoed in the susurrant insistence of the sea.

Wave, now gentle, now crashing
as it meets its doom on the rocks.

The birds awaken, sounding the alarm of a new morning, a fresh start,
a fresh container for all our worries and insanity.

The strand.

The chill in the air, fresh with new-day possibility. The flesh awakens,
reaching for more, shivering with delight.

The breeze lifts the hair

doing a slow tango, alive with sensuality.

The strand.

The distant shores, faint in the morning light
as if being born out of the darkness.

They have secrets waiting to be told
as they slowly show their faces.

The daylight licks the tips of their shoulders
as a mother cat might lick her kittens alive.

The mountains more solid with every moment,
reminding us that this is how we, too, grow into solid shape.

Little by little,

our illumination makes us stronger.

In the Garden

from First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Church

POLLY INGRAHAM

During my childhood we never went to church as a family. In fact, I can barely imagine the experience of all of us piling in the car together to go *anywhere*; I was so much the tail end of the line that those days of boys crammed in the back of a station wagon were history. But we did spend a lot of time together at home—working, playing, talking, and going places both collectively and separately, thanks to the many visitors who came, the books that lined our living room wall, and the fields and woods that surrounded our house.

Two of my favorite early books, both read to me by my mother who had first encountered them with *her* mother, were by Frances Hodgson Burnett. What I remember best about *A Little Princess*, the more powerful of the two, was how completely absorbed in the tale my mother was. She must have been so glad to have a daughter after all those boys, partly because she could revisit this book again. I was about six. Sara Crewe, the girl who came to a British boarding school from India, was at first surrounded by wealth provided by her father but then, with his sudden death, lost all of her possessions and had to move up to a bare attic. She bore up, making friends with servants she never would have known had she stayed at her high station, though the dreadful headmistress Miss Minchin cared nothing for her pain. Tears streamed down my mother's face as she read through this section, replaced by delight when a secret benefactor of Sara's—the wonderful and exotic Ram Das—transforms her dank chamber into a comfortable and beautiful place overnight. Goodness prevailed; patience and kindness were rewarded.

I knew nothing about resurrection then, but as my mother sat on the edge of my bed holding that dark blue book with the gold lettering, I learned something about how life can be reclaimed.

Knowing that I was at just the right age for Burnett's work, she moved us on to the similarly entrancing *A Secret Garden*. The book is full of mystery as it traces the relationship between a cranky girl named Mary and Colin, a sickly boy who cries out repeatedly from some other distant

wing of the mansion. We learn that Colin is not only physically unwell but also spiritually hindered by his chronic self-centeredness. Eventually, with the help of Dickon, a boy who is very much one with the natural world, Mary is able to wheel Colin outside and through a forbidden door to the walled-in garden, a place that had been off-limits for years after Colin's mother's death becomes a place of rejuvenation for all.

I, too, had a kind of secret garden. It was tucked away down the hill from our house, not walled in and forbidden, but not easily accessible to the outside world. Going there was what I imagined going to church was like for other people: a place apart, a place for reflection, and a place to sense a larger spirit, what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the "Over-Soul." But the congregation consisted only of me, myself, and I.

While a garden can be any tiny plot of earth that is cultivated, this one was generous and gem-like at the same time: a green clearing in the woods with about a dozen flowerbeds. It had been my grandfather's world, and though in the years since he died when I was only seven everything had become wilder, the outlines of what was once a carefully tended green space were still clear. Granddad had always been a multifaceted individual—a lawyer, a writer, a trout stream fisherman, an amateur ecologist and painter, and, as he himself wrote when the Census taker came around, a farmer. He and my grandmother lived in Brooklyn most of the time, but they, being fortunate and escaping the worst of the Depression, acquired a home on Long Island during the early years of the twentieth century. He took to tending roses as, I was always told, a peaceful antidote to the rush-rush of their city life—and perhaps to have some quiet moments away from a wife who could be formidable.

Enhancing the magical feel of the place was the presence of a small house perched on a slight hill overlooking the garden. Built originally as a honeymoon cabin for my Aunt Winifred and her husband Harold in the late 1930s, as the decades progressed it became more of a nuisance building—attracting hooligans who hiked in off the back road to drink and smoke. While soon enough my father made the sensible decision to take it down, it still held for me as a young girl a kind of mystique, if not allure. People had lived here, at least for a time, and they enjoyed complete seclusion, having only flowers and trees and birds for companions.

Some rich red roses still emerged each spring during my youth, despite having lost the dedicated hands that used to care for them. On the other side of the garden from the house rose a huge weeping willow

tree with cascades of small green leaves falling everywhere, like a girl whose hair was too bounteous to be controlled. And beyond that was the small pond, silent except for the occasional quack of visiting ducks and almost completely hidden by the dense growth all around it. You could almost miss the narrow path that took you past a tall patch of bamboo that made a wonderful whispering sound on one side and a couple of intentionally planted and thriving holly trees on the other, to a small wooden dam between two cement blocks. The sound of the water trickling over that dam is one of my most vivid childhood memories; it was not a particularly dramatic spot in itself, but it was a tremendous focal point. From there, you could look right to see ever-shifting reflections and colorful leaves drifting in the pond, and left to what we called “the swamp” where herons and turtles and muskrats had their own mysterious domain. It felt magical, a place where startling things could happen at any moment.

Throughout my elementary school years, as she had done for my brothers, my mother volunteered to host every single class picnic at our house. After the field games and the watermelon pit fights were over, we all tore off down the hill on what we called “Emil’s Path” (so named for the man who had worked for Granddad) to see, and when teachers weren’t looking, actually go right into, the luscious black slime. When the obligatory thank-you letters from the kids arrived in a rubber-banded pack a week or so later, one mentioned how the “Squish, squash” sound of his footsteps was a favorite highlight. To this day, my classmates still recall these forays. I was so proud to show everybody my special places. Once, on somebody’s dare in seventh grade, a few of us agreed to meet right at the little dam for a day of playing hooky. That was a strange, but in a way necessary, experience for someone like me who rarely transgressed: my version of what my brothers occasionally did when the ice was especially perfect at a nearby skating spot.

While I sometimes enjoyed sharing this spot with friends, it was primarily a place where I could be sure of being alone for long stretches of time. When I was around eight or nine I would write my innermost thoughts, confident that no one would ask to read them. In my early teenage years, partly following the example of a couple of aunts and one great-uncle I didn’t even know, I became interested in ornithology. That propelled me to head down to the garden daily during prime migration times with binoculars and spiral notebook in hand, searching for fluttering warblers making buzzy sounds up high in the trees. When I

reached my twenties, a serious boyfriend who grew up in a city would say to me, incredulously, “Wow, you’re the first person I’ve ever even *met* who watched birds.”

I had no Bible, I had no idea what went on in Sunday school, but I was without a doubt getting a kind of spiritual education here. In me was an emergent sense that I was a unique individual, alone where it most counted, holding some kind of reins. I had a physical being as well as a mental and emotional one, and I was in charge of my own self-integration. Around the age of eight, I had moments of being thunderstruck, even frightened, by this simple yet also complex realization, telling no one. The responsibility of steering my own thoughts and actions felt both empowering and staggering; I pinched myself, trying to figure out which part of me—soul or body—was the *real* me.

Sometimes—especially when I scurried high up in a pine tree, mindless of the real danger of dead branches cracking and sending me down, down, down with no one having any idea where I was and I looked out to see the deep cobalt blue line of Long Island Sound—I knew I was as fully alive and sentient and capable as anybody in the world, and that it was entirely up to me how I would choose to engage with everybody out there and which qualities I would cultivate as I grew up. As Mary Oliver would put it a few decades later, “Tell me, what is it you wish to do with your one wild and precious life?”

from Pantheon: A Novel of the Greek Gods

GARY DEVORE

Pantheon is a novel of the ancient Greek gods. When humans stopped believing in them as divine, they came to Earth and have lived among us for centuries. Now they've decided to reclaim their worship, which means they must destroy every other religion in the world.

This excerpt is about Hermes, the immortal former god of liars, thieves, and luck, who in the modern era is an international art thief pretending to be human. He's in the process of crossing the Sahara in southern Tunisia to sneak into Libya and steal an artifact from a forgotten Roman archaeological site, though in the process he's also inadvertently kidnapped an American named Malcolm Byron Wallace.

First the Berber tribesmen dressed Malcolm and Hermes in dark robes that hung down to their ankles. Then the men wrapped long lengths of cloth several times around their heads and necks. When they were finished, only the two's eyes peered out from the cloth.

Their transportation was parked a few hundred feet out into the cool shadows of the desert. Hermes had ridden a camel before. Malcolm had not, and when their guides showed them their animals, the human let out a small groan. In response, his camel turned its narrow head and bared its teeth with a guttural squawk.

Hermes climbed into the finely decorated saddle of his camel and made a series of sharp clicking noises with his tongue. The lanky beast ambled to its feet, tugging on its reins that were embroidered with red and gold thread. One of the shorter Berber men helped Malcolm maneuver his legs around the seat then goaded his camel to stand. Malcolm clutched at the pommel of the saddle to keep his balance.

Without speaking, the three Berbers led them southwest, straight into the heart of the barren desert. In a matter of minutes, they had crossed from the rocky flatlands into rolling shadowy dunes of smooth sand. The murky night hung cloudy and dark above the tiny group of five as they rode in a long line. Only the occasional slap of a leather crop on the broad flanks of the camels broke the stillness.

“You might want to try and sleep,” Hermes told Malcolm over his shoulder, his voice carrying far in the engulfing silence. “We’re going to go on all night and straight through the day.”

“Don’t leave me behind if I fall off,” Malcolm warned.

“I won’t.”

“I’ve seen *Lawrence of Arabia*.”

“So have I,” Hermes chuckled. “And I’ll cross the burning desert to rescue you if you do fall off.”

But Malcolm did not fall off, and was in fact able to sleep for several hours, hunched forward on the horn of the saddle, rocked gently into slumber by the rolling of the camel. Hermes hummed to himself, and spent the night remembering the times he had been in a desert during his life on earth. He recalled each wasteland: Mojave, Kalahari, Gibson, Gobi. Once he had been caught in a sandstorm for three days in the Arabian Desert with only himself, his camel, and a flimsy lean-to tent that spent most of its time leaning-fro. It seemed to take a century to get all the sand out of his hair.

When the sun finally rose, round and glowing over the Sahara, banishing the chill of the night with a warm blast of wind, the heat pressed down on all of Hermes’ limbs. His memories dissipated like mirages and he was left watching the uniform buff-brown scenery. He swiveled around in the saddle to look back at Malcolm, who had recently woken up. The human was turning his head from side to side, watching everything intently as their caravan wound its way slowly through the dunes. A few times he even let out an excited, muffled shout and pointed out to Hermes a scurrying lizard or snake. Hermes smiled although the vista only bored him with its monotony.

The desert grew ferociously red, but the heat was bearable only because it was November and not the height of summer. The air swayed under the sun in a rhythmic dance. The sand crunched under the hooves of their beasts. From time to time a blast of burning wind would sear their exposed skin with the breath of a furnace, making ripples undulate like waves on the sand.

They rode for the entire day, only stopping periodically to rest the camels. Late in the afternoon, the leader of the Berbers held up his hand and pointed at an island of green in the golden dunes. Hermes nodded that he understood. They would spend the night at this oasis that was under the guardianship of these Berbers’ tribe.

When they reached the track of lush land, the Berbers dismounted and led their beasts into the foliage.

“Whaaur wehopin?” Malcolm asked.

Hermes turned to him. “Huh?”

Malcolm pulled the thick wrappings of his headdress down away from his mouth and spit out some sand. “Why are we stopping?”

“It will be night soon. We’ll rest tonight. How are you doing?”

Malcolm nodded. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve spent summers in Fort Lauderdale. I’m used to the heat.”

Hermes chuckled and slung himself down off his camel without allowing it to kneel. Malcolm gently nudged the sides of his camel with his ankles and clicked his tongue.

“Come on, boy,” he said. “Down. Go down.” The camel parted its lips and let out a groan, shaking its head from side to side.

A large pool of water glistened in the middle of the oasis. Hermes approached the Berber leader who had guided his camel to drink there and asked in Arabic how much further it was to the border. The leader, a tall, thin man with skin tanned and wrinkled from a life in the desert, replied that they would reach the abandoned tunnel early the next afternoon. Hermes nodded his approval and returned to Malcolm.

The human was still perched on his obstinate camel, shaking the decorated reins. “Go down. Down boy.” Finally, as Hermes watched with amusement, Malcolm tried to swing down like he had seen the immortal do. He held on to the base of the camel’s neck, and tried to pull one of his legs across the back of the saddle. But the animal took one step forward, throwing Malcolm off-balance. The human and the entire barding slid slowly but directly toward the ground, the belt of the saddle twisting under the belly of the camel. Malcolm let out a yell of alarm as he clutched tighter at the camel’s furry neck. The barding slumped to the ground with a thud. The camel groaned again as Malcolm’s legs reached the sand. As the animal began to walk away, Malcolm’s feet dragged through the desert. “Uh, help!” he finally cried. Laughing, Hermes went over and took the animal by the dangling reins and halted it, then helped Malcolm down.

As the human finally stood, he tried to compose himself. “I’ll get the hang of it next time.”

Great palm trees stood tall against the sky. Under them, smaller plants and shrubs clustered, covering the land with a green carpet. An underground water source flowed to the surface under the expansive

pool that fed all of the plants around it. The Berbers sat by themselves under a spreading palm. They conversed in low voices, munching on a few dates they picked up off the ground. Hermes and Malcolm perched together in the shadow of a pile of large rocks, separated from the Berbers and their fire.

“Are we almost at the tunnel?” the human asked.

“Tomorrow afternoon. Then it’s just a hop, skip and a jump to the buried city and the temple.”

Malcolm looked around. “Are we supposed to sleep here tonight?”

“It will be safe.”

“But...just sleeping on the ground?”

“Didn’t you ever go camping?”

“Yes, but that was with a tent, a sleeping bag, hibachi, portable generator...and I didn’t even like it then.”

“You can sleep on the camel again if you want.”

“No thank you.”

Hermes set about building a small fire as the moon and the night sky took over from the hostile sun. He and Malcolm shared some of the food Anniballa had packed for them, washing it down with warm bottled water they passed back and forth between them. Malcolm wiped off the opening before he took each sip.

“I have to admit this is beautiful too,” he said with a grin. “I never knew how pretty this country would be. I’m really in awe.”

“Just think,” Hermes said, “back home they’re scraping snow off their cars.”

“And I’m sitting in the middle of the Sahara.”

“Who would have thought it?”

Malcolm took another drink of water. “And disregarding the two different groups of people that are trying to kill me, and the bit of international trespassing I’m about to do, it’s not that bad.”

Hermes smiled broadly. “Good! I’m glad to see you’re finally having fun.”

“Trying to.”

“That’s all I ask.” Then Hermes squinted and spoke with a thick German accent. “And Herr B-b-b-b-byron-W-w-w-w-wallace, you will g-g-give me w-wh-wh-what I ask for!”

Malcolm giggled and collapsed backward onto the grass. Hermes laughed out loud and fell back as well. “You shouldn’t make fun of people who stutter,” the human scolded with a smile.

“I only make fun of people who stutter who want to kill you.”

“Okay then. But don’t forget, he wants to kill you too. More than me.”

Hermes let out a short puff of breath. “Peek’s not going to kill me. Many have tried before him, and none have succeeded.”

Above them, the sky opened up its endless expanse, flowing away like a black sea lit by a million tiny lights.

“It’s gorgeous,” Malcolm sighed. “So amazingly gorgeous.”

Hermes tried to focus his eyes on one of the stars, but it seemed to liquefy, and its light flowed into another beside it. “I guess,” he answered.

Malcolm turned to him. “The majestic infinity of the cosmos is right here, and that’s all you can say?”

Hermes fought the urge to reply, “*Been there. Done that.*” Instead, he bent one arm back behind his head, and dropped his other arm beside him, where his hand gently brushed against Malcolm. He could sense the shivers he caused to echo through Malcolm’s frame, but did not withdraw his hand. “I look up there, and I see it, and people say how beautiful it is. And I just look at it. I know it should make me feel some way. It should make me feel special, and happy, and content, but...it just doesn’t. It’s like some big cosmic joke that no one’s let me in on.” His nose itched and he scratched it, replacing his hand and brushing against Malcolm again. “For all the beautiful things that pass through my hands, beauty never affects me. I don’t know why.” He turned his head and gazed at Malcolm. “I guess I’m defective.”

Malcolm had been watching him. “Well...you’ve probably seen so much. It probably takes more to impress you.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Hermes drew down his eyebrows, trying to rid himself of an uneasy feeling. “But it shouldn’t be like that. Simple things, like laying under a blanket of stars next to a handsome man.” Malcolm turned away. “That should affect me. That should dazzle and overwhelm me.”

Malcolm’s voice was low. “And it doesn’t?”

Hermes shook his head. “Like I said, I know it should, but it doesn’t.”

They were silent. “You’re a lucky man, Wally,” Hermes finally sighed. “Very lucky.”

Malcolm scoffed. “You’re right, you are defective.”

Hermes laughed and looked back at the sky. “Go to sleep. You’re under the universe. It’s beautiful. At least you know it’s beautiful.”

“And I’m lying next to a handsome man.”

“And you’re lying next to a handsome man. See how lucky you are?” Hermes pulled his other arm up behind his head. “Be happy. One day, you’ll remember this, and I want it to make you smile.”

Malcolm closed his eyes and yawned. “I still hate you for forcing me to come.”

“Goodnight Wally.”

In a few minutes, the human was asleep. Hermes fetched a blanket from the packs and placed it across him to guard against the chilly night air. He listened to Malcolm’s measured breathing for a bit before his own thoughts and gaze returned to the spreading sky. It seemed as if every shining light he saw could be a life he had lived, a persona he had played, a mortal he had touched. The constellations were a map of his infinite life, crisscrossing the sky as points of intense memory. Names began to rise to the surface of his consciousness, names he could no longer affix in linear time, receding back into his history. Along with names there were feelings, and hazy pictures, and half-remembered scenes that would have required many more nights to catalogue and file correctly into a sequence of fourteen centuries. Like the light of the stars, they flowed and merged into each other, overlapping so that no clear edge could be discerned. His eyes began to ache from the strain, and he closed his lids, blocking out the universe. Instantly, the names evaporated, and the feelings and images melted into blissful nothingness.

A low noise reached his immortal ears. A short hiss—the flip of a moist tongue between two lips. Turning his head slowly, he saw a black snake curled up atop the pile of rocks about six feet from Malcolm’s head. Its scales reflected the moonlight like a mosaic of tiny mirrors. As Hermes watched, it raised its diamond-shaped head and flowed down between the rocks like water and began to push its way through the sand, twisting its body around and around. The hairs on the back of Hermes’ neck pricked up and were tickled by the night breeze. He watched as the creature slithered toward Malcolm, leaving a trail in the sand.

The human’s nose twitched in sleep. The snake paused and raised itself up. Its tongue shot out in repetitious motion, tasting the air. It stared at Hermes as if gauging his reaction.

Hermes' eyes narrowed as he returned the glare. The snake swayed. The tip of its black tail quivered in anticipation. Its ebony eyes glistened and creases in its brown underbelly folded across one another as it wavered from side to side. The crackle from the fire did not seem to scare it and none of the Berbers were stirring. Malcolm's chest rose and fell in a soft rhythm of breath savored by the snake's curious tongue.

Slowly, Hermes raised himself up on one arm, digging his elbow into the sand. He placed his palm flat and readied to leap across Malcolm if necessary. The snake drew its body back momentarily. It lowered its head, keeping Hermes in its gaze. A branch on the fire spat a white spark into the air with a loud pop. Nothing moved, except for the stomach of the sleeping human.

Annoyed, Hermes pursed his lips. Tired of the game, he stood up and walked around Malcolm. The snake, terrified, slithered backwards, waving its body wildly as a threat. Hermes bent down and took hold of the creature with his right hand. It hissed like mad. Sharp fangs punctured the side of his hand as his fingers closed around the soft body. Hermes winced at the moment of pain. The snake wriggled, trying to escape as Hermes drew his arm back. It tried to bite him again but missed as Hermes flung it as far as he could out into the darkness. He heard it thud somewhere against the sand.

Looking down at his hand, he saw the two puncture marks. The skin surrounding them was white, and the holes the fangs had made were streaked with black. As he watched, the black began to rise to the surface and run in tiny droplets down his hand. With every heartbeat, the thick ichor that flowed through his veins pushed the venom out of the wound. Within a minute, the black was gone, and his ichor had filled each slit cell by cell.

Hermes returned to Malcolm's side and lay back down, accidentally knocking against him. The human woke up with a start.

"What is it?" he asked looking over at Hermes with startled but drowsy eyes.

"Nothing. You're safe," Hermes replied pulling his arms back beneath his head. "Go back to sleep."

[Pantheon by Gary Devore is available on Amazon and at independent book stores in six compact volumes or one omnibus edition. Visit garydevore.com/pantheon]

The Other Side

CHERYL BARNHART

“What is the other side like?” I asked.

Grandma said what she always said: “Unimaginable, dear!”

Grandma was one of the lucky ones. Most people don’t return once they walk through the door, but she did. All she would ever say when asked about the other side was, “Unimaginable, dear!” Granted, that’s not a very good answer, but I think she had trouble finding the words to explain it.

I want to be back in the kitchen helping her create her famous cinnamon bread. It’s only been a year, but far too long just the same.

I’m finally here to see the door for myself, wondering if I should stay or go.

The door isn’t like it was in Grandma’s day. When she was there, it was just a door. Now, there’s an entrance fee just to see it.

I’m glad Grandma isn’t here to see this. As I walk through the turnstile, the first thing I notice is a souvenir kiosk. There’s restaurants, an area to take photos, and a friggin’ ferris wheel.

I think I’ll just get a cup of coffee and people-watch for a while. Two tables over, I notice a couple arguing.

The woman says, “Don’t go! You have children to think about!”

The man apologizes, saying, “Sorry, I can’t explain it. I have to go.”

“How the hell do you want me to explain it to your children?! To your mother?!”

I stop listening to them because I know full well how he feels. Thankfully, I have no children.

Uhhh! My aunt is calling. She heard about where I went. “Honey, what the hell?! Please don’t go!”

“I’m sorry Auntie. I haven’t decided yet, but I feel myself drawn to it. I love you Auntie. I have to go.”

I hung up and shut my phone off. I was pretty sure she wouldn’t be the last to call.

“Oh, hell! I’m just gonna go!” I said to myself. I gave the attendant my card, watched him swipe it, then stepped toward the door.

I grabbed the heavily worn iron handle and admired the hand-hewn woodworking marks on the door. I closed my eyes as I pried the door

open. My eyes were still closed as I smelled a familiar smell, Grandma's cinnamon bread. This is her house. I was missing her so much and here she is! The reason Grandma returned all those years ago was because the door brought her back to me!

I opened my eyes to see her beaming. "Hi Grandma! How have things been since I've seen you?"

Grandma's reply was simple, "Unimaginable, dear!"

from Return to Kesan

STEPHEN PASCUCCI

Kay stood beside her horse on a stone bridge just outside the walls of her home city, Forsolelh. With her medium-length blond hair whipping in the troubled wind, she looked south across the orchards and fields—an expanse of orange and green covering the lazy hillsides. Beneath the bridge passed a wide silver ribbon, the river Briventa, its waters smoothly flowing, steadily making their way southeast to the sea. These colors—she feared for the safety of her land. How fragile it all was. Her chestnut steed, noble and well-dressed in the same royal greens and purples as her own outfit, issued a soft neigh. She regarded him with sad eyes and ran her hand along his soft neck.

Kay was returning from the south where she had delivered the bad news to a council of local rulers in the southern lands of Kesan. The king was making the call. The lords and ladies of the south were being asked to muster troops. They each had their quota to fulfill and it wasn't a small request. The nobles hadn't been happy, but to their credit, none had questioned the need to contribute to the whole. They were used to providing men and supplies to a unified Kesani army—though typically not to this extent. Two years ago, they had come together to aid the northern lands of Kesan during a time of famine. With what they were facing now, this was very possibly an order for the survival of the kingdom, though she didn't think they realized that quite yet. Men, from both the north and the south, would come from all walks of life to fill the ranks and defend their land from northern border aggression.

Kay's own project had come to an abrupt halt. Months before, she had secured royal funding for the construction of a stone bridge across one of the many tributaries to the Briventa. Kay was proud of her initiatives that served to improve the movement of people and goods between different parts of the kingdom as well as increase employment opportunities for local folk who still relied heavily on productive growing seasons and bartering to meet needs. That labor, as well as any funding, was now gone, transferred to a rapidly expanding military. Kay lamented the need for war. It should never come to this.

She turned her head. The city's horns were unexpectedly sounding out a single, long tone followed by a resonant chorus that carried across

the sun-drenched capital. Kay's heart sank. She had been hoping not to hear that sound for another couple of days. The king and her brothers were returning. From the rocky northlands they were coming with tidings of their final attempt at avoiding a war. That they were returning this early indicated failure to reach some kind of peace agreement.

Kay put her left foot in a stirrup and mounted her horse. Gently, she turned to face the looming granite walls of her home city and headed off at an easy gallop. She didn't bother to unfurl her royal banner to announce her arrival. Nevertheless, the guards easily recognized her and offered a respectful salute as she rode up to the eastern gatehouse and, slowing to a trot, continued on into the city.

Hooves clip-clopped on a cobbled street. Forsolelh was bustling with the normal midday activity. Carts dotted the shop-lined thoroughfares as Kesani merchants, sprinkled here and there with a few from beyond the kingdom borders, peddled wares to both locals and visitors in the crown city. Kay greatly enjoyed the days when she could make her way through the veins of the city, interacting with the people that were its heartbeat. She was genuinely interested in the individual stories and well-being of the folk that made up her community and, certainly, it was essential for her to keep in tune with events in the kingdom. On this day, she didn't need to ask what was sitting in the back of everyone's mind, haunting even the most cheerful mood. Lost in thought, she rode onward to Forsolelh Keep.

She found herself in the Black Room, a secluded, windowless, and insulated chamber nestled in the high tower to avoid the prying eyes and ears of castle inhabitants. It was here, five stories up, in the most secure room in the keep, that the serious matters of the kingdom were discussed—economic decisions could be negotiated, land deals could be planned, and military strategy could be laid out. At a large, round table meant to accommodate many more, Kay sat quietly with two whom she considered her brothers—Darius and Ellias. The soft crackle of torches ensconced on the wall pervaded the room and Kay could hear her own heartbeat pulsing rhythmically in her ears. Then, there were footfalls, soft at first, becoming sharp and louder as the individual creating them approached their sanctuary. The heavy door swung open and in walked King Darius. His tall, strong frame moved directly to the conference table and sat in one of the nicely padded, high-backed chairs that surrounded it.

King Darius, her adoptive father, commanded attention from any audience through his regal stature, piercing eyes, and—even when soft—booming voice. King of Kesan for the past thirty years, he had grown the kingdom through stability. Though a warrior at heart, he was a realist and not careless with his responsibility for the welfare of Kesan.

Of his three sons, the two that were present accounted for his capable bloodline and they sat quietly, humbled by a lack of success shared by the entire group. Darius of Forsolelh was the King's eldest son and heir to the royal house. Someday to be crowned King Darius II, the red-bearded Darius of Forsolelh was as tall and well-built as his father. Rough-edged and disciplined, he had a reputation for being outspoken, impetuous, and perhaps a bit more interested in military matters than issues of governance. The King's middle son, Ellias of Forsolelh, did his best to follow in his brother's footsteps, though with limited success. His instinct for military matters was not as sharp, his actions tending to be more rash. Despite this, he was charismatic and his men worked hard for him. He had enjoyed particular success fighting against the bandit tribes of the mountains to the north between Hedalis and Tanarac many years back. With their short red hair and distinct facial features, both were the image of their father, with the exception that the younger was clean-shaven.

Not present was the King's third son, Kary. Kary eschewed his siblings and basked in the excesses afforded by court life. Ellias's junior by six years, his resentment at growing up in the shadow of his older brothers still simmered. Turning down both a command post and an academy apprenticeship, he distanced himself from his family at every opportunity. His influence outside the keep was minimal, though he was still required to be present in serious matters of the kingdom. Where he was on this day was unknown, but Kay knew King Darius would not be pleased with his absence.

King Darius, his two elder sons, and Kay—the four of them had already been to Hedalis in the north, where they had met with an unforgiving King Falsoun. Unable to untwine Kesan from the outlaw Veln of the North, they had been forced to share responsibility for the alleged murder of one of King Falsoun's sons. Following that severe rebuke, Kay had traveled home and then to the village of Couzy in the southern region of Kesan to meet with the rulers of that land and convey the King's will. King Darius and his sons had traveled east along Kesan's northern border to Tanarac, a dangerous kingdom home to a

notoriously closed society and a mysterious leadership that had already signaled its intention to follow Hedalis onto the battlefield. That meeting, presumably, had not gone well. Other royal advisors had gone looking for allies in the neighboring kingdoms to the south and west, only to find that an air of neutrality had swept across the land and left Kesan standing alone to face the substantial threat.

“Kay, how are you?” King Darius greeted her as he pulled his chair up to the table. She nodded a response to indicate she was well, considering the circumstances. King Darius prompted seriously, “Tell me about the southern lands and the council at Couzy.”

Kay summarized. “They were all there. They accepted the news and all indicated that they would meet our request in the time given to them.”

King Darius appreciated the outcome of Kay’s mission and moved on to the next topic. “We’ve received messengers from our envoys to our neighbors. There will be no aid. Veln is our problem and we need to deal with him. Quite simply, no one else is in a position to get involved in this. The other kingdoms have their own security issues and have no interest in sending soldiers beyond their own borders with little to no gain for themselves.” He continued in a matter-of-fact manner, though Kay could see a layer of irritation underneath. “They’ll have a reason if Estelas Ersa falls. We just spent two days at Landen.” He was referring to the primary border checkpoint between Kesan and Tanarac. “We were coldly refused a parley. We know they have a military that in the past they have hired out as mercenaries, and even based on peacetime observations, it is a sizable one. Facing two comparable armies in a two-front conflict...we’ve got our work cut out for us. Not only that, but our northlands have become a free-for-all.” He looked to the others around the table. “Do any of you have anything to add to this? Thoughts? Ideas?”

King Darius’s gaze passed from son to son to adopted daughter, hoping to hear from each of them. His eldest spoke first. “Father, if I may speak plainly,” he ventured.

“Of course,” King Darius said.

“I think Kay should lead a party to the northlands,” the younger Darius stated boldly. Kay stiffened in her seat. She and Darius had often been at odds over the years when it came to royal policy, among other things. By the look on his face, this was going to be more of the same.

“To what end?” the King asked.

His son adopted a superior air. "She's the only one who knows where Veln is."

"I don't know where he is," Kay shot back with a remark that was technically true.

"You know where his hideout is," he returned. He then pointed a sharp finger at his adoptive sister and elaborated. "Way back when, you left him out there and now I think that makes you the perfect person to go get him."

Kay shook her head. "Even if I could find him, he'd never let me take him in." She needed to maintain her patience so that she didn't dismiss him completely. That would only make things worse.

"That's what the rest of the men you'll have with you will be for. All you have to do is get them to the hideout and they'll do the rest."

Kay couldn't tell if he was gloating because he thought he had the perfect plan or if he thought he had a chance to get her out of Forsolelh on a pointless mission into the northlands. "No, he'd never fall for that. He'd see right through that plan. Darius, he's been out there for two dozen years. He's a survivor."

The younger Darius kept volleying across the table. "You gained his confidence ten years ago. You can do it again. He'll trust you."

Kay looked to Ellias, who sat with his arms crossed wearing a stern look on his face, and then to the King with his contemplative look. He may actually be seriously considering this. "I'm not betraying..." she started, but Darius continued.

"You'll find him, capture him, and then gain an audience with Hedalis and turn him in." He finished with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Simple."

"You don't even know if he did..." Kay attempted to defend Veln, but again, Darius would have none of it, cutting in with an even sharper rebuke. "You'll do it because he's an outlaw that you should have turned in a long time ago, and this is your chance to clean up your own mess so that your kingdom, which has treated you so well, doesn't have to sacrifice its fathers, sons, land, and resources to clean it up for you."

Kay shot up from her seat and leaned over the table to speak emphatically. "It doesn't matter. I was twelve at the time and he didn't even deal with me. He patted me on the head. He dealt with the Friends, he dealt with Stephen." All of a sudden, a blanket of warmth passed over her and a rush of memories flashed by too quickly for her to see in her mind. She looked to the middle of the table to steady her head.

“And if you can’t find him,” Darius looked first to his father and then to his younger brother before settling once again on Kay, “I say you take another trip to Hedalis and figure out a way to convince King Falsoun that he doesn’t want to go to war with Kesan.”

“How would I do that?” she asked incredulously.

“Same way you did before,” Darius said unwaveringly and raised his hands out. “Find a way to get it done.”

“That, too, was Stephen. He made that speech we’ve lived off of for twelve years.” Images of Stephen talking in front of a large audience flew through her mind.

Darius sat sneering at her in contempt. “If he cares about Kesan so much, then where is he now? Where is he to account for his mistakes?”

Kay stood at the edge of the table in silence. She flashed a look to King Darius. They were the only two in this land who knew about the portal.

Nightfall

DANIEL ELLISON

Evening comes to the Armagosa, cicadas sing
A desert song of courting calls, distress and chorus
The wind carries their notes of vibrating tymbals and wing flicks
Past a jack rabbit, motionless in the sage, while the owl waits
Coyotes sing to one another
Rodents eat seeds and hunt insects
The coyotes fall silent as they hunt the rodents.
The jack rabbit moves and an owl swoops
In the darkness, the rattlesnake, with its tongue,
Follows the scent of a kangaroo rat and waits...
It strikes, paralyzing the rat and swallows it whole, good for another two
weeks
The chuckwalla feeds with its long sticky tongue, flicking and
Picking off insects one by one
The desert kit fox pounces on a stuffed chuckwalla while
Mexican brown bats and night hawks feast on nocturnal flying insects.
Dawn comes to the Armagosa, after a
Careful balancing of the scale that weighs life.

Kitchen Conversation

DANIEL ELLISON

The scene is set at the kitchen table, and you're invited to eavesdrop.

“I might as well tell you I’m planning another climb.”

“I thought...” she left the sentence unfinished, having guessed over two weeks before. All this talk—the I would, I should, I ought to—and then he’d proceed in the opposite direction.

“You thought what?”

“Nothing.”

The hostility glazed his eyes, a visible disapproval of her refusal to talk. “It’s settled then. You don’t mind?”

“Would it make any difference? You just want my approval. You’re going to do what you want regardless.”

She followed his shifting gaze and the absentminded rubbing of the back of his neck, his small, full lips pulling into a grimace. “Changing your mind?” she asked.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I was running over the possibilities for the umpteenth time. I think I’ll...”

She sat back waiting for the monologue. He would fill the spaces with noise and she would fill them with silence.

Welcome to the Meadows

DANIEL ELLISON

How did the dawn greet you?
Did you see the sun in the east as it burst forth
on the western range as it turned red and gold?

Did you see the wild mustang mares of old?
Running free and followed by the stallions and their foals?
Or did you take a trip down the strip of the town oblivious to the
seasons,
and never sleep whatever the reasons?

Okay! But what of the guy on this the marginal way
who gave purchase to his addictions?

How do you say as you ambulate; is it too late?
How do you say hey! Think twice you fool take a chance
on a better fate?

Or did you pass him by and say, to yourself, “But for the grace
of God there go I, in the blink of an eye, and a nod to God that you’re
not an addicted sod
aye more?”

Reflections

DANIEL ELLISON

Linda,

Your pictures are lovely; they lifted my spirits this morning when I brought my mom in for surgery. The poem is a reflection of how I felt as I looked at your art. Thanks.

At the pond I let my thoughts skitter across the surface of my awareness as the cold air drained from the surrounding hillsides, creating eddies of mist spinning clockwise and scudding across the water.

Mirror images of the sun, sky, rocks, trees, and clouds lay suspended beneath a translucent veil while reflections of my past called to me.

The wind rose and a beaver plowed through the stillness—heading home from a hard night’s work.

Above me my future caught in the jet stream and disguised as tiny ice crystals left me wondering what might be, but never is.

The sun, sky, rocks, trees, and clouds mixed in the ripples of activity, but then the wind died and the beaver’s wake dissipated on the shore and I waited in the abiding calm. The above things once again held in reflection.

I turned to my breath, its soft heaving a comfort. After a while the light faded, leaving only the pond.

The Gravedigger's Son

JOSH BRESSLIN

ZACHARY WINSTON
JUNE 3, 2000 – JULY 17, 2008
WE WILL SEE YOU AGAIN SOMEDAY

Thomas Kasterdian ran his hand across the lettering of the gravestone a second time. The smooth marble was slick with the fallen rains of the late hour, and on the second pass, he nicked his nail inside the heart-shaped knot of a twin pair of children's sneakers that were etched into the stone.

WE WILL SEE YOU AGAIN SOMEDAY.

Not likely. Tom chuckled as he stepped to the side of the pit, allowing the spotlight to cast the gravestone into full view. A single beacon amidst the dark rain.

Tom stabbed his spade into the dirt and hopped back into the hole. The fresh earth held the dampness of the previous days. The July storms had set in, and with the falling rain came the warn humidity, which even in the early morning hour had caused beads of sweat to bleed through Tom's Metallica t-shirt. The loose cloth hung low over the gravedigger's body, sagging from his shoulders to the seam of his pants, tiny streams of runoff dripping from the fabric. He gave another hard strike, burying the spade into the black dirt and littering the fresh green sod around the site as he tossed the earth onto the growing pile above him.

Tom paused, dropping his shovel at his side as he wiped the sweat from his forehead and left a smeared trail of mud across his greased hairline. A moment later, the heavy rains took the dirt, cascading brown water over his eyebrows and down his cheeks: clogged pores, a recipe for acne. Despite being in his early twenties, a far cry—at least in his mind—from the teenage years when he went through bottles of distilled alcohol and facial cleansers, he still got the occasional flare-up. Though if his only memory of this night's work were a few red bumps, he'd count himself lucky.

He took a gulp of water, downed the remainder inside the plastic bottle, and tossed it aside where it rattled off the cage of the tiny projector light.

Could they have picked a worse night for this? The rain hadn't made the shoveling any easier. Dig jobs were back-breaking work, but with the storms weighing down the soil and loosening the usual hard clumps of dirt, it was a minor miracle he'd gotten as much done as he had. On top of that, he wasn't even getting paid. Not that there was any money in this sort of work, but some of these caskets had stuff worth stealing. Tonight this grave wouldn't have any of that. You needed to dig up someone old to get the *good stuff*.

He'd seen the *good stuff* once. It was the first job he'd ever done with his father. He was nervous, nearly pissing himself as he braced for the sight of a corpse. It was an old lady. She had died months before the dig, something which had made for a light lift. The more brittle and decayed the body, the easier it was to move. But it wasn't her light weight that Tom remembered. It was the giant ring.

Buried with this old woman was the most enormous ruby ring Tom ever seen. The deep red color inside the stone seemed to glimmer underneath his flashlight. It had to be worth thousands, enough to cover the family grocery bills for at least half a year, or at least enough to fix up his dad's station wagon.

Of course, his father never took it. They were doing a service, not grave robbing. He reburied the ring along with her. "*He knows how important this is.*" He could hear his father's words: "*There are a great many evils in this world, son, and He guides those who stand at the forefront against them.*"

"Well I don't see you doing any of this," Tom muttered as he jumped back into the pit. The old man could've at least volunteered this year, if not to shovel, then to help haul the load back. After all, he was still young. Well, maybe "young" wasn't the right word. Dad was still "healthy." Late fifties or not, he could still swing a pickaxe. The least he could've done was come supervise—or even keep a lookout.

Or maybe lend your backhoe. Tom sunk his shovel back into the ground. His old man was always strict about that: no machinery allowed. Hell, even using a small spotlight was against the "rules." *The arcane prick.* Three hundred and sixty-four days out of the year practicality outweighed wonder. But one night a year, they had to do it the hard way. And this year, *they* meant *him*. Still, just because they were doing nineteenth-century work didn't mean they needed nineteenth-century

technology. If his father had it his way, he'd be out there swinging a shovel with just a dim kerosene lamp wedged in the corner of the grave.

Well, fuck'em. His father wasn't out here, he was. The son of the town gravedigger or not, this was his trade now, and he had a say in how things were done. If he could be trusted enough to put grave liners into the ground by himself, he could be trusted to get the job done on his own terms; his father would just have to accept that that's the way things were going to be. Besides, no cars ever came up around these parts.

Tom stuck his head out of the hole. The trees along the roadside whipped back and forth amidst the tempest, their dark silhouettes outlined by only the dark blue of the night sky above. No yellow lights in the distance and no shadows of twisted branches growing along the graveyard: not a single car was coming.

See.

It took another hour for his spade to hit something hard. He'd almost dropped his shovel as a vibration shot from the metal edge to his forearms.

The liner. He was close.

He slid the tips of digits into the gap between the top of the liner and the base. The space was tight, and the edge of his nails scraped along the lid as he pushed his hand further in and lifted.

For a moment, the cover was off, suspended only a few inches from the base, and it came back down just as fast, almost crushing his fingers. A few more tries and he was able to finally get the lid halfway up before his grip slipped from the concrete slab, loosened by the falling rain and dripping mud, and the lid leaned back on him. *It was collapsing!* He pushed forward and shoved his shoulder into the side of the slab, giving a hit akin to a nose tackle trying to break through an offensive line and the lid toppled over, coming to rest at an angle against the side of the hole.

Tom collapsed against the dirt wall behind him, clutching his shoulder. The pain wasn't severe. His shoulder only nagged a bit—just a few scrapes, but the thought of what lay ahead seemed to amplify the pain.

He glanced down into the open vault. A tiny black coffin was in the center of the concrete. For all the convenience of this dig, nothing was relaxing about this one. The boy would be the youngest in many decades to be chosen. Not since the early years, before his father was even born, before The Rite was understood. They were always older than this. A

few young ones his age occasionally drew a bad hand, but at least they were adults. This was a child, an unlucky victim chosen because he was fresh. Because turning up unsettled ground and reburying it wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

He leaned down over the coffin. *There really was someone in there*, he thought as he brushed a splat of mud off the top of the dark walnut wood. A human being. It wasn't as if he didn't know that before, but now it was real. It felt different. *Didn't any of them know what they were doing?* Of course they did. They all knew and didn't care. And what did that make him? Someone just following orders? There was a rabbit hole of rationalization he didn't want to go down. It was sickening. Necessity or not, why did it have to be this young boy? To condemn a child to...

Tom shook his head. Some things had to be done.

He grabbed the coffin lid and snapped it open. A wall of warm odor struck him like a plume of invisible smoke. It was overpowering, but more so, it seemed to attach itself to him. He turned from the casket, fighting a fit of coughs as he lifted his head out of the plot and inhaled a lungful of wet evening air.

That part never got easier.

The misting rains continued to fall, clearing the dirt off the polished casket and spotting the inside. Within moments the interior was ruined, with water and mud splattered across the white satin lining and that tiny tuxedo...

Thomas turned away from the casket. The glare from the spotlight overhead cast the body into view. Being down several feet, it was only a faint light that showed the outline of the body but left most of the boy's features obstructed by the long shadow that hung over the coffin. It was one of the few breaks the young gravedigger would get that evening. But even with an obstructed view, it was difficult to look.

The roses draped across the boy were already wilted. The petals were a dying red and wrinkled into the texture of old parchment. Toys and trinkets the child would never play with lay scattered around the coffin; coloring books and crayons rested at his feet, and at his side was a tiny John Deere tractor and few Hot Wheels cars.

And there, clenched in his tiny hands, was a teddy bear.

Tom choked at the sight of the boy and his little bear. The child clung to the stuffed animal, its stained yellow fur clenched against the boy's chest. *This was real*. Thomas tried to dismiss the image, tried to block it out, but the more he tried to bury it under thoughts of old

girlfriends and the vacation he'd taken the week before, the quicker the idea rose to the forefront of his mind. *This was a kid.*

A hard lump formed in his throat as he stepped into the casket. The boy was underneath him now. Thomas's soiled boots left muddied prints on either side of the boy, and his hands shook as he crouched over the body. *Just do it*, he chastised. *You're going to have to at some point.* He bit his lip and reached down for the bear, grasping its stubby little arm, and pulled.

It didn't budge at the first tug. The boy held onto the stuffed animal, clutching it back to its chest as Thomas tried to wiggle the bear free.

He's still in there! Thomas jumped back. The boy was alive. A part of him was hanging on, grasping onto the remnants of his old life. It was impossible. Tom couldn't begin to explain it, but it was true. No deceased had that sort of grip.

"Get ahold of yourself, he's dead," Tom muttered. "Just reach in and grab it."

He lifted his gaze, glancing up at the starless sky as he reached back into the coffin, padding his fingertips over the soft velvet of the boy's tuxedo arms. *Further...* He tapped on the boy's arm. *The bear's there somewhere...*

There was the sensation of soft leather.

His hand! Tom pulled his arm back, shaking it out as if he was trying to dry it off. "Relax, relax, relax..." He shouted. "The bear's right there. Just reach in and grab it."

For a moment he just stood on the edge of the liner. *I shouldn't even be here tonight.*

"Well you are." His internal voice slipped into the words. "Now do your job."

He reached back into the coffin, tapping at the boy's exposed hand. "Just relax and grab it." He kept his eyes to the sky. The boy's bony hands gave way to the light touch of the stuffed animal's fur. He felt the soft nib and grasped the bear's ear between his thumb and forefinger. "One...two..."

Tom yanked the bear free. The boy's hands flew up, as if he was trying to hug him. Tom slipped on the edge of the liner, collapsing back against the grave wall and knocking loose a small pile of dirt down the back of his shirt.

Good job.

Tom held the stuffed animal up to the light overhead. The bear was more ragged than he'd thought, worn out with the passing of time. One of its button-sewn eyes was out of place and hung against his cheeks by a few remaining stitches. *God, the kid must have loved that thing*, Thomas thought as he gently placed the bear on top of the coloring books at the end of the box. *Maybe I'll bury it with him*. Why not? It wasn't against the rules. People were buried in clothing, and it was never a problem. And who knew how many people were buried up in that plot with fake limbs, teeth, or other man-made organs. Hell, these bodies were pumped full of formaldehyde. There was nothing natural about burials these days, so why would a stuffed animal be any different?

He didn't take it.

It wasn't the process or the formality involved, but the suspicion it would draw. *They* would know, somehow. Each and every one of them would hear about how he buried a boy with his stuffed animal, and they would wonder. The others would hear about it, and then rumors would spread. *Does he have the stomach for it? Can he be trusted?* And once someone fell from the group's grace, it was only a matter of time before they were put in that cemetery too. Whether he was the future of this little clique or not, the number one rule was keeping The Rite a secret. And to do that, anything was permitted.

2

Daybreak was almost an hour away by the time the station wagon pulled out of the town cemetery. Tom could just make out the pointed silhouettes of the surrounding pines against the sky as he wound through the countryside. The folded tarp shifted in the backseat trunk, wedged between the spade and the projector light. With each turn the tarp slipped, sliding from one end of the vehicle to the other with a low rumble as if he were hauling a load of bowling balls instead of a body.

The young gravedigger glanced into the rearview, scanning for any sign of headlights before looking back at the speedometer; a perfect fifty miles an hour. He tapped at the breaks anyway, slowing his speed down to forty-five—five miles under the speed limit—just like he sometimes did when he drove home from Neal's after he'd had a few too many. It was obvious, and any cop on the road would find it suspicious, but they wouldn't be able to pull him over for speeding.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter and steadied the car as he banked another turn. The body rolled to the opposite side. *Yellow line*,

white line, keep those tires in between, he told himself; a fear that never set in when he was sober, but tonight he couldn't risk giving Johnny Law a reason to pull him over.

"Keep it down back there," he yelled as he banked another turn, and heard the body slam against the side of the car, followed by what sounded like sand being funneled out of a leaking bag. "Don't make me pull this car over." Tom laughed. A series of coughs followed as he smacked his fist against the wheel, only pausing as the funneling sound grew louder, and the realization of what the sound was came to him; the tarp was leaking.

"I better not see a single speck of dirt on those seats," Thomas yelled back. Of course it was pointless. He would need to clean the car out on his way home. Every trace of dirt had to be vacuumed out. It had nothing to do with The Rite. Nothing to do with the mystic mumbo-jumbo, or to hide his tracks from some forensic examiner. As far as he knew, dirt was dirt, and even if there were a way to link the soil back to the cemetery, it wouldn't matter. He was a gravedigger, he had an excuse for having mud in his backseat.

The dirt—much like the tarp that he'd bury with the body, and the shovel he'd dump in the lake—needed to go because he didn't want to remember. Bad things done for the right reasons were still wrong. The Rite had to be done. And when it came down to it, maybe it was better that it was the boy than someone else.

Someone still living.

Tom twisted his fingers around the steering wheel until he could feel the vinyl padding heat up against his hands. *Someone living*. Was that really the alternative? They'd never done it before. As long as his father had been alive, they had never taken a living person. And even if his father was ordered to take someone living, Tom was sure he wouldn't do it. His old man wasn't like that. He wasn't a killer. A grave robber? Yes. But a murderer? No.

But would any of the others do it? The thought came to him and was outright dismissed. Of course they would. At least *most* of them would—hell, wasn't that why he had given up a Saturday night of drinking to go play in the graveyard? One way or another, they would make sure that a body was in the ground.

It was disgusting. As far as The Rite went, he was able to stay calm because deep down he knew that all he was doing was moving a soulless corpse from one hole in the ground to another. If The Rite were real—if

he actually believed in what the others said—he'd never take up the shovel. The way they spoke of the corpses was terrifying. The old stories about how some members had dug up the bodies they buried and found disfigured heads staring back at them, the way they spoke of twisted faces, with the corpses' last bits of brown flesh curled as if in pain. The way they talked about bodies with mouths open in screams of terror. If he believed in any of that...

But *they* did, and *they'd* kill to keep The Rite alive. He could never know why his father dug up the bodies, but he knew why he did. Not because he truly believed, but because the consequences of not pretending to believe were worse.

3

The boat drifted at the entrance of the island's basin. The tiny vessel barely passed for a fishing boat with two wooden bars for seats that the boy rested on, and a single engine that Thomas had neglected to use, instead opting to row across the lake. Stealth was his ally.

Sediment swirled around Thomas's rubber boots as he jumped into the shallow water and pulled the boat to shore where roots of exposed trees hung from the sloping banks, forming shallow caves that dipped into the island.

The first light of dawn had already broken over the mountains; he was running behind. There was no particular time of day or other rules about when the body needed to be buried, though all the same he wanted the thing over with before the sun came up. Night was its own cover. With no engine running and near darkness around him, he was as safe as he could be. But with the early hour, there was a chance he'd be spotted. There were always a few fishermen out catching some early biters, or some college intern at the State Marine Patrol taking a swing around the island at that hour.

Boats were still docked at the marinas to the south. Tom cupped his eyes and tried to catch a peek at the beach side of the island to the east, but the dawn light prevented him from getting a clear view. All the same, he hadn't heard any outboard engines in the distance. In fact, all he could hear was the sound of his boat being struck by the choppy shore waves and a few gulls chirping in the distance.

Now was his chance.

He scooped up the tarp out of the boat. The boy was small enough that he could hold his folded body outstretched in front of him.

Thomas's arms still ached, the island was at least half a mile from the marina, and the pain only worsened as he carried the boy to shore. His elbows took the bulk of the weight, and after just a few feet they began to buckle, sending the edge of the tarp dipping into the shallow water. The boy wasn't heavy, and if he held the body closer to his chest and bent his arms, there'd be no pain at all. But he dared not do it. He wanted that thing as far away from him as possible. His imagination ran wild with thoughts of cradling the body close to him, only to have the child poke his head out from the tarp and sink his teeth into his neck. That was how it was done in those horror films. And in the back of his mind, the fear prevailed, with images of the boy's teeth clamping down into his skin while his smoky marble eyes stared back at him.

He dropped the body on the top of the bank and shook out his aching arms. He wouldn't be able to carry the boy like that; he'd have to drag the body the rest of the way.

The unmarked path was overrun with foliage. The scent of damp moss from the rains the night before filled the air around Thomas as he lugged the tarp behind him, smothering the fallen maple leaves from the previous season's bloom as he passed. The tarp almost seemed to glide over the fallen leaves as he dragged the body through the dense wood. *Maybe this will be easy*, Thomas thought. Perhaps his luck had finally changed. The skies were already clearing up, with only a few overcast clouds still lingering overhead. The low branches were a bitch though, and more than once a switch broke early as he pushed the branches aside only to have them crack against him. An annoyance, but the worst sticks were the low ones, the jagged ones broken right at the base of the trees. They snagged the tarp as he trudged past, and one branch managed to tear a hole right through the plastic.

His luck wasn't changing after all.

He snagged more of those low branches, tearing at the tarp, searing open holes to expose the black felt of the boy's tux. *It was going to break*. The tarp strained against the boy's weight. The blue plastic fibers were snapped as the tears widened, leaving trails of dirt behind the tarp. He had maybe a few minutes before the pressure became too much and the tarp split in half.

He sprinted down the path, dismissing the low branches as they continued to cut through the plastic sheet and ignoring the minor cuts as more branches snapped against his arms. The tarp smacked and thudded

off of each patch of rock in the middle of the path. *Could dead bodies bruise?* Thomas wondered.

The tarp held until the wooded path gave way to an open field; he was almost there. A sloping valley stood before him. The rear of the island rested at his feet. An untamed valley of wildflowers in mid-bloom and patches of overgrown grass cast into view through the slit beams of dawn light between the trees that bordered the field to the right. To the left of the pasture, between the valley and the lake, was the narrow river. It was still too shallow to use, and even at that time of year fishermen would get their boats caught in the shallow pools that dried up in the mid-summer months. For years he'd argued with his old man that they should move the bodies in the spring, during the thaw when the river was higher, so they could just take his father's boat upstream instead of hauling the bodies. But apparently digging up bodies when there was still slush on the ground was just asking for trouble.

Tom hunched over at the edge of the hill, still huffing from the sprint. *The plot was down there.* The faint white church stood beneath him. The dawn light had just reached the stained glass window beside the door, the one with the picture of the beast of Revelation on it. The older townies had put work into that mural, though it never looked quite right. While he always imagined a demon or a dragon for the beast, this depiction was different: a grand furry animal, like a bear or a werewolf, with a large torso that walked upright on hooves. And from its trunk sprung six heads with antlers that looked like batwings, and sunken eyes and narrow faces like the bones of dried-out bison skulls left in the desert to be picked clean by buzzards. And beside the monster's exposed ribs were three arms on each side with talon-like claws, and six furry tails swept around its body like a cat o' nine tails whip. The six faces were shrieking, with smoke fuming from the hollow nostrils of the corner heads while the center two bared their jaws and a vanquishing arch-angel—with albino white skin and curly golden locks—drove a sword through both of them.

Thomas shook his head. After all the times he'd seen the old church, it still looked...*unnatural*. Tom had come to use that term because the word *creepy* sounded too superstitious. It wasn't as if it was any different than any other old church he'd seen. It had the New England style with the steeple top roof and a bell he was sure hadn't been rung in a half-century. The white paint was peeling, but that wasn't too surprising. No, it wasn't the design that scared him, but that the

church appeared to have been built on the island at random. It didn't belong there. There were no roads—not even dirt ones—that led to it. It wasn't designed for regular commuters. It wasn't intended for anyone. And worst of all was the open cemetery in front of it.

It's almost over.

He picked up the tarp and headed down the hill. The earth was soggy that morning. With each step Thomas left a sunken track imprinted in the ground. *March weather*, his father would call it. It was as if the island *was* in the middle of the spring thaw after all.

The tarp glided effortlessly over the valley, skimming across the ground and splashing water up onto the back of Tom's legs as he sprinted towards the church like a child pulling a sled down a snow-covered hill. Faster and faster the tarp went until it slipped ahead, outpacing Thomas as he reached the bottom. His hands fell from the edges of the tarp, and he collapsed onto his side as it raced by him, careening towards the overgrown field where stalks of waist-high ragweed and switchgrass lay.

Thomas got to his feet. *It's almost over*, he promised himself again as he wiped mud from his cheeks and spit out a dirt riddled clump of saliva. He didn't bother with his jeans or his shirt; the wet grass had already soaked through. *Just a few more minutes.*

He followed the tarp's tracks to the middle of the field. With each step he felt the soft squish of wet socks squeezing water between his toes. The pathway was marked for him, made by the tarp as it shot across the field and flattened the grass beneath it, leaving a trail to the head of the pathway where the body came to rest.

No.

The tarp was undone. Its top corners sprawled out over the grass like an unfolded burrito, and with the body laid out beneath it. The boy was right there. Thomas's legs wobbled as he tried to keep his balance. The top of his tiny bald head poked out from beneath the tarp, though the plastic still covered his upturned face.

Tom shifted his gaze up towards the horizon, keeping the semblance of the body in his peripheral view as he inched closer to it. *God, it was right there, wasn't it?* he thought. It was hard enough picking the boy up out of his coffin, but even then he had the cover of night to block most of it out. The daylight was now over the field, and he could see the blotch of opaque skin just over the bottom of his eyelids.

He eased his view, slowly working the body into his line of sight as he knelt down and grasped at the bottom edges of the tarp. The wet cloth of the boy's muddied tuxedo dampened his hands as he slipped his fingers under the body and grabbed the trapped corners of the tarp. The little bald head was right in front of him, resting at eye level. Before he could look away he caught a few glances of the boy's tiny strands of dead hair.

Tom's stomach bubbled, and at that moment the air filled with his soiled stench. *Pull yourself together*, he berated himself. *One...two...three...pull!* He lifted the boy, tipping the body into the open pocket as the bottom of the tarp came up to form a lopsided taco shape with the body in the center. Once the boy was secure, he grabbed all four corners of the tarp and dragged the body in short bursts across the tall grass, cursing every bit of the way.

4

The cemetery grass was shorter than the rest of the field, though the uneven lengths made him doubt anyone had recently gone to the effort of cutting it. The healthy blades that must have once suffocated the rest of the field were now thin patches of grass interspersed with mounds of crab weed and dirt that stretched from the paint-peeled church to the edge of the cemetery where the grass thickened once again. There was no gate or fence to block off the grounds; its boundaries seemed defined by that poor soil.

There's death in this place. The thought flashed across his mind and was outright dismissed. Of course there was death; it was a graveyard.

But that's not what he meant, and he knew it.

The graveyard had no headstones or plaques. The only markers were twin sets of sticks that from a distance looked like crosses. But up close, one could see that two additional sticks were tied to the base of each cross like a pair of legs that sank into the earth. That was it. No names, dates of birth, or dates of death. Nothing that could ever delineate one plot from the other.

The image gave him a shudder. Deep down, his atheist logic shouted at him to move along. *There's nothing different about this place than any other. It's just dirt with a few sticks littered around it. That's it.*

But his hands shook.

He made his way through the yard, weaving between the slanted rows of markers, the graves of people who were once known, and now forgotten to history.

5

To Thomas's surprise, the boy's grave was already dug. At the far right corner of the cemetery, right where the hill began to slope down towards the bog, sat an open plot with a dirt pile beside it and a stick figure cross at the head.

He dropped the tarp beside the grave and gave a single kick. The boy rolled right in, though the tarp came loose as he fell, catching a protruding root at the edge of the pit and unraveling with a searing tear that split it to the center. The boy slipped through the tear, feet first like a child emerging through the chute of a playground slide, and fell onto the muddied earth.

The mud splashed up onto Tom, splattering across his face as he spun, wiping at the mud with the back of his hand. *The dead water is on me.* He tried to clean the tainted soil off his hands, brushing them on his pant legs until his hands chaffed. The tarp snapped behind him, slipping off the root and coming to rest on top of the boy with just the fragments of his dirty tuxedo peeking through its rip, the face of the pale boy forever lost to the world.

Tom pulled the shovel out of the dirt pile. "You couldn't have made it easy for me, could you?" he said as he inspected the hole. The grave was big enough for a full-sized person, a lot of wasted time on the digger's part, and more wasted time on his. *The stupid twit.* Filling holes was a lot easier than digging them out, but he didn't want to stay on that island a minute longer than he had to. Still, the idea of one of those creepy fucks spending a whole afternoon digging out a grave for a full-sized body, wasting time and back pain for no reason made him chuckle. Dark *schadenfreude* humor that always seemed to make menial tasks pass by faster.

A few hours later and the hole was filled. A few extra shovels of dirt and a good packing, and it was over. A new body added to the pile, and that year's work was over. The town of Akerman's Hollow could rest in blissful ignorance once more.

The trailer was still dark when he returned home that morning. The shades were still drawn over the windows, and the only light inside was the glow of the digital clock on the microwave screen.

Thomas quietly slipped through the trailer door and inched it slowly back in place like a teenager sneaking back into the house after a party. A single ray of morning light trailed across the yellow carpet as he shut the door, casting the wooden console television into view.

“How’d it go?” came a croak from the corner of the room, followed by a fit of coughs.

Thomas stood frozen on the mud mat. “Good, Dad,” he said into the darkness where a single red ember pointed back at him. For a moment that dim fire stood in place before levitating up to his chest where it glowed a bright orange and died down. A whiff of blue smoke trailed out afterward.

“Anyone see you?”

“No.”

The red ember grew bright again and died. “You sure?” His father barely got the words out before a fit of coughs overtook him.

“Yeah I’m sure.”

“And the gravesite?”

“The kid’s plot looked just like it did when we put him in a few days ago. All the roses at the headstone were put back right where they were. I vacuumed out the back of the wagon too.” Thomas paused and kicked his boots off. “You left two beer bottles wedged underneath your seat.”

“Good boy.”

Thomas started towards the living room.

“Don’t walk across this with your socks on,” his father croaked. “I can hear ‘em squish. Take ‘em off before you muddy my carpet.”

Thomas rolled off his socks and stormed towards the laundry room at the back of the trailer; a makeshift corner room where there was just enough space for a washer and dryer to fit.

That ungrateful piece of shit, he thought as he rolled down his pants and slipped off his boxers. *All night I’m out there, and he wants to sit in his recliner and whine?*

He dumped his soiled clothes into the washer and poured an extra amount of detergent in with it, just to piss off his old man. He was a frugal son of a bitch who didn’t seem to realize the cost of smokes and booze took more from his wallet than the pennies he saved from portioning out liquid soap and unplugging the television when it wasn’t

in use. He reached into the hamper and slipped on a pair of shorts and a white t-shirt that was still dirty but didn't reek.

"Hey, get me another one," his father called out as Thomas passed back through the kitchen. The statement was followed by the crunch of an aluminum can being squeezed, just in case there was any confusion.

Tom pulled a fresh can from the refrigerator, leaving one can on the plastic ring. A rarity on his father's off days: only buying a six-pack, not the drinking. A six-pack was more of a weeknight thing. His father couldn't afford a hangover on a workday.

"Thank you," his father said as Thomas replaced the cans, the scent of cigarette smoke and stale beer shooting up into his nostrils while his father leaned over his recliner. God, he hated that scent. "Can you take these too?" His old man rolled his hand over the beer-stained armrest and pointed underneath the table beside him where the other three crushed cans sat. "Make sure you put it in 'cycling bin. Daryl'll be by at some point this week for 'em."

"Okay," Thomas said, not bothering to hold back the spite in his voice.

"Runs next month. Five cents for one of 'em babies over the border up 'er. Daryl's renting out a flatbed for it. Big load this 'ear. Might even need our wagon too." His father fell into another fit of coughs. He leaned over the edge of the recliner, grasping his gut as the coughing spell faded.

Once the cans were put out, Thomas was back in his room. At the back window, the branches of the pine trees were pressed up against it, filtering the light into jagged shadows that danced off his *Misfits* and *Dead Kennedys* posters on his closet door. The odor of his bong was more noticeable this morning, and lay over the room like the fog that hung in the cemetery the night before.

He crashed on his double bed and stared up at the cobwebs in the corner of the dingy white ceiling. *What would they have done if I didn't put a body in that grave?* He thought as his eyes grew heavy. *Would they have known?* He didn't see how. What was the point in having him bury the body if they were going to dig it back up for inspection? He could've filled the hole and left, and no one would have known. A thought that made the guilt of his deeds that much heavier. *It was all bullshit of course.* Thomas thought as he closed his eyes. *Local superstition...*

Bang!

Tom sprang up from the pillow, rolling off of the double bed as he tried to find his foot.

Bang!

His sock drawer cabinet shook, nearly shooting out from his bureau as it rattled inside the chest.

Bang!

The noise came again, as if someone was knocking on his dresser from the inside. As if it was begging to be...opened?

Tom crept across the floor, one hand outstretched in front of him as he stood over his dresser. It rattled again, the drawer shaking as if in the fit of a seizure, the very edge of it shooting back and forth, giving a slight peek inside of the dark cabinet.

Tom glanced over the dresser. The drawer was shooting out, further and further, sliding from the chest and then shutting. Half an inch, an inch, two inches. He leaned closer, trying to glimpse inside. *What was in there?*

Tom shot back, pressing his hand against his bed for balance as the flash of daylight struck the object inside and the drawer shut once again. *It couldn't be.*

The drawer stopped, sealing shut inside the bureau as if it had never moved in the first place, bathing the room in silence once again.

There's no way. He ran to the dresser, nearly ripping it from the chest as he slid it out.

It was there. Inside the chest, resting in the middle of the drawer between his bunched-up socks in the back and a baggie filled with mostly stems, was a ruby ring.

The red gem seemed to swallow the golden ring. Wet soil stained the drawer and was smudged around it, as if it had just been dug straight out of the earth...

Tom scooped up the ring, holding it in front of him as he inspected it, twisting the face around in the pool of sunlight that shot over his closet door. *The old woman's ring.* It was right there. Right in his hands.

"Dad?"

from In The Cards

ANGELA D'ONOFRIO

In the three weeks since her arrival in town, Beatrice Ledrey had spent almost every lunch break walking up and down Bryer Street, eating one of the protein bars she'd bought in bulk, and familiarizing herself with her new neighborhood. That afternoon's choice still tasted mostly like lemon and granola, and not quite like sawdust. It was worth it to get a glimpse of the thing she was sure she'd never tire of, the reason she'd moved down to Aviaro in the first place: the open, honest presence of magic.

The storefront of The Balefires was two blocks away from the florist's shop she'd managed to find a job at. Its large, plate glass window was painted with a swirl of autumn leaves interspersed with green and purple stars. Cornstalks were bunched on either side of the door, propped up by painted, grinning pumpkins with mops of chrysanthemums for hair. The merchandise display was a gentle chaos of items: stained glass ornaments, wind chimes and dream catchers hanging from carefully looped strands of tiny white lights, bright tumbled stones and crystals nestled among gathered piles of dried leaf herbs, an assortment of incense spilling from a cornucopia basket, and small fountains served as resting spots for resin statues of deities and dragons. But the most stunning object was the three-foot statue of a woman in a robe and hooded cloak, sitting on a crescent moon upturned like a park bench. Her hands were cupped like statues Beatrice had seen designed to be used as bird baths or feeders, but in place of those, a warm green light glowed.

For the last three days, Beatrice had walked up to the store and stared in wonder at the welcoming beacon and the serene stone smile in the window. She had stood on her toes, stretching as tall and as long as she could, and had seen no bulbs, no wires, glow sticks, or other gimmicks to explain the beautiful phenomenon. In a town where she hadn't managed to find the time to meet anyone yet beyond the three people she worked with, she walked up to that window and was at ease within an instant. Yet somehow, she still hadn't quite worked up the courage to go inside. On a whim, she stretched out a hand and reached up toward the glass, as if she might be able to feel the warmth of the flame.

To her right, the door swung open with the soft lilt of wind chimes, and a young woman stepped out. Beatrice drew her hand back as if she'd been burned in earnest, and tucked it back into the pocket of her cardigan, trying to look like a normal person who hadn't been trying to touch a storefront window out of complete and utter loneliness.

"Hey," the other woman said with a smile. She didn't look like the kind of person Beatrice would expect to be coming out of a pagan store: her wavy, shoulder-length black hair was streaked on either side of her face with swaths of stark white, and both her ears were lined with cuffs and studs. Her clothing implied that a music video from the 1980s had collided with a Gothic boutique: rainbow-striped knee-high socks under a black, lace-edged skirt, fishnet arm warmers, a purple vest laced like a corset, and a bright blue top with sleeves that slouched down off her shoulders. A paper bag in one of her hands rustled along with several bracelets as she swung it back and forth.

"Uh, hi." Beatrice raised her eyes and smiled back, unsure what else to say.

"You know, you can go inside. They don't actually bite or drink blood or anything in there. Unless you want them to, and then it's really kind of under extreme protest."

Beatrice's eyes widened.

"I said they *don't*. Wow. Hey, it's okay. Are you new around here?"

It was a question she was getting tired of answering every time she went to a new store for something she'd forgotten to stock the apartment with, but at the very least, it was one she could handle more than blood consumption, voluntary or otherwise. "Yeah. I just moved in a couple of weeks ago, so I'm still unpacking things and...well, everything else."

"Cool. Welcome to Aviaro! I'm June, June Slovich." The smile broadened as she held out a hand, not bothering to step out of the doorway.

"Beatrice Ledrey." She stepped closer and glanced down to shake June's hand. Her fingernails were painted in a neon green and pink French manicure, with tiny black dots. "Oh my gosh. Are your nails watermelons? That is *so cute*."

"Thanks! My best friend, April, did them. She does the coolest things like that. I keep telling her she should hire herself out to Lunatic Fringe down the street and do it for other people, but she's happy working in her mad science lab, so I don't bug her too much."

“What’s Lunatic Fringe?”

“Hair salon! You need your hair done, you should absolutely go there—Eileen and I went to school together. She and her girlfriend run it, they are *so* adorable. You can tell ‘em April and I sent you.”

“April and June?” Beatrice giggled. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you get that a lot...”

“More than you think.” June winked. “Her last name’s Maine.”

“So that makes you...”

“April Maine and June. Uhhhh *huh*. But what’re you gonna do. Oh! I know what you’re gonna do. You’re gonna go *in there...*” She pointed through the open door beside her, “... and you’re gonna look around, because seriously, it’s super cool in there. And you’re gonna feel better, and your whole day’s gonna turn right around.”

“What?”

“And then you’re gonna give me your phone number so I can call you later and make sure you don’t die of boredom, and show you all the good spots in town: like the bowling alley, and the really good coffee shop, and stuff and junk.”

Beatrice was pretty certain this was the first time she’d been befriended by force. Something about the sheer amount of energy June held was encouraging, rather than overwhelming. “Actually, that sounds like a lot of fun. Sure. I’ve got about fifteen minutes before I have to go back to work.”

“Perfect. Come on in.” She stepped out of the way, still holding the door open, and lolled against the wrought iron security door propped open against the outside wall. It was the first time Beatrice had noticed it—simple vertical bars like an old-fashioned iron gate, with intricate vines covered in ivy leaves curling around them, each vine and leaf also fashioned of iron, but still remarkably delicate-looking.

“That’s beautiful.”

“One of the original shopkeepers made it, when I was just a kid. It’s enchanted: no one’s robbed the place or even tried since he put it up. There isn’t even a security system. They don’t need one.” June reached up and touched one of the iron leaves. “I miss him, sometimes.”

“Did he die? I’m sorry...”

“Oh, a long time ago. But thank you. It was hard on a lot of people he knew...But I’m making it sad. You don’t need more sad. Go on, go soak up the happy witchy vibes. Shoo, shoo!”

Even more than the sensation that the flame in the window had kindled, stepping into the Balefires seemed like coming home. A potpourri of smells hung in the air, which was warm enough to take off the chill without being stifling. Most of the store's light came from hanging paper lanterns of all shapes and colors, the only bright, focused fluorescent lighting mounted in cases at the center of the floor. The immediate effect was so strong that Beatrice couldn't help but hover inside the doorway on the rug, letting the atmosphere soak into her skin like hot bathwater. After a few slow, rejuvenating breaths, she wiped her worn-out Sketchers on the mat and stepped inside to look around.

At first glance, there was no reason or rhyme to the way the store was laid out—displays of Hindu figurines cavorted beneath intricate prints of trolls and fairies, prayer flags fluttered beside a rack hung with pewter saints' medals and a selection of mezuzahs. Various types of candles, stones, and incenses were stocked in nooks and crannies everywhere, with small baskets or boxes holding slips of paper. Curious, Beatrice moved to the closest basket and picked up a slip next to a dish full of tumbled amethyst crystals. Printed in a clear, no-nonsense font were a set of brief facts and instructions. *Amethyst: Part of the quartz family. Good for the crown chakra and boosting connections to the divine. Traditionally a stone of inspiration and creativity.* The dish was surrounded by totems of owls and spiders, a large mason jar full of quill pens cut from real feathers nearly the size of Beatrice's forearm, sheaves of homemade paper, blank journals, seals, wax sticks, bottles of ink, and even plain boxes of pens and pencils.

"It's all by purpose," Beatrice realized, glancing over to see June standing a comfortable distance away, still smiling. "Whoever runs this place must have put a lot of thought into how they set it up."

"Not as much as you'd think." June fished a box out of the bag in her hands as she moved into the bank of counters at the center of the store: four weathered wood and glass cases arranged in a square.

Beatrice tried her best not to gape. "Wait, you work here?"

"Even better: I own the place. So, uh...hey, thanks for the compliment."

"You...wait, really?"

"I *told* you we don't bite here," she laughed, the sound blending with the upbeat new wave music drifting through the aisles.

"But...you don't look like a witch," Beatrice blurted.

“I don’t?” June began to pull the other items out of the bag she’d been holding, laying them out on the counter. “Okay. What do you think a witch looks like?”

Heat rose in Beatrice’s cheeks, and she bit her lip, fidgeting with the hem of her cardigan. She was about to stammer an apology when another woman came up to the counter from behind a tall bookcase, clutching a thick book to her chest. Her greying blonde curls were corralled by a fabric headband, and she wore a calf-length, black hooded wool coat with a hand-knit scarf looped around her neck. Her long blue skirt lapped at the tops of black ankle boots as she picked her way across the age-warped hardwood floor. There were lines at her eyes and mouth that turned her skin to crepe, but they spoke more of mirth than age. Beatrice couldn’t take her eyes off her.

“Like that, I guess,” June chuckled. “Looks like you found one back there, yeah?”

“I don’t know how you ever expected me to choose,” the other woman breathed, sliding the book onto the counter with care. “They’re all so beautiful. And your aunt really didn’t want them anymore?”

“Nope. She has notes, and I had April run them through the scanner where she works, so I have nice high-quality PDFs now. Not the same by a mile, but I don’t have room for them, and I want them to be used and loved, not packed up in storage...Louise, this is Beatrice.” June turned and smiled without missing a beat. “She just moved here.”

“Uh, hi.” Beatrice held out her hand, still pink-cheeked from her faux pas.

“I’m so pleased to meet you.” Louise’s hand was cool as she took Beatrice’s, but her smile was warm enough to compensate. Her grip was light, her fingers thin and bony, as though they were older than the rest of her. “Welcome to Aviario...But you’re so nervous. Is something wrong?”

Beatrice winced. “I said something without thinking about it, and...June, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you...”

“With what? Honey, I’m already totally over whatever it was. *Hakuna matata.*”

“It’s very difficult to genuinely upset our June.” Louise gave Beatrice’s hand a reassuring squeeze before letting go. “She’s a very well-grounded woman, and just as good at giving the truth as hearing it.”

“That’s the problem,” Beatrice frowned. “I...I had a stereotype in mind when I came here, and...”

“It’s okay, a lot of people come in here thinking the same thing. It’s part of why I like having Louise come and do tarot card readings for people every other week or so. The people who come to town looking for their Pretty Super Magic Witch Encounter get one, and we still get good business...and at the same time, I get to show them that it’s not all black cats and broomsticks and woo-woo spooky. Or, you know. Granola and glitter, good witch bad witch, et cetera.” June finished laying out the items on the counter, and tilted her head at them. “On that note: I always *love* it when parents send their kids back with stuff they bought and say they can’t have Satanic crap in their houses, just because they find out they got it here.”

“Those are cinnamon sticks.” With a frown, Beatrice inspected the rest of the pile: a book about candles, a small sachet full of wooden beads, and a length of green ribbon. “What’s it all for? I recognize some of it, but...I haven’t been studying magic for long at all..”

“Poor kid came in asking for help getting a scholarship she really wants.” June sighed. “If I’d known her folks were going to have such a problem with it, I would’ve sent her home with a plastic bag from Klairdes or something, instead. I keep a stock of them for people who’d rather be more discreet about where they buy their supplies.”

Beatrice looked around the Balefires in dismay. “But this is such a beautiful store, and I’d heard from so many people that Aviaro has a reputation for being...well...magical. That things happen here, more often than anywhere else. I thought, maybe, it would be easier to learn how to be a witch, here.”

“Easier to learn? Absolutely,” Louise nodded. “As far as being one, it’s the same as anywhere else. There are still plenty of people who live here that don’t believe in magic, no matter how much evidence they might encounter.”

“Belief’s a really personal thing, after all,” June said. “It’s part of why the store’s organized by intent rather than religion. Someone might use a feng shui mirror with an ancient Celtic scrying spell just because it meshes with how they see the world, and it’s not our place to judge, as long as it makes them happy and they’re not hurting anyone.”

“An it harm none, do what thou will,” Beatrice quoted. “That’s a witch’s biggest rule, right?”

“It’d be everyone’s in a perfect world. The Witches’ Rede and the Hippocratic Oath boil down to the same thing.” Louise gathered up the

things June had placed on the counter. “Here, come help me put these back, I can give you the tour while June does the return paperwork.”

Beatrice looked over at the inviting labyrinth of shelves and displays on the other side of the store, then glanced down at her watch. “Thanks, but I really should be getting back...my break’s over in a few minutes. Will you be here tomorrow?”

“I will, definitely. But then again,” June winked, “I haven’t really got a choice. Lou?”

“What time will you be coming by, Beatrice? I can come and meet you, if you want to talk some more.”

“Oh—you don’t have to come back just for me!”

“Consider it your housewarming present: I want to do a reading for you. I don’t live very far away.” She rummaged in the patchwork bag hanging from her shoulder and took out a card. “Here’s my number...give me a call when you’re going to walk over, and I’ll meet you here.”

“Thank you.” Beatrice smiled as Louise reached out and put her other hand on her wrist.

“I know it’s hard starting your life on your own. But remember: just because you’re on your own doesn’t mean you’re alone. Just take everything a day at a time.”

The cool of her fingertips was soothing as ice on a bruise, and Beatrice faced the threat of tears without even having realized she was upset. Somehow, Louise had known just what to say, though they’d barely even spoken. Beatrice swallowed back her sudden rush of emotion and managed a shaky smile. “I will. Take care, both of you.”

“Always do.” June waved, her bracelets jangling along with the wind chimes on the door as Beatrice pushed it open. “And hey—merry part, and hurry back!”

“Believe me,” she called over her shoulder, “I will!” Outside on the sidewalk, the calm quiet of the Balefires dropped away, and the sounds and smells of city life swirled back around her: car exhaust, fall leaves, the sound of dogs barking somewhere in the distance. Beatrice pulled her cardigan tight and buttoned it, then broke into a run, hoping to make it back to the florist’s on time.

[You can find the rest of In The Cards at angeladonofrio.com]

Farmers and Actors

CAROLE SOULE

This piece originally appeared in The Concord Monitor, The Suncook Valley Sun, and The Laconia Daily Sun.

Swords clashed, fighters groaned, and the audience gasped as a battle raged on stage and actors fell to the ground. At the end (spoiler alert) the bad guy, Macbeth, was killed by Macduff in this Shakespeare play at the Hatbox Theater in Concord. Some of you may already know the outcome, but I was glad Macbeth died.

This play was enacted at the former location of Coldwater Creek, now Hatbox Theater, at Concord's Steeplegate Mall. Surrounded on three sides by seating, the stage is only a few feet away from the audience. Without special effects, other than metal swords and period costumes, the actors made the action real. It's hard to imagine rhyming English and a four hundred-year-old story coming alive, but it did. The next night I watched *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* at the classic Concord City Auditorium (the Audi). While this play didn't have any sword-swinging, the verbal barbs were flying and the actors believable.

What does farming and acting have in common? Maybe nothing, but maybe a lot. Sitting in a space, with other people, watching actors repeat thousands of words they've memorized is astounding. These are not actors on TV or on the movie screen. These are people like you and me making magic happen in real-time, in front of me and others.

Local is the connection. These are local actors on a local stage, performing for their neighbors. Just as buying locally raised food helps neighborhood farmers and tastes good, going to a locally produced play supports neighborhood actors and also feels good.

Actors are a lot like farmers. How many people have second jobs to support their careers? Most actors have day jobs to pay the bills so they can pursue what they love: acting. Many farmers or their spouses have second or third jobs so they can farm. Actors act because they want to provide entertainment. Farmers farm because we want to provide food. Paying the rent or mortgage is important, but not primary for farmers or actors.

While I appreciate actors, I never want to be one. I could never memorize all those words but I'm glad someone can. For now I'll converse with my monosyllabic cattle with a good Moo or two. Visit your local farmer to buy food and attend a play for amazing entertainment. Like me, you just might get hooked.

Only a Wyvern

*from a work-in-progress fantasy novel set in an alternate
North America*

PAMELA HUNT

*June 15, 1834, Near the southern border of Ammonoosuc, one of the Confederated
Clanlands of Katabdin*

Cecilia sat on a wide ledge at the top of Mount Wantastiquet surrounded by wildflowers and stunted pines, her horse absently grazing a few feet away. The day had grown warm, and while she still wore her mail shirt she had long ago removed her helm to let a light breeze play with her chestnut-brown hair. Below her the remnants of a morning fog along the Quonticut were dissipating as they rose, providing glimpses of the river's wide channel some eight hundred feet below. Soon enough she would be riding along that channel, but first she would have to descend the steep and winding trail carved into the cliff, and she wasn't quite ready to leave the highlands behind. Not too far to her south, perhaps twenty miles, the border of York marked the beginning of the former English colonies, where the waterway had been renamed the Great River. She'd been gone a long time, and while she thought she was ready to reenter the lands of her people, their closeness was giving her second thoughts.

She'd specifically taken this route so as to delay her return to Hampshire, hoping the detour through York would give her more time to ponder her next steps. Hampshire was home, but she knew she would not be welcome there, at least not by her family. So much in her life had changed since that fateful day four years ago, and for all she knew she was assumed dead. That was fine with her, but it didn't change the one thing she held onto from her past: she needed to learn what had happened to Abigail.

She let her mind drift farther back, to memories of happier times, and watched the clouds drifting slowly overhead. She had almost dozed off when something caught her eye along the ridgeline to the north. It

appeared to be a large bird, perhaps an eagle, slowly circling and gliding south on the escarpment's updrafts. After a while she realized that it was a much larger creature than she'd originally thought, and came to a disturbing conclusion.

It was a dragon.

"Shit," she said aloud, the first word she'd uttered all day. "This is a fine time to be sitting atop an exposed cliff." She got up quickly and gathered her horse. Not too far back to the northeast she'd noted an old stone keep, presumably left from the early days of the Bnaki Wars some seventy years ago. It had been small and in disrepair, but would provide better cover than the granite ledge and its stunted trees. With luck they could make it there before the dragon saw them.

She also hoped that the dragon would "only" be a wyvern, and not a wandering fire Drake, since the latter would be far more likely to put a quick end to her journey. It's not that wyverns were less powerful, but that they were generally less belligerent, for lack of a better word. The smaller dragons were creatures of the air and wind, and sometimes as fickle as that element. They tended toward curiosity, sometimes interspersed with a little mischievousness, rather than the "scorch first" approach of their larger fire-breathing relatives. Either way, she really didn't want to fight a dragon—today or any other day—so she mounted her horse and began to weave her way carefully through the pines. There was no need to rush. Sudden movements might only attract the beast's attention, and if it never saw them it would be a far preferable resolution.

By the time she reached the crest of the hill, the soaring figure was much closer, and she saw it was clearly a wyvern. The dragon's green and red wings caught the wind effortlessly, and sometimes it appeared to be playing. Now and then it would roll into a shallow dive only to pull up and chase its long tapered tail. Cecilia had neither time nor inclination to watch it, however, and continued toward a line of low trees a few hundred feet away. As a precaution she drew her sword. Although the sun was largely behind the clouds, Thunderhead gleamed faintly, as if with its own inner light. The effect was most obvious on the blade itself, particularly around a complex inscription at its base, but bright blue gems on the hilts and pommel also subtly brightened and darkened as if in synch with the weapon's heartbeat—if it had had one. In retrospect, exposing the blade might have been a mistake: lightning and air were adjacent elements.

A sudden gust of stronger wind blew from the north, causing Cecilia to look over her shoulder. The wyvern was closer still, and had shifted its trajectory enough to come straight for them. Seeing the distortions in the air around the dragon's wide open mouth, Cecilia braced for impact just before the full force of the exhalation hit. Her horse lurched to the left in an attempt to compensate, and Cecilia felt herself slipping sideways in the saddle. She grabbed for the horse's mane, but her arm got tangled in the reins and she ended up hanging awkwardly at the animal's side. Worse yet, she also dropped the sword.

The combination of the wyvern-wind and unbalanced rider caused the panicked horse to stumble. It lurched forward to its knees, which slowed its fall, and when it finally landed on its side its momentum had already been broken. *So this is how it ends*, Cecilia thought. *All that training only to be trapped under a horse and eaten by a wyvern in the middle of the Katabdin wilderness.* She struggled to free an arm in the hopes she could reach her lute, although she wasn't sure anything in her repertoire would work on a dragon anyway. Her questing fingers found the instrument soon enough, but two of the strings had broken. Firmly immobilized by the horse, and without access to her stronger magic, she closed her eyes and—perhaps for the last time—sent forth a silent prayer to The Four.

Mother and sons

I have been your faithful servant

But now face the end of my service

Corpos has watched my body, may he take it back

Nollos has taught me much, may he teach another

Emos has steeled my will, yet let me cry

And Byos, great Mother Byos, has loved me like a daughter

She will love me still, whether I live or die

I will find her in the heavens or do her works on earth

And in so doing come to peace

The wyvern landed next to them, and the horse tried to rise and run away. Just before the dragon's head lashed out toward them, Cecilia was able to roll to the side and out of immediate danger. As she scrambled toward her sword, the horse's death scream assaulted her ears. Looking back, she saw the dragon mantle the dead horse with its wings and begin ripping at its hide, now oblivious to the human a short distance away. The wyvern was a small one, maybe only half-grown. A larger one would

quite possibly have killed and carried off a horse—at least for a short distance—without needing to land.

Cecilia reached her sword and sat quietly, contemplating her situation. Would it be best to remain still and hope the wyvern would simply leave when it was sated? Or should she try to reach the cover of the woods? There was a chance the dragon would see her either way. She opted to move, making sure to give the dragon a wide berth and keeping the sword close to her side where its unusual gleam would hopefully not attract the creature’s attention. As she crept forward, the wyvern paused to lift up its bloodied head and look around. Cecilia stopped in her tracks, but not before the dragon registered the movement and locked its gaze upon her. Now distracted by another target, the beast let out a piercing cry, opened its wings to their full extent, and launched itself into the air. Cecilia broke into a run toward the woods.

She never made it. Another powerful gust of wind knocked her to the ground. She rolled again, came to rest on her buttocks, and inched backwards as she kept her eyes on the dragon above her. It didn’t seem to be doing anything but hovering—an unusual sight in a creature twice the size of a horse—although it *did* seem to be watching her curiously. Its chest expanded and contracted as it breathed, and after a particularly extended exhalation Cecilia knew what was coming next and searched frantically for something to hold onto. She found only grass and wildflowers, so when the wyvern opened its mouth to inhale, there was nothing to prevent the resulting updraft from lifting her twenty feet into the air. Still, the dragon just hovered.

“Put me down!” she screamed. “I’m not some plaything in a game of cat and mouse! Wasn’t my horse enough for you?!”

Seemingly in response, the wyvern subtly altered the position of its wings and closed its mouth, and Cecilia fell back to the ground. As she lay there catching her breath the wyvern continued to hover above her, occasionally tilting its head sideways as if to get a different perspective. Cecilia got to her feet and turned toward the dragon, just in time to see it dive.

She pointed the sword at it and shouted desperately: “*Alakwsabla padôgîvîgî!*”

Nothing happened. She shook the sword vigorously with both hands and shouted again. “*Alakwsabla padôgîvîgî! Alakwsabla padôgîvîgî!*”

Still nothing.

The wyvern leveled out and brought its talons forward, and Cecilia dropped to her knees. She steadied the sword as best she could and braced for impact. *Should have brought a polearm after all. Fine lot of good an old malfunctioning magical sword is doing against a damned dragon.*

Whether from intent or inexperience, the wyvern landed with one foot on either side of its target, and Cecilia took the opportunity to slash at a leg. As her blade cut deep into its greenish-bronze scales there was a soft crack, and for a moment faint blue-white tracings outlined both the sword and the wound. “*Now* you work?” she yelled at the sword, her words drowned out as the dragon shrieked and returned to the air. Cecilia was caught off balance when the sword pulled loose from its target with an awkward jerk.

She was still recovering when the dragon dove again. This time it barely slowed as it passed, and struck downward with its beak as it flew over her. She brought up Thunderhead in an attempt to block, but missed, and the dragon struck a glancing blow to her sword arm. The pain was intense, and it was Cecilia’s turn to scream. Her arm went numb and she dropped the weapon a second time.

With her right arm hanging useless at her side, she retrieved the sword with her left and looked up at the hovering dragon. “Just eat the damn horse,” she muttered softly, “I only want to go home. I have a more important battle to fight than this one.”

The wyvern tilted its head back and forth while continuing to hover, and Cecilia took a cautious step backward toward the trees.

Then the dragon repositioned its wings, opened its mouth, and again directed its breath attack down toward Cecilia. She found herself caught in a beam of high pressure that threatened to force her to the ground and push all of the air from her lungs.

With an effort, she lifted the sword above her head and wiggled it at the dragon. Her voice started to crack nervously as she spoke. “Look here dragon, this is a fucking *Peace Sword*! You felt what it just did? There’s more lightning where *that* came from!” Then, unable to maintain the bravado any longer, she began to laugh hysterically. “*Please?* Please just let me be?”

The wyvern continued to hover and blow, and Cecilia was forced to her knees. Her eyes began to water under the pressure, and as she closed them she reflexively leaned forward to steady herself on her right arm only to have it give way with another shooting pain. “GODS DAMN YOU!” she screamed, the laughter overridden by angry resignation, and

thrust the sword upward with all her strength. “I’m sorry Abigail,” she murmured, “I might not find you.” She opened her eyes, glared at the dragon one more time, and spoke as calmly as she could. “*Alaknsabla* bloody *padôgiviği*. *Alaknsabla padô...*”

The force of the explosion forced her backward as a bolt of searing blue-white lightning erupted from the point of the blade and surged upward. It hit the wyvern at the base of one wing and briefly enveloped the dragon in crackling magical energy. With a deafening screech it started to fall, its good wing flapping vigorously in attempt to remain airborne while the other flopped uselessly along one side. A moment later the wyvern crashed to the ground twenty feet in front of her, where it lay sprawled out like a giant, green vulture.

Cecilia took a deep breath and sat down. She watched the dragon impassively, completely drained and unwilling—perhaps even unable—to look away. It met her gaze, and she was momentarily taken aback when she recognized the look of terror there. Greater dragons had some ability to read thoughts and intentions, at least when they were older. This one was probably too young, but under the circumstances it was worth trying to communicate one more time.

“It didn’t have to end this way, you know,” she gasped. “I was willing to let you have the horse.”

Short wheezy breaths came from the wyvern’s half-open mouth, and its ruff of long red and green scales opened and closed in synchrony with its breathing. It lifted its head and continued to stare at Cecilia—no, there was no sign of comprehension there—and slowly tried to rise to its feet. Once it managed to get itself upright on a tripod formed from its good wing and two legs, the dragon shook its head violently. The motion propagated down the neck, through the torso, and all the way to the end of the tail, giving the impression of a giant scaly dog that had just come out of the water. Only then did it look away, shifting its attention to the wing hanging limp at one side. It prodded the wing with its toothy beak and flexed its shoulder muscles. The good wing shifted to a horizontal position as the dragon rose to its full height.

Cecilia glanced at Thunderhead a few feet away. The sword still glowed with residual electricity, but there was no way she could reach it if the wyvern were to attack again. Chances are the blasted thing wouldn’t activate anyway. She turned back to the dragon to await its next move in silent resignation.

It was still worrying the useless wing, apparently oblivious to her. The good wing was flapping more vigorously now, raising a small cloud of dust and dry leaves. A strange gurgling sound—almost like purring—started coming from deep in the wyvern’s chest, and it extracted its head to look at Cecilia, then to the partially eaten horse, and back. With a loud hiss that was clearly directed at Cecilia, it shook its whole body again and hopped to one side. After a few more hops it had turned completely around, and with a final glance over its back began hopping more rapidly away from the scene of the fight. Each hop was a little longer than the last and accompanied by a strong downward thrust of the good wing, and after about fifty yards the dragon shook violently a final time, launched itself into the air with its powerful legs, and awkwardly extended the injured wing to its full length. For a moment it appeared ready to crash again, but suddenly righted itself, gained altitude, and flew away along the escarpment. It did not look back.

“Lucky bastard,” muttered Cecilia, glancing at her own injured arm. She started to stand, but with the adrenalin rush fading and pain in her shoulder rising she only managed to get one leg extended before she lost consciousness and fell backwards into the grass and wildflowers.

She awoke shortly after noon, her dislocated shoulder throbbing with pain. She massaged it with her left hand, hoping to shift the bones into their proper positions, but that only made things worse. “I knew I should have studied more healing,” she said to herself, wincing.

She stood up carefully and walked over to the dead horse—trying not to jar her arm. “Poor beast, shame you had to die this way. There’s nothing I can do now, so I hope the wolves and ravens appreciate your sacrifice.”

As best she could with one hand, Cecilia fashioned a crude sling from rope and strips of a blanket and managed to immobilize her right arm against her side and chest. The dull throbbing wasn’t going away any time soon, but at least now she’d be spared the sudden spikes of pain that came from unintentional movement.

Then she set about assessing her limited possessions and deciding what she could realistically carry with no horse and a bad shoulder. The border was probably close enough that she could do without her cooking kit, bedroll, and small tent for a day or two. Everything else—coin, tinderbox, first aid supplies, some dried food, and a handful of

personal items—fit into a side satchel she could wear over her left shoulder.

At last she turned her attention to the damaged lute. The body of the instrument was scratched, but appeared unbroken, and two of the courses had snapped. She had spare strings of course, although she wasn't sure she could attach and tune them with one hand. But with her sword arm immobilized and Thunderhead unpredictable as ever, she needed *some* way of defending herself if needed. Awkwardly she took the new strings from her pouch and, gripping the belly of the instrument with her legs, was able to attach them with difficulty. Tuning them was another matter, but she did the best she could. "Ah, Crimsonstring," she sighed, "I'm sorry your voice is a little jarring, but it will have to do for now. At least I can play a few notes on you." She paused, patting a flute case at her side. "There is no way to give *Piguōngan* his voice with only one hand."

Once everything appeared in order, she walked back to the edge of the mountain for a final look into the valley below. It was a long way down. "I'm *trying*, Abbi. I really am," she whispered. "I hope it's not all in vain." For the first time in many days she felt the melancholy return. It was a *long* way down the cliff—not a fall anyone would likely survive. She shook her head to disperse the thoughts, and tried replacing them with new ones. How far *was* it to the border? Could she obtain a new mount there? At least it was downhill for a while. She turned away from the cliff, adjusted the various straps crisscrossing her chest, and with a last sad look at the dead horse at the edge of the woods started her descent toward the Quonticut below.

Rejection

IAN ROGERS

Dear Mr. Prescott,

It is our most sincere regret to inform you that the manuscript of your novella, *Post-Coital Marriage Proposal*, was not among those chosen for this year's Hossenpfeffer-Schweppman-Hildridge Book Prize. Since 2012 it has been the goal of the HSH Book Prize to grant a home to our time's greatest literary achievements by allowing unpublished writers to share their work with an appreciative audience. This year we received more submissions than ever before, and the quality of these submissions was enormous. We wish we were able to select more winners.

Submissions for next year's Hossenpfeffer-Schweppman-Hildridge Book Prize will be accepted starting in September, and we fully encourage you to submit again. However, should you decide to submit next year, Mr. Prescott, we feel it best to bring some of our contest guidelines to your attention—for your benefit as well as ours.

First, while our judges experienced a formidable challenge deciphering your novella manuscript, if you were to read our website instructions carefully you'd see that the HSH Book Prize does not accept prose submissions because it is a poetry contest. As such, our committee has reason to doubt that you've actually read our previous collections or encouraged your fiction-writing colleagues to purchase them at full retail price from our website, as you so earnestly claim in your cover letter.

Second, our contest guidelines clearly state that the book prize entry fee is twenty-five dollars, payable by check or credit card. Not only does the HSH Prize not accept cash, inside your submission envelope our judges were appalled to find a hundred-dollar bill and a handwritten note instructing them to "keep the extra" for themselves. Such bribes will not be tolerated by the HSH committee, and to save you the embarrassment of having us press charges we're considering the extra funds a charitable donation.

More glaring, however, Mr. Prescott, was your cover letter, which mentions in no uncertain terms that your well-off uncle Mr. C.M. Burns might be persuaded to donate a portion of his vast wealth to the HSH Prize should he be pleased to see his nephew emerge as this year's winner. Considering the letter's juvenile tone, your earlier attempt at a bribe, and the equivocal nature of your uncle's offer, we feel confident assuming that C.M Burns is a character of your own creation whose name you most likely stole from *The Simpsons*.

In lieu of alerting the authorities to your behavior, our panel has instead taken the opportunity to offer suggestions for how you might engender some much-needed improvements in your writing and focus your energy in a more positive direction. To make *Post-Coital Marriage Proposal* a more competitive book prize entry, we offer the following suggestions both technical and stylistic:

- *Lose* is spelled with one o, not two.
- The “plastic thing on the end of your shoelace that you slip into the holes” you refer to on page 112 is called an *aglet*.
- Czechoslovakia is no longer one country, and the capital of Michigan is Lansing, not Detroit.
- Though emerging writers will often have their characters engage in lengthy political discussions, these digressions rarely advance a book's plot or further our understanding of its characters. As such, we recommend deleting pages 35 through 97.
- After reading the opening sex scene, our panel found it incredulous that a normal adult male could successfully engage in intercourse nine times in two hours. We find it especially troubling that this feat is accomplished by a first-person narrator.
- On the subject of female characters, Mr. Prescott, we noticed that yours tend toward the one-dimensional, and are greatly in need of some fleshing out. One suggestion for fixing this would be to spend more time describing the hopes, ambitions, and emotional needs of these women, and less time describing their bodily proportions.

We hope you consider this list carefully as motivation not only to improve the deficiencies in your writing, but to remedy some most egregious flaws in your moral character. Should you choose to venture further into the publishing world, Mr. Prescott, you'll find that one is as important as the other.

In closing, we'd also like to mention that, in the unlikely event you actually possess an uncle C.M. Burns who wishes to donate to the HSH Book Prize, he may do so by sending a check to our office or by clicking the Donate button on our website. We hope there are no hard feelings.

Sincerely,

The Hossenpfeffer-Schweppman-Hildridge Book Prize Team

A King's Pine

THOMPSON PARKER

On a pleasantly warm but windy day in April of 1458, winter snows melted to reveal a tiny green cluster of needles, attached to the narrowest of stems. A newcomer to this mighty forest, she hadn't existed in November, when the first snowflakes covered the earth in a winter blanket. Yet here she was, mere inches high, thrusting from the ground like a young coniferous bird ready to fly. Her name was Strobilus, and like the soaring trees around her, she too was an eastern white pine, and this was her realm.

Strobilus had no memory of her life that began as a pinecone on the tallest branches of her mother, rooted just meters away. Nor could she recall when as a tiny seed she had been swept from the cone by a cool summer breeze. She drifted back and forth in the wind, periodically dancing across the ground only to be whisked into the air once again. Finally she landed and penetrated through thick, orange pine needle litter. There she split apart and sent tender shoots into the forest floor. Her stem and needles had appeared in secret, beneath accumulated feet of snow, but now she had made her debut, and Strobilus reveled in her glorious and sudden freedom.

She also had company. Scores like her had taken root beneath the tall and infinite parent trees. All were survivors. Many of the cones dropped by Strobilus's mother and other trees fell useless to the ground, barren of seed. Others carried viable seeds, but these were plucked by jabbering chickadees while still high aloft or by darting squirrels once they had fallen to the ground. If they did drop, most seeds failed to penetrate soil through decaying leaves and brush. Some encountered soil lacking key minerals, ensuring a swift demise. Still others fell on rocks, into water, or in other areas where germination was impossible. Seeds from competing species like fir, spruce, and beech also entered the fray, but this was the realm of white pine, and they far outnumbered their less majestic brethren.

Yet if Strobilus had already demonstrated luck in making it this far, even greater challenges lay ahead. For despite its quiet solitude, the virgin forest of eastern North America ensured dynamic competition.

Every small seedling had but one desire, to soar to the heavens, and in this task there would be no cooperation with neighbors or kin. Most of these fragile seedlings in fact soon perished, the bitter reality amidst life in the primeval forest.

But Strobus was better positioned than most. She had taken root in an unlikely clearing, beside the great trunk of an ancient cousin that had recently toppled to the ground. High above her, where thick boughs and a net of needles once covered the sky, lay open to the heavens above and the blessed warmth and light of the sun. Strobus basked in this early spring radiance. The sun gave nourishment to all her kind, allowing photosynthesis and life. Dozens like Strobus that rooted in more shady areas would soon wilt and die, unable to make carbohydrates from carbon dioxide and water. They would starve.

Strobus had other advantages. She had emerged in a narrow gully of no topographical significance, but this trough enabled fallen rain to gather around her slender stem and penetrate through to her developing roots. Rain drenched the forest in those spring months, so she was content. In areas of compact soil and shallow bedrock such precipitation might result in poor drainage, but Strobus tolerated the dry sandy soil, unlike some competing species, and this soil encouraged water to properly percolate after heavy rain. Other pine seedlings had taken root on steep slopes with shallow soils, and their jobs would be made harder, for most rain would wash past them to the benefit of other young pines like Strobus. With her roots solidly anchored and protected by a thick mulch of pine needles, Strobus felt secure.

But Strobus faced severe challenges in those first months of life. In that time she saw many exciting and terrifying sights. Dreadful thunderstorms with sudden winds knocked her sideways for a time, yet after they passed she righted her one-inch form and continued her slow reach for the sky. At other moments prancing rabbits or foraging deer came close, devouring other seedlings. Hidden behind the great fallen trunk of her kin, she went untouched. Sometimes slimy caterpillars crept close to inspect her few needles, but blanched at her resinous taste and moved on to other fare. Such behavior made sense. Any forest observer that looked upon this preposterous twig might have laughed that such a tiny plant had any connection to the imperial trees which soared nearly two hundred feet above her. This scrubby thing had no business being here. Perhaps the forest animal scoffed at, then ignored her.

The most amazing sight Strobos saw that year came only once, but it ever after framed the dim fringes of her awareness. The plodding steps of a young bull moose entered her grove, and it stopped in some suspicion, sniffing the air for signs of an odd presence. Its neck swiveled around slowly, eyes wide and clear, and then when it had stood still so long that time might have stopped, the air suddenly crackled with a hissing thrust. In an instant, five long sticks of unknown origin had penetrated the moose's thick hide. Though it turned to run, it fell lame and struggled. Then seven more of these savage whistling sticks brought the matter to an end.

Moments later, several creatures approached the dying animal, unlike any Strobos had seen before. They had dark skins but no fur of their own, only that taken from other animals, and incredibly they walked on only two legs unlike every other forest creature. They carried many items on their backs and made strange noises to each other as they claimed the fallen moose. One of them stepped near Strobos, and she thought she might be trampled, but the creature took no note of her. Within minutes, the Algonquin hunting party and the slain moose were gone, but Strobos was aware of a new and formidable presence in the forest.

The eastern white pine requires less rain than many tree species, but that spring and summer were wetter than normal, and Strobos took persistent advantage of the moisture and the radiant sunshine that struck her through the clearing above. As autumn took hold, Strobos had doubled her modest height in less than a year. She then stood over two inches tall, but of greater significance was the whorl that had erupted from her side, forming a tiny branch with needles of its own. Strobos remained an implausible plant to look at, but the genetic code which had produced the mighty titans around her danced within her stem, and if Strobos were lucky she might resemble her kin very shortly.

Winter came early as it often did in this land not yet known as New Hampshire, and Strobos remained her scrappy self even after the snows nearly buried her, a few visible needles still seeking the dim light offered by the cold sun. But a heavy snow in January completely enveloped her, and she was not seen again until March. But this suited Strobos, content for now.

When the snows receded that spring, Strobos drank in the sun like desperate food, and quickly her growth resumed, activated by solar power and the moisture of melting snow. Now she had not only the

initial whorl she had sprouted the previous year, but a new and smaller eruption on her opposite side, also bearing blue-green needles. In addition, her leading stem stretched straight and rigid. This new growth gave evidence of her tenacity and health, and Strobilus stood defiant with those first warm rays of spring.

In these early years, Strobilus grew at only a portion of her potential. By her third year, she measured just five inches in height. At year five, she spurted past twelve inches. These were critical years for white pine seedlings like Strobilus, for only a fraction of those that had germinated in her class, perhaps five percent, could expect to last into a tenth year of life. Accordingly, as though authored by some divine plan, the genetic code charting her destiny remained inconspicuous. Now she concentrated her resources on more critical tasks, like survival.

She faced daunting odds. Most succumbed to unseen dangers beyond their control, with only the sheer number of offspring insuring that some few must last through maturity. Strobilus witnessed the devastation firsthand. On a cloudy day in June of her second year, a rambling young porcupine shuffled into the grove and devoured the closest neighbor to Strobilus, and the rodent's prickly frame bent her as well. The porcupine found the experience distasteful, spitting out much of its acidic meal, but the wider clearing now worked to her benefit.

Other disasters threatened her. Snowshoe rabbits scampered by, gnawing on the young wood of pines just larger than Strobilus, and killed the trees if they severed the cambial layer of their bark. In the fall, two mature white-tailed bucks, heavy in the rut, battled back and forth near Strobilus. Their heavy hooves and slashing antlers uprooted and trampled a dozen pine seedlings, clearing the way for others to sprout where they had once been, to face similar odds. The great mammals stepped and stomped around Strobilus countless times, never making fatal contact. Somehow she endured.

But this wasn't all, for as she grew, Strobilus realized with startling clarity that many other pines were quite close to her, and in fact three others arranged in a sort of diamond pattern near her were so close it was obvious friction must soon develop. She had long been aware of the one to her east, for that intruder had erupted a year after her, and ever since, she realized this competitor had ambitions every bit as keen as her own. But on the other side of the fallen log two other young pines lurked, also shooting for the heavens, just now becoming apparent as

the trees passed the height of the decaying log. These trees to her north and west also appeared vital, healthy, and destined for greatness. Strobus realized she must compete against her own kind if she were to long survive.

One of her gifts could be found in her misnamed blue-green needles, for they were actually quite soft, delicate, and pliable. Since her emergence, she had sprouted this foliage from bundle-like clusters attached to her slender twig crown and branches, always five in a group, never to exceed six inches in length for the duration of her life. In this feature at least, her potential already blossomed. These needles took on special importance in her second season however, for great changes in internal chemistry had caused the plant to withhold nourishment from some needles, and they gradually turned brown.

But Strobus wasn't sick. She had entered into a cycle she would follow all of her days, focusing her energy on needles that collect more sunlight at the expense of shaded branches. Specifically, the needles she had been born with had lived out their purpose in this, her second year, and each designated cluster of five needles soon withered and fell to the ground. Strobus was evergreen in that she always retained some foliage even during winter, but she remained in a constant process of rejuvenation, and shed her needles much like the hardwood maples and oaks dropped their leaves. Yet her needles contributed to an enduring carpet of soft orange on the forest floor, well after hardwood leaves had disintegrated. Just another way the eastern white pine controlled this land.

Strobus of course paid no attention to such matters. Time passed slowly for her, and she remained fixated on spreading her feeder roots to sources of moisture, while also seeking the glorious rays of sun above. She stood there determined to avoid attention, and hoped to look unappealing to predators if she were noticed. Her needs were direct and basic, and this perseverance paid off when she bucked long odds to reach her seventh year.

In 1465, at a time when Christopher Columbus was still a boy in Italy, Strobus underwent another remarkable change essential to her existence. Like many trees, Strobus was monoecious, meaning she carried both male and female flowers. In theory, she could fertilize herself with the aid of birds, insects, and favorable winds. Nonetheless, we are correct in referring to her using female gender, for those flowers

began to form at the age of ten and would always form the dominant portion of her reproductive strategy. These flowers appeared every year in early summer, awaiting the male pollen, though fertilization and seed production would take a year beyond pollination. Male flowers appeared only sporadically, and well after female ones had begun reliable bloom.

Yet the flowers on *Strobus* would never decorate the trees of spring. Again here is a paradox, for the mighty timbers of eastern white pine produce the smallest of forest flowers. Her female strobili, the proper term for any fruit characterized by overlapping scales, emerged in June that year. Green like her needles, even on mature pines they measured barely an inch and a half long. *Strobus* managed flowers only half that size. The undependable male flowers were no more than oval buds a quarter inch long and destined for obscurity. Yet these minute floral organs were designed flawlessly, as the dominant forest stands gave testimony. Eastern white pine aggressively established itself, and *Strobus* had just started to contribute to this noble heritage.

Strobus could not know she yet had no chance for conception. But the coding for this process was embedded in her genes, and with each passing year, she would become slightly more adept at the task, less easy to discredit. *Strobus* was no longer a tender forest seedling. She had grown into a white pine sapling in the primeval forest of eastern North America, capable of great success provided she could endure the continuing trials of her youth.

The following winter inflicted brutal cold on the landscape of upper North America, yet *Strobus* barely noticed. She was ideally constructed to endure temperatures that might cause less resilient plants to wilt, even when later thermometers might record measurements at twenty to thirty below zero Fahrenheit, which often afflicted the land this year. As long as she had sunlight, she endured. She no longer actively drew moisture from the frozen ground, but she was hardly dormant, and even in the brutal cold of early January when few warm-blooded creatures stirred, *Strobus* was primed to resume growth the moment surrounding snows began to melt.

At age ten she had vaulted to almost five feet in height, well above most probable snow depths, so she no longer faced the possibility of a lengthy frozen entombment. Several layers of thin, graceful branches bore her blue-green needles, and gray, smooth bark lined the walls of her expanding trunk. But this milestone also entailed further risks, as *Strobus* soon discovered. Several times in a period of four consecutive

weeks that winter, warm temperatures in the upper atmosphere caused precipitation to fall as normal rain. However, colder air at lower levels made this water freeze on contact with the ground, and so seemingly innocent drizzle quickly froze upon striking Strobus and her vigorous yet tender branches. Previously, covering snows had protected her like armor from such threats. Now she lay exposed to these assaults. At first this frozen rain caused no obvious trouble, merely coating Strobus in a shiny glaze. The Abenaki would marvel at the stark beauty of this glassy landscape. But several such storms struck consecutively that January, and soon Strobus felt the weight of accumulated ice weighing down her tender branches. After a fifth such storm, and persistent cold temperatures, Strobus could no longer fight back, and she slumped in a parabola to the ground under the weight of an inch-thick sheet of ice.

This alone might have threatened her survival, but several inches of snow followed this inclement weather, which partially buried Strobus, and then another frozen rainstorm coated the area by the Newichannock River, interring her still further in ice. Finally, a period of high pressure followed in February, eliminating the threat of precipitation, but Arctic forces from the north again took hold, keeping Strobus frozen in a hunchbacked state for six straight weeks. When warmer temperatures finally began to thaw this winter misery, many like Strobus had their existence forever shattered, unable to stand upright again.

But even as the forces of nature sought to crush Strobus, her internal metabolism responded to the challenge. She had taken in ideal amounts of sun, moisture, and soil nutrients in her young life that made her narrow trunk strong but supple, and as the icy forces of winter slowly relinquished their grip, Strobus made equal strides toward regaining her posture. By late March, she again stood proud and upright, though the same could not be said of others in her class. Many remained bowed to the ground, and would not recover. Soon their needles would turn from green to orange to brown, and they perished.

Still, the forest remained covered in snow, and so poor Strobus faced yet another threat related to this weather. Under great pressure to find food, many forest creatures, from white-tailed deer to turkeys to various furry rodents, set their sights on anything edible, and even though Strobus like all her species offered a poor choice with few nutritive qualities, she could provide calories to desperate animals. With no chance to flee, and her resinous texture no longer a deterrent, Strobus could only hope to evade their attention. Daily the animals

came, knocking down young pines and consuming young buds and inner bark in a rapid, unpleasant meal. Somehow Strobus avoided the onslaught, and warm winds finally came in April to melt the remaining snow. The starving creatures of North America could find their food elsewhere. Strobus again survived.

The effects of her initial reproductive efforts became evident two years later, as Strobus sprouted cones from which later seeds would emerge. These cones clung tight to Strobus at this time, for they too were in their infancy, and required another year before maturing. Initially just an inch or two long, they developed into longer bundles clutching the precious seeds. The cones were merely effective armor protecting the treasure within, for inside the cones huddled the precious seeds, waiting for release. The following year, Strobus opened twenty or so cones to the whims of prevailing winds, dispersing a modest concentration of seeds. But Strobus would improve with time, and when she turned twenty she would produce thousands of viable seeds, though even then almost all would fail to germinate. The odds that Strobus dodged in her creation now challenged any hope that her offspring might develop.

Darting birds like chickadees and titmice often perched on her branches to penetrate her cones, and they made off with a fair amount of her seed. Red and gray squirrels were versatile, snacking on the seeds either high in her crown or once they had blown to the ground, and these were eagerly gathered to store as food during winter. It seemed like a slaughter, yet here they unwittingly played host to the designs of Strobus and her ilk, for they often burrowed through leaf litter in their relentless search for food, and the crafty pine seeds exploited these openings, where they would germinate.

Among her most remarkable traits, Strobus was programmed for explosive growth, but until she reached the age of fifteen she kept this power under restraint as she carefully established her root system. Until that point, it was as if she had to prove she was worthy of her species, and she utilized all available energy for initial seed production and survival. But when Strobus had climbed to nine feet tall, excited genes in her trunk and roots began to kindle with great urgency. Now she raced for the sky like gravity in reverse, and for the first time Strobus set her sights in earnest on the canopy where her brethren ruled. In that year she grew a remarkable two feet. She followed the next year with two and

a half feet more, yet even then Strobos was still only warming up. Two and three-quarter feet. Two and a half feet again. In 1478, after she had turned twenty, Strobos grew an astounding three and one-quarter feet in a single year. What made this growth more remarkable was that Strobos annually achieved it within a span of ninety to one hundred eighty days, and always completed by autumn. With patience in these years of frantic growth, one might have watched her carefully and seen Strobos grow within hours.

Strobos never again achieved such phenomenal new height as she did that one year, but she continued to ascend at a healthy clip. She behaved like the runner in a tactical race who, having paced herself for the initial laps, now made her sprint to the finish. Onward and upward she thrust, her pace slowing yet never tiring. When she reached thirty years of age, she towered over fifty feet in height, yet she still had attained only a third the height of her surrounding kin. Her growth soon slowed to a foot per year or less, but by now she gave every appearance of being a worthy successor to her ancestors. But she still felt the threat of competition from neighboring pines, and if the hole in the canopy above her ever closed, she might quickly wither in the shade.

In every visible way, Strobos assumed the shape and form of the mighty white pine forest around her. Her crown spread majestically, her lower branches long and full, her upper branches receding to the trunk in a regal pyramid. These impressive branches now spread a web twenty feet across, casting a wide circle of dappled shade onto the forest floor below. The diameter of her trunk, once mere inches around, had slowly widened about its circumference. This growth occurred with more subtlety than her height, perhaps another inch every third year, but this horizontal expansion was persistent. Strobos remained a gangly and gawky tree, soaring in height but without much weight, yet this too would eventually change, as always happens, with time.

Externally, two other visible changes helped position Strobos for forest dominance. The outer covering of her woody stem, once deep green, smooth and shallow, had in just a short period become gray and furrowed. These channels only became more rough and pronounced as she aged. Moreover, in response to unknown signals that identified keen competition for sun, nutrients, and water, Strobos shut off nutritional support to her older and lower branches, and they soon died. Yet, it was as though Strobos couldn't bear to part with these vestiges of her youth, and so this dry brush persisted on her trunk, relics from an earlier era

when she wasn't quite so formidable. These decaying limbs generally had lived about fifteen years, yet they persisted on Strobos for twice as long, or longer, until wind and rain finally brought some down.

Still, these changes were also common to other white pines from her generation who had survived, and in this sense Strobos had simply managed to match her competition. Her branches had long since rubbed against those of her neighbors. Now their trunks almost touched on windy days. Her impressive growth merely matched those around her. Below her, the old timber log beside which she had sprout had decayed, now no more than a raised mound of earth, and the four seedlings arranged in a diamond pattern had each also survived, but only one could become the dominant tree in that stand. Between ages ten and forty, Strobos had matched wits with all four, yet none showed any signs of weakness. Indeed, all were formidable, blessed with similar genes and growing conditions as Strobos, and over four decades none had faltered.

But then as the fifteenth century drew to a close and the first Europeans cast their attention toward America, the pine forming the northern point of the diamond mysteriously slowed. But Strobos and her kin hadn't accelerated. Their most exuberant growth was now behind them. Rather, one of those damaging microbes so prevalent in nature had assaulted this seemingly vigorous timber, and now, as the spirited race among the three other pines continued, this one ceased growing, and withered. It had been stricken by white pine blister rust, that bane of Eastern white pine, and now suffering in its advanced stages this tree had no hope for recovery. Slowly, her needles wilted, turned brown, and fell. Technically, she still lived below that portion of her trunk where the blister had formed, but shade from competing trees led to her ultimate demise. In a few years, her trunk and roots dried and decayed. For another decade the rotting shell of this tree remained upright, a haunting monument to its former glory, until a November gale toppled even this relic. Strobos gave the matter no heed. Two competitors for the open canopy above remained, and she kept focused on taking her rightful place in the sky.

And then, when Strobos had seemingly survived the worst possible trials, came the end of the world she knew. One August morning in 1532 started with muggy sunshine. Dew hung tenaciously on her high branches, and a heavy stillness gripped the air. Few birds chirped in the treetops. Squirrels and other varmints were also quiet, hidden away in

their lairs. For long hours, time seemed to have stopped, and then on the far southern horizon, from the top of her crown, Strobilus could see a black, churning mass of clouds tinged with a hue as green as her needles. She had never before seen a storm like this.

The winds howled first. In a few minutes, the air exploded from dead calm to wild fury. The hard trunk of Strobilus still retained its flexibility, and responded by moving with the fierce wind. Back and forth she swayed like a pendulum, bumping and jostling with other pines around her. The scraping branches beat a haunting percussion through the forest. Old brush ripped free from her trunk, falling helter skelter onto the trees and ground below, and living twigs still green with health tore from her crown, spinning and dancing in the gale before landing far away.

The winds strengthened further. Soon her trunk pummeled others nearby, as it contorted wildly in the furious, shifting winds, knocking off sections of her bark. Branches and logs sailed through air and landed with devastating force. Some shattered on impact. A few projectiles lodged in her trunk. These hurricane winds tried the limits of her endurance.

Entire trees perished. Either too old and no longer so flexible to endure the hurricane fury or else fully exposed to the raging wind, stands of white pine toppled. Those with shallow roots were the first to go. A faint crackle replaced the usual creaking of a swaying trunk as the doomed tree began its fatal pitch. The massive trunk plunged through branches and other trees and crashed to earth, as loud as the roaring thunder. The winds continued without end. A normal bad storm might claim one or two trees in a grove, unhealthy specimens whose time had come. Only a few hours into this storm twenty had fallen within her view, and the hurricane had only started to reach its fury.

Then came the rains. Normally a blessed event, water now destroyed. It soaked through the ground, and usually the sandy soil around Strobilus enabled adequate drainage in even hard rains. Not now. At first, it collected in wide puddles, turning the forest around her into a pond. But later the gentle slopes turned to accelerating water currents. On and on the rains pounded and the wind wailed. The new pond stirred, churned, and exploded into a wide, torrential river.

A new round of destruction followed. Fallen trunks now washed down hillsides, crushing young trees and uprooting others previously weakened by wind. The raging torrents washed away soil from the root

systems of trees that had withstood the carnage so far, and now even these otherwise healthy specimens fell over or weakened.

The rain poured, striking Strobus like a thousand needle sticks at once. The wind eased, yet still jostled her to the limits of her endurance. All around her, the evidence of decades of pine growth fell in indiscriminate slaughter. The trees of the diamond still near Strobus fell victim. Everything rooted on the nearby slope, from young seedling to old growth pine washed away. The soil eroded precariously, exposing her thick roots once far below ground. Strobus could not endure the fury of the hurricane much longer.

Then the rains slowed, first to a steady drizzle, then to a calming mist. The gushing river still flowed, threatening her roots. But an end to the storm gave promise of better times ahead, and Strobus drew strength from those roots that remained submerged and anchored. Clouds broke. The sun appeared. Startled birds returned to her branches to survey the devastation. Strobus stood defiant, the only tree for fifty feet around. Other surviving trees also stood largely alone. As the waters receded, a wreckage of trunks, branches, boulders, and dead animals littered the forest floor.

She survived. And even then, Strobus hatched her plans to heal the land. Young cones matured that fall and winter, and her seeds soon spread across the scarred land.

The years passed, and Strobus took her place as the old matron of the forest. At age eighty, Strobus had passed the one hundred-foot barrier, and stood out as the dominant specimen in a grove now composed of white pine largely in their adolescence. Her thick trunk measured over two feet around, and had no limbs for two-thirds of her height. Deep and mottled fissures typified her rough, scaly bark, which demonstrated its worth in the dry summer of 1543. A wandering Abenaki camp, careless in extinguishing fire, ignited flammable needles and brush left from the hurricane of the previous decade, and soon flames engulfed much of the forest. Many younger trees perished, including white pine and other species, and only a chance thunderstorm days later doused the blaze. Though lower portions of her trunk had charred, the thick bark had suffered only superficial damage, and would soon heal.

Strobus had now achieved some note as a mature member of her species. The graceful majesty of pyramidal branching at her crown

suggested artistry of perfection. She attracted new attention from wildlife, but no longer did such creatures threaten her existence. She now gave back to the forest that had allowed her to reach this point. Her seed production continued strong, and this helped germinate a forest that had lost much of its timber to fire and storm. Animals continued to find such seeds as delicacies. Moreover, many birds found her branching spires attractive, and she played host to the northern flicker and many species of owl, while the yellow-bellied sapsucker flitted about in search of her oozing sap.

What gave *Strobus* her unparalleled majesty and beauty had less to do with her soaring branches and trunk than with what lay hidden underground. Many trees display a dominant tap root, that single root which started the plant on her life journey and from which several secondary roots branch off in search of moisture. At her size and age, *Strobus* had only the barest remnants of her initial tap root. Rather, she had developed five large roots that penetrated the sandy soil. Surprisingly shallow, the roots were firm enough to keep her anchored in the absence of erosion or wind exposure. Yet in recent years a remarkable transition had occurred, and her secondary roots had begun to join with those from other pines. In essence, *Strobus* became part of a colossal living organism, extending through miles of virgin forest, and in this collective manner, each tree helped ensure the survival of the other. Though alone not enough to assure the dominance of white pine, it did form a symbolic union.

At age one hundred, *Strobus* dominated the vicinity. Her trunk swelled double the width of surrounding trees. Her canopy dominated the sky. A mighty power in the New Hampshire forest, she notably stood out from her peers. In addition to her dominant width and height, she now leaned slightly, though still secure in her roots. Others like *Strobus* had survived to this point. But in their particular groves, they stood out as ancient progenitors and examples of what their species might achieve.

In the spring of 1562, a dozen creatures walking upright entered the grove, as they did occasionally, but this time they displayed more than passing interest. This party of Abenaki hunters carefully assessed many of the trees in the area, but when they came upon *Strobus* and her nearest competitor to her west, great excitement erupted. The men slapped her trunk, concerned by her split crown and modest lean. The

flawless vertical rise and full healthy crown of her neighbor made their decision easy.

They kindled a controlled fire about the perimeter of this great tree near Strobos, and slowly the base of the trunk withered in ash and smoke. Attending Abenaki took great care, cutting away the charcoal with stone tools while watching that no sparks kindled nearby trees. Soon, this mighty rival of Strobos teetered in the mild April breeze, and then in a great rush, this worthy tree toppled to the floor in the direction demarcated by the Abenaki. Over the ensuing days, they slowly burned and hollowed the trunk of this pine, which gradually gave form to three dugout canoes, on which the Abenaki could ply the waters of the Piscataqua River that summer.

The seasons waxed and waned, but Strobos endured. She continued to grow, more slowly now and subdued. But she was already a giant. Strobos had now lived a century and a half. Abenaki Indians returned, harvesting a tree every few years. They even passed Strobos at times, stopping to admire her, but left her alone.

She entered the seventeenth century in excellent health. As her crown competed for the tallest spire in the forest, Strobos had occasionally been struck by lightning, but each time she had been able to replace lost limbs with new growth that sprouted healthy green needles. She stood a towering specimen, 130 feet tall, five-and-a-half feet wide, the deep fissures in her bark more than an inch wide and deep. Symmetrical crown. She was everything her species had accomplished across eastern North America in the thousands of years of their dominance.

When Martin Pring explored the Piscataqua region in 1603 in search of valuable sassafras, Strobos was among those soaring timbers that captivated the dashing English captain: "Although I find no sassafras in this fair region called Pascattaway, mighty pine dominate the North American forest. I am especially awed by one grizzled old pine with a modest lean not far from the Piscataqua. I claim her for His Majesty."

Strobos had lived long, but she could scarcely be called old. If conditions were right, she might live four hundred years or more, and so far Strobos had shown she was equal to all challenges.

By 1681, Strobos had stood the test of time. She was now over two hundred years old and measured an incredible 170 feet tall. Her thick

and rugged trunk, seemingly impenetrable, measured an unthinkable six feet in circumference, and her weight, if any scales might have weighed her, would have registered an astounding twenty tons. She had long since outlived her nearest rivals, and in fact now stood among the dominant trees in the vast forest. Strobos wasn't a remarkable specimen, for many of her species had outlasted long odds and grown to such heights, and trees like Strobos might be found in every grove on the eastern part of the continent. But in her particular stand, Strobos was impressive, the dominant and primeval specimen of the virgin forest, and she looked as though she might last for all time.

The year began no differently than others in the past two centuries, but in spring an excited mass of two-legged newcomers came to the forest, speaking quickly and pointing with glee at all the trees in the area. Though she was aware, Strobos gave no heed to their words or actions, for the Abenaki had come and gone from this area often enough before, occasionally harvesting one giant pine but more often hunting and gathering what they needed from other animals and shrubs.

But these were not Abenaki. Their skin was much paler, and their heads were topped with colorful mats of blond, red, and brown hair. A few appeared to know the area better than others, but all carried sharp metal objects, and knew how to use them. With these cutting instruments they proceeded to every old and mature white pine in the vicinity, spending considerable time at each. Then they approached Strobos. The creatures jabbered excitedly below her, and found amazement when three of them together could not ring her trunk with their arms. Then they went to work. First they cut a large oval in her trunk, and removed all bark in the circumference so the soft pulpy wood inside lay exposed. Then they swiftly chipped away at the fleshy material, and inside carved a deep arrow pointing up to the sky. When this mutilation was complete, the attending men stepped back and one said, "This for sure is a king's pine."

Strobos gave the matter little attention. On her massive trunk, the wound the English men had inflicted was only superficial, and soon after rapid reactions occurred in the area, much like antibodies for a human wound. Chemical processes sought to staunch the flow of sticky sap from the injury, while the exposed wood underwent similar changes to harden the lacerated wood and begin its gradual change to prickly bark. In its context, the incision was no more than a bug bite, bringing momentary discomfort but soon forgotten. Strobos continued her reign

as queen of the North American forest, with no other competitor within thirty years of challenging her.

A year and a half later, though to Strobis it seemed sooner, a great army of these creatures returned to the area. Almost immediately they organized into teams, and one by one, these groups of men fanned across the forest, pointing to timber that bore the king's emblem.

Chop. Chop. Chop.

Crackle. Crackle. Crash!

Again and again, the relentless hacking of steel on wood repeated itself and echoed across the valley. One after another, great stands of timber that had taken decades and centuries to grow fell in a few tumultuous moments, shaking the ground like an explosion of cannon. For acres around, forest that had endured for thousands of years was reduced to protruding, uneven stumps, while all about the ground lay covered with branches and needles. Great oxen bore the mighty trunks away to unseen places, and Strobis became vaguely aware of intense sunlight all around her, momentarily shocking her system.

One day, a group of men pointed excitedly at her, stood around, and began hacking at the base of her trunk with their sharp axes. Long cords were tied around her trunk further up, and teams of men took turns in cutting her trunk away. It took over an hour, and while bark remained connected to roots, Strobis continued to think she would live as she had for two hundred years, for nourishment from her roots continued to flow up to her crown. Then she swayed precariously, toppled in the manner directed by men below, and she landed with a deafening crash that seemed to echo for hours. Undaunted, the loggers pressed on. While teams stripped the bark from her massive trunk, others approached her canopy with swinging axes. In minutes her once glorious crown would be left to rot on the forest floor along with the branches from hundreds of her neighbors, while her remains were hauled to the Piscataqua River.

But in the frenzy of sawdust and slash left behind, her seeds floated and danced in the wind.

Thinking of You

JONATHAN HALL

At the top of the stairs modeling earrings,
Tramping on your snowshoes as if they were wings,
Warming your almond drink to the right degree,
Frowning as you check the chicken cooking for you and me.

The curl of your hair as you groom,
The wink of your eyes across the room,
Laughing at a story with meaning so deep,
Thinking of you as I drift off to sleep...

The Steppes

JONATHAN HALL

I shall never feel the same about the wind
Or horses on the steppes,
Or cold winter nights
With the snow blowing outside,
Now that I have found you
And you have found me.

8/29/15

Wild horses no longer roam the steppes,
The winter snow is a curse.
The moon shines like death,
Now that your love has gone.
Did you ever exist?

7/9/16

Caged Bird

WENDY JENSEN

Have you ever had a secret so big it tried to bust a hole out of your chest? A bird taking wing, her rushing feathers filling up almost all of your lung space until it felt like those fragile little air bags would simply collapse—but your ribs, prison bars, keep the feathered traitor from flying away free.

I fear that release. Won't it hurt? If the bars ever open enough to allow escape, and the wings, finally freed of my skeleton, burst out of my chest and spread wide, claws scraping in one last push against flesh and blood...won't it hurt? And the bird herself, flying free into the trees, would her presence in the world somehow diminish my own? Would her shadow suddenly flitting over the field broadcast my weakness, my shame?

Perhaps this bird keeps me alive and gives me meaning. Without her hooked beak and claws scrabbling near my heart, her quick breaths drawn in around the edges of my own lungs, without this intense captive life within, I might just lose all sense of myself. I might become a hollowed-out plastic person, a mannequin. When my bird flies (I say “when” now because I’m slowly beginning to realize it’s inevitable) my mannequin self might just retreat behind the display window glass and stand frozen, awaiting the next artfully draped bright bits of cloth, arranged by a stranger.

An escape, marked only by a few fallen feathers, and suddenly the life is gone. But how can my very existence rely upon a secret so strong that it takes flight against my wishes? Would speaking its name drain my life away just as surely as the bird’s escape?

He hurt me.

A swell of fear, left over from long ago, when I was small and he was big. Never tell, never tell, it's our special secret.

But I'm going to tell.

One day I will fly. One day I will speak his name aloud to all who will listen, and they will turn to me and see me for who I really am. Maybe some will cringe in disgust, pulling their hands from mine quickly, cowards. Maybe others will wonder at the change, the difference

between who they thought was Wendy and she who spoke such brazen horrible secrets.

But there will be a few who will understand, deep inside. A few whose birds have already flown and now wait for mine, circling in the updrafts above the clouds.

Awakenings

PIPER TALLIS

Baltaak's eyes fluttered open and he found himself in the middle of a warm cloud. Disoriented, it took him a moment, but then the stimulants flowing through his system did their job and he remembered: *I am on a pioneer class colony ship. My cryogenic pod is bringing me out of suspended animation. The ship is headed toward Vuori, a brand-new planet.*

With a beep and a whoosh, the capsule vented and thick mist clouds spilled from the sides of the narrow chamber. Baltaak huffed in frustration. His instructions before going under had been explicit: *Hang my Vermeer directly above the cocoon.* The acquisition from the Rijksmuseum was one of his favorites. Her luminous figure was the first thing he'd wanted to see on waking. However, the small rectangular alcove above the suspension chamber, constructed especially for his treasure, was empty.

He remained still as the animation program continued its work. Electrodes detached and his oxygen mask retracted. Baltaak winced as the long needles, having delivered their cocktail of substances, pulled from his thick neck. A soft pop signaled releasing locks. The plasticine hood slid back and the dry, antiseptic-smelling cabin air washed over his face.

Where's my purser? he wondered, pushing himself upright with a wrench of pain. *An assistant should be here to help me climb out.* While Baltaak waited for the light-headedness to subside he examined the executive-level cabin. This was his first opportunity to see the life-sized version of the holographic proposal. He twisted to his right and gasped. The graceful curved wall of glass provided a panoramic view of space. He scanned the sky, but was unable to identify Earth, the filthy dying planet, among the twinkling stars.

Tearing his gaze from the racing cosmos, he moved his eyes to the left. A wingback geri-chair sat in the corner angled to face the window. Its sleek black leather contrasted elegantly with the intricate silken tapestries, with their scenes of medieval conquest, adorning the wall behind. The narrow table alongside the chair was made of rosewood. Hand-carved mythological creatures occupied every inch of the legs and

frieze. Delicate unicorns reared from each of the table knees, their spiraled horns pinning the thick ebony table top in place. Further to the left, the wall across from the picture window held an arched portal leading to the passageway. With a soft groan he twisted around. The final wall revealed a closed paneled mahogany door and an ornate highboy liberated from a Boston museum.

Baltaak remembered the instructions he had been given for reanimation. Phase II required the medical recliner. With an impatient grunt, he tried climbing from the cryogenic chamber, but his legs refused to move. *Right. Lower body paralysis. Temporary aftereffect of suspension.*

He searched the room until he located the small blue globe set in the corner near the portal opening. Baltaak waved at it. He expected a response, but the small light gave no acknowledgement signal. His anger began simmering. *Why have a security monitoring system if no one is going to watch it? Where the hell is my assistant? No matter. I can do this myself.*

Baltaak pulled his upper body as far as he could on to the lip of the pod. He took a deep breath before toppling himself from the chamber. Pain shot through his arms and neck as he landed on the plush wool carpet. Breathing in the rich earthy smell, he muttered, "Someone's getting their ass reamed."

After that ridiculous flop he was grateful no one was at the monitoring center. As he pulled himself across the rug, sweat prickled and ran along his body, trapped by the stasis suit.

He reached the chair and, with a grunt, hoisted his bulky frame onto the leather-covered molding gel. The chair detected an occupant and initiated the muscle massage cycle. Baltaak began to relax as the sonic pulses hummed through his body. "So," he mused aloud to the empty room, "they woke me up. We must be close."

Baltaak lifted the soft padded armrest flap and smiled at his row of shiny multicolored buttons. "BREAKFAST!" he barked, tapping his dark green personal staff call button. "Two, no, make that three, quail eggs lightly poached. With some buttered white toast, thick cut bacon, fruit cup, hot coffee, and fresh-squeezed orange juice." In response, a slight hiss sounded from the speaker in the left wing-rail. Baltaak narrowed his eyes at the cloth-covered disc. *Just how much of the equipment on my ship is sub-par?*

He settled into a mesmerized zone, watching the stars whizzing by, until he realized five long minutes had passed and no food had been delivered. "What the HELL!" he yelled. *No assistance purser. No food. Did*

someone wake me before they woke my staff? Typical incompetence. Baltaak waved once again at the security globe. When there was still no response, he tried pressing the silver button. *One of the ship's general staff will have to do.* He held the buzzer down until the speaker crackled once again. He thought he heard the word “momentarily” through the static. Satisfied, Baltaak glanced at the twinkling lights before flicking the hologram emitter control. The large window clouded briefly. Once the glass cleared, the floor-to-ceiling portal looked out over a life-sized 3-D image of the family estate.

Baltaak grinned. The immense white Georgian-style structure was perched on a small rise under a brilliant blue sky. Back on Earth it sat on a high bluff facing the Atlantic Ocean, each of the tall, evenly spaced windows providing a spectacular view of the sea. The extraordinary detail of the hologram pleased him. Baltaak felt as if he could step through the glass onto the lush green lawn. Mature lilac bushes, laden with deep lavender flowers, flanked the gleaming coal-black front door. Additional plump purple and white shrubs dotted the curved concrete drive. A recessed fan clicked on, wafting the heavy scent of lilacs throughout the cabin.

A small boy with wideset shoulders and slick raven hair raced across the scene. Himself, at about eight or nine, when he was still a happy only child. Not far behind, a younger, delicate girl gave chase, her thick auburn tresses secured in a long braid. Baltaak's smile broadened. Jalni, heiress to an immense fortune. The small forms continued their sprint up the hill and disappeared around the back of the mansion. *What happened to my beautiful home after we all fled into space? No matter,* he thought, his mood lifting. *I will make a bigger and better copy on Vuori.*

At the door's soft swish, Baltaak gestured toward the ornate side table without looking at the purser. *About time.*

“Hallo Brother,” a familiar voice called cheerily from the entryway.

Baltaak snapped the image off before turning. “Oh, so you're awake too?” He grumbled at the younger man. *Irritating, even after prolonged suspended animation, Tegus manages to ooze smooth charm from across a room.*

“I've been up a while,” the younger man quipped, sauntering toward the temporarily opaque glass.

Baltaak examined his brother closely. The familiar, well-proportioned square face, full mouth, and wide grey eyes showed no signs of unexpected aging. Tegus had probably been awake no longer

than a few cycles. “How were the budget accommodations?” he asked, eyes flicking over Tegos’s tattered jumpsuit.

Tegos bowed at Baltaak. “Fine, quite fine. I thank you. It was very generous of you to secure me a cryo-chamber with your service staff.”

“Of course it was,” Baltaak murmured through pressed lips.

“Now I have something for you.” Tegos drew a small clear pouch from a pocket. The thick liquid contents looked vaguely like split-pea soup.

“Ugh, don’t be ridiculous.” Baltaak warded off Tegos’s foul-looking gift with a raised hand. “I have a decent breakfast on the way. In fact, why don’t you do something useful and go find my food?” He made a shooing motion toward the door.

Tegos remained in place and the brothers stared at each other for several long moments before Tegos finally broke the impasse. “Where’s Jalni?”

The older man frowned and remained silent. *I don’t owe him any explanation*, he reminded himself. *Although, wait*. Something clicked in his mind. *Tegos was housed with my staff. If Tegos is awake, then wouldn’t my other staff be awake? If they’re awake, where are they?*

“How did you get up here and what do you want?”

An odd half-smile flitted across Tegos’s features as he again proffered the pouch to his brother.

“I *told* you,” Baltaak hissed, eyes skittering toward the hatch, “I have real food on the way.”

“Are you sure about that?” Tegos asked, tearing the tab from the top of the pouch and sniffing the contents. “Whew, Christ,” he muttered, twisting away from the concoction. “Putrid, I agree. Smells a bit like well-used sweat socks. However, may I suggest you appreciate the offering?”

Baltaak frowned. *Why did I agree to fund Tegos’s passage? What the hell was I thinking? Same shit, different planet*. Baltaak watched as his brother held the container up to the inset ceiling lights, twisting it back and forth. “Tell you what,” Baltaak nodded toward Tegos’s hand, “You enjoy.”

“Oh,” Tegos shrugged. “I’ve already eaten.”

Purple rage suffused Baltaak’s face. “SECURITY! SECURITY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!” He wildly waved at the small sphere with one hand while the other held down the bright blue security button. This time, the speaker remained silent.

Tegus balanced the small pouch upright on the decorative table in the silence following his brother's outburst. "Calm yourself," he hushed. Leaning in close, Tegus whispered into his brother's ear, "This will get you nowhere."

"What are you talking about?" Baltaak pushed at the younger man's chest.

"Drink." Tegus shoved the slick pouch into Baltaak's massive hands. "Your body needs moisture and nutrients."

The older man's eyes narrowed at Tegus before he tried a micro-sip and gagged on the thick sludge. Baltaak twisted away and thrust the container back at his brother.

"Hold your breath and swig it down," Tegus instructed through clenched teeth.

Baltaak studied the younger man's face for a moment before gulping down the mixture as quickly as he could, shuddering against the urge to retch it up.

Tegus took the spent pouch and folded it into a small square as he spoke. "Here's the thing. Circumstances have changed."

"What circumstances?"

"The ship."

"My ship," Baltaak corrected.

"Well, maybe not so much anymore," Tegus replied.

"You're ridiculous."

Tegus sighed, "Taakie, the ship is under the control of the Veda Group."

"You know I hate it when you call me that. What in the hell is a Veda Group?"

Tegus plastered a broad smile across his face, his eyes scanning the room as he spoke. "Several of our passengers have come together to form the Veda Group. People from Veda will be piloting this ship to its destination."

"Veda? You sound like a fool." *What kind of half-assed game was Tegus up to? He can't really expect me to believe this nonsense that some mysterious group has seized control of my ship.*

"Just so you know." Tegus broke off, patting at his thin jumpsuit and producing something that looked like a bloated IV bag. He ripped it open, placed the extension tab between his lips and sucked down several mouthfuls of the clear liquid before offering the remaining contents to his brother. Then he continued as if uninterrupted. "There's a wide

variety of people involved. Some of the individuals even have schooling.”

“HA!” Baltaak sputtered, lapsing into a mirthless chuckle. “Service people? Now you want me to believe a bunch of *Service* level fools have managed to get control of a massive colony ship? It’s not even possible. You think I am an idiot.”

“Not an idiot,” Tegos ignored his brother’s amusement, “just thick-headed.” He scoured the room once again with his eyes before continuing in a light amused tone. “They prefer to be called Contributors. The thing about Contributors is that they are the ones who know how to do stuff. We *expect* them to do stuff. *Stuff* like programming the reanimation sequences for every pod on board.”

“Please. Are you asking me to believe some Service people woke themselves up early and decided to steal my ship?”

Tegos chuckled softly. “Believe what you want. I can tell you Veda controls all the ship functions and they are in the process of deciding who on the ship will proceed to Genesis, or Vuori, as you call it. Anyone who has no use, *or* who appears to have an *incompatible* personality, is ejected, out there.” He waved toward the blinking stars.

His brother’s unusual affect sent a squirm along Baltaak’s neck. “Tegos, you’re making no sense,” Baltaak’s voice sounded dismissive but his mind raced. *This can’t be true. It has to be a hoax. Best to play along. Find out what Tegos is up to. If there are some disgruntled Service people on board I’ll make sure they are paid off. Then, whichever Counselor family sponsored such trash will answer to me for their lack of oversight.*

“Really?” The younger man glared at his brother. “Because I’ve seen them do it.” Tegos rubbed at his temples mumbling, “The ones I saw ejected weren’t even woken up. Their bodies were dumped out into space while still under cryo.” With a small shudder he swiveled his body on his seat to face the view. “Damn decent of them I suppose.”

“Fine, so tell me, who do you say was thrust from the ship?”

“Well,” Tegos replied as he licked at his lips. “I’m not certain on the names. The ones I saw, well, they were some of the older Counselors.”

No names, Baltaak thought. *Convenient.* He felt an irrational anger begin building. “No one would be here if it wasn’t for the Counselors!” he blurted. “We paid for the whole *fucking* thing! A *Counselor* funded the passage of every person on board. A *Counselor* gave each person on this ship a chance for a new start on a fresh planet. A *Counselor* saved the life of every person on this ship.”

Tegus responded with a shrug. “So, what?”

Baltaak’s normally olive-hued complexion flushed red, then drained of color before he finally managed to gasp, “So *what?*”

Tegus smiled a little sadly. “Exactly. Out here,” he said, pointing in every conceivable direction, “no one cares.”

His brother’s words had a chilling effect. Baltaak fought down his rising feelings to focus on the situation. *What if it was true? What if a bunch of renegades had seized the ship? Surely the people on board would feel an obligation, or at least some loyalty, to their Counselor sponsors? If not. The doubt sent a chill down his spine. But even if they got control of the ship how could they hope to keep control? His mind argued. Every Counselor on board has their own Enforcer staff. What kind of Enforcer would just willingly take orders from a Service hack? What about my security staff? Can I count on them?* He thought about the group of men and women he’d brought along. *Possibly, he considered. Especially if I am the one to revive them. If I tell them I am rescuing them from space execution. Entice them with the beautiful, powerful weapons at my disposal. First though, I need my legs to work.*

“You must really be in trouble this time.” Baltaak forced a chuckle, unwilling to admit aloud that Tegus might be telling him the truth. “What is it? Has some trouble managed to follow you from Earth?” Baltaak’s round, chestnut-colored eyes bulged with mock horror. “Let me guess. In your time awake you connected with a nubile who is now trying to extort you with a brat.” Baltaak scrutinized Tegus’s lean form. “Fine. You agree to join my servant staff. Formally relinquish any claim to Counselor rank and I’ll have a small bungalow constructed on my estate for you and for your, heh, responsibilities. I trust,” he glared at his brother, “that will be sufficient?”

Tegus’s laughter was genuine. Swiping at his eyes, it took a few moments before he could speak. “Forget your resources. Everything’s gone. Veda controls it. All of it. No one in Veda cares what you, or any other Counselor, had back on earth. They don’t care that the Counselors funded this mission. Are you interested in hearing what they *do* care about?”

Baltaak grunted his assent, only half-paying attention to his brother. *They only think they have everything. There is no way they found my secret weapons stash.*

“They care about *surviving.*” Tegus’s voice broke through Baltaak’s thoughts.

“Surviving,” Baltaak rolled the word around his mouth, staring at his brother for a few moments. “Let’s just say it was true. Let’s say I believe you that a bunch of criminals have stolen my ship. I don’t see the connection between stealing a ship and survival.” He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Why are you here?”

Tegus nodded and took a deep breath. “To help prepare you.”

“Prepare me for what?”

“Your trial,” Tegus responded.

“My what?” Baltaak started to rear from his inclined position, but then managed to fight down his flash of rage. “What the hell are you talking about!”

“Your trial, brother,” Tegus smirked. “Where you stand before a committee appointed by Veda and convince them you can become a Contributor in the colony, and just as importantly, where you demonstrate you are *compatible* to the group.”

While Baltaak’s mind reeled with the new information dump, Tegus continued. “Speaking of survival. Where is Jalni? She’s not on board. I checked. Did you at least make provisions for her before you left?”

“What is your obsession with my wife’s whereabouts?” Baltaak’s face again flushed with emotion. “I don’t remember you asking about Jalni when we boarded. In fact, as I recall, you were pretty eager to get your ass into a cryo-chamber.”

“Fair enough,” Tegus nodded, bright spots of scarlet flaming across his pale cheeks. “Just be prepared to explain to Veda why you left your wife behind on a depleted planet.”

Baltaak inhaled deeply and held it for a few seconds before exhaling. He avoided his brother’s eyes as he spoke, “Jalni’s dead.” Glancing over, Baltaak saw from the look of horror on Tegus’s face that his news had the intended effect. “Ebola, Millennium-J version.”

“You didn’t arrange for the vaccine? What’s wrong with you!” Tegus swung back toward Baltaak, half-rising, arms flung wide.

Baltaak could feel the frustrated anger pulsating from Tegus and his own anger rose briefly to match it before flickering out. “The vaccine didn’t work. She had an aberration. Doctors should have caught it on her genetic screening.” *At least that’s the version I’m going with*, his mind whispered. He ran broad fingers through his over-long dark locks. “I warned her. Reminded her the slums were unsafe, full of disease. She didn’t want to hear it. Refused to stop her charity work.” *That’s what she gets for not listening to me*, he added silently.

Tegus slumped down further on the recliner. “When?”

Baltaak’s eyes remained fixed on the stars “About a year before we left.”

“Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you tell me?” Tegus’s voice cracked.

When Baltaak shifted his gaze to look at Tegus his eyes were hard. “You were off on one of your ‘get richer’ schemes. What was I supposed to do? Beg you to come home? What could you have done anyway?”

“I would’ve gotten to say good-bye.” Tegus’s voice was a barely audible whisper.

The two men sat, each absorbed in their own thoughts, not meeting each other’s eyes. *Was this actually real? A trial? That’s unfair.* Baltaak’s mind reeled. *All of them entered into contracts. Every single passenger promised to serve their Counselor in exchange for passage to a wonderful new planet full of natural resources. How many were participating in this travesty? How many people were trying to avoid their obligations? Who did they think they were?*

Baltaak finally broke the silence, “So?”

“So.” Tegus echoed, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

“This trial?” Baltaak prompted.

“Oh, yes.” Tegus spoke softly and paused frequently. “Aiding the group’s survival. Basically, well, what they want to know is, um, what can you, or, more importantly, what are you willing to do?”

More crap. I need to see for myself what’s going on. I need to get out of here. “What do you mean *willing* to do?” Baltaak felt his toes begin to wriggle inside his booties. *Movement returning!*

“Well, think about it. What do you know about starting a settlement on a raw planet? Do you have skills to offer?” His voice regained some of its usual confidence as he continued speaking, squeezing at Baltaak’s waving foot. “Come on, let’s be honest, you know nothing about physics, terraforming, medicine, engineering, and good God, have you ever even hung one of your own precious paintings?” Tegus stood, swinging his brother’s legs over the side of the geri-bed, ignoring his mumbled protests. “So, if you can’t do any of those things, the question becomes, what *can* you do to help the colony succeed?” Tegus tucked his arm under Baltaak’s broad shoulders and hauled him upright.

“Fine.” Baltaak worked to keep his voice light and cooperative even though the words tasted like bile in his mouth. “Tell them I understand.

We are all in this together and I want to participate in the colony's survival."

"I am not your advocate," Tegos replied. "Anything you want to say, you have to say for yourself. Understand though, they will send you out an airlock without a second thought if they don't believe you will be an asset."

"What good are you if you aren't an advocate?" Baltaak tore away from his brother, walking unsteadily on his own.

"Maybe I could offer you some advice?"

"Advice?" Humorless laughter burbled from Baltaak's mouth. "Advice? From the man who squandered his portion of the family resources on ridiculous schemes? From the man who when his own resources were gone, conned additional resources from his grandfather? Scammed the one person who thought you could do no wrong? Advice? From that man?"

Tegos nodded, squaring his shoulders and maneuvering himself directly in front of Baltaak. "Yep. From that man."

"Very well, provide your wisdom." *This should be interesting.*

"Eagerly volunteer to do the nastiest, most demeaning tasks."

Baltaak laughed, the deep throaty laugh usually reserved only for Jalni. "Is *that* what you told them you would do? This Veda *believed* you?"

Tegos glared at his brother. "What is so amusing?"

"You?" Baltaak gasped to breathe through his laughter. "They believe that you'll do hard manual labor? That you will do, what did you call them, 'nasty' tasks?"

"Why not?" Tegos's fists balled at his sides.

"Well, let me see." Baltaak wiped his eyes, fighting for control. "How many times did you schedule the dog-walker for Grandpa's Komondors? Remind me how many times you gave them their 'attention time.'"

"The mop dogs?" Tegos sneered, lips barely moving as he spoke through a clenched jaw. "You *know* I'm allergic. Besides, you needed the exercise."

"Yes, of course, exercise." Baltaak continued chuckling. "Well, you've managed to keep your physique intact. You didn't spend enough time sitting in our offices to grow soft."

"My skills were better put to use in other areas."

“Oh, yes.” Baltaak barely suppressed a giggle. “Your skills. Did those skills include tending to your fellow man? Remind me, how many times did you help serve Christmas dinner to the Miners?”

Tegus’s eyes danced around the room as he responded. “Grandpa explained it to you. You’re robust. That environment did you no harm. My health has always been more delicate than yours.”

“I see,” Baltaak responded with a mock serious expression, “I guess that also explains why you disappeared when grandfather became ill. No need to chance getting sick by tending to an old man, right?”

“Disappeared? Is *that* what you’re calling it?” Tegus’s eyes settled on Baltaak with a look of pure fury. “Can’t even admit the truth millions of miles from home? *You’re* the one who made sure I was out of the way. Arranged some quality alone time for yourself. Made sure all that pesky paperwork was in your favor. Why share any inheritance with little brother, right?”

Baltaak shook his head. “Tsk, nothing is ever your fault, right?” He spoke as he made his way toward the paneled door. “No one forced you to leave.”

“Well,” Tegus walked back to the chaise and lowered his body onto it. The chair’s gel reformed itself around his body. “I just want the colony to survive.” The broad smile was back in place.

Baltaak chuckled again as he cracked open the thick panel door and caught his first glimpse of the sumptuous marble behind. He turned and spoke to his brother from the entryway. “My staff, the, um, Contributors on board.” He paused, waiting until he was certain he had Tegus’s full attention. “They are all from families Jalni helped. In fact, Jalni picked most of them.” He ducked into the bathroom without waiting for Tegus’s response.

Baltaak barely glanced at the deep purple marble bath and matching steam shower. He lowered himself to his knees and flung open the cherry cabinet doors under the sink. *Don’t know how to do anything my ass*, Baltaak gloated. *You don’t know as much as you think you do. I’ve got a few skills up my sleeve*. His hands quickly located the emergency repair kit tucked under the cabinet lip. Baltaak used the wrench to uncouple a short, thick pipe. The heavy carbon filter gave the tube a nice heft in his hand. He wasn’t going to be Tegus’s prisoner anymore. He was getting to his Enforcers.

Peeking out into the main cabin he saw that Tegus had found the hologram emitter and was absorbed by images of himself and Jalni as

teenagers. The two were laughing and clipping bouquets from heavily laden lilac bushes.

“You see,” Tegus called. “Come look how charming you can be.”

Baltaak crept quietly into the main cabin. He held the liberated pipe piece low against his thigh.

Tegus’s focus remained on the hologram as the program continued. The lilacs shrank away and a swath of giant multicolored dahlias burst open alongside the flagstone walkway. Red, white, and blue buntings extended from the windows while a matching swag hung over the front door. The bright day deepened to night and brilliant fireworks lit up the sky. Two shadowed figures watched from a thick blanket.

Baltaak’s booted feet were silent on the thick carpet. He worked his way around the perimeter of the room, approaching Tegus from behind.

The 3-D display rotated into autumn. A few fluffy white clouds drifted across a crystal blue sky. The leaves on the white birch trees planted along the right side of the property shone bright yellow in the sun. A large pile of dried leaves was mounded at the bottom of the driveway. The college-age versions of Baltaak & Jalni, bundled in thick, brightly colored wool sweaters, crept from the mansion with sly smiles on their faces. Baltaak threw something toward the leaves. Flames roared from the center of the pile and Jalni clapped in delight. The hidden fan kicked back on, distributing the sweet aroma of burning leaves.

Baltaak inched forward and stopped an arm’s length behind the seated figure.

Out past the glass wall the season swept into winter. The sky darkened to a soft twilight. Thick swirls of snow danced across the scene. The mansion windows glowed warmly. A large green wreath with a red bow festooned the front door and smoke puffed merrily from each of the brick chimneys. Curtains blurred the figures moving from room to room.

Keeping his breathing low and even Baltaak raised the cylinder, his attention focused on Tegus’s temple.

“You know they’re watching, right?” Tegus sounded tired. “Watching, listening,” he sighed, whispering the last. “Judging.”

Baltaak’s arm stilled. “What do you mean?” his voice came out oddly strangled, his arm dropping limply to his side.

“The security globe, the one you keep hoping will light up, it’s a hologram. The real one,” his arm gestured over his head, “is hidden

within the tapestry. Oh Bal.” An oily glee tinged his tone. “Can’t you see? The trial. It’s now.”

Baltaak began shaking and with a scream lunged at Tegus. “You’ve known! This whole time you’ve known!” Tegus sprang up and out of the way. Baltaak landed with a thud against the recliner as his face twisted with anger. “What kind of game are you playing? I *saved* you. Brought you on board. *Funded* your passage. *This* is how you show your gratitude?”

“Gratitude?” Tegus’s voice dripped with venom. “Paid? Yeah, you paid all right, with my money! My inheritance.”

Baltaak smiled with no warmth. “If it’s true. If this Veda has been listening then another one of your harebrained schemes has backfired. Now they know you’re a lying slack who will tell them anything you think they want to hear. They’ve learned that the most effort you put into anything is in avoiding work.”

“What they know,” Tegus spat back, “is that I matter. I have something to offer and that you are nothing but a thief. A common thief.”

“Thief? The family fortune was mine long before you intruded into my life.”

“Intruded?” Tegus murmured, “Oh, yes, being born. The ultimate crime. How could I? But it’s not just that, you’ve stolen other things.”

“Other things?” This time Baltaak sounded genuinely puzzled.

“I think you know,” Tegus’s voice cracked as he swallowed.

It took a few moments before Baltaak made the connection. “Is this about Jalni again?”

“She belonged with me.”

“Please,” Baltaak jeered. “She was smarter than that. She wasn’t going to let you squander her fortune. Besides,” he narrowed his eyes at his brother, “she loved me.”

Tegus shook his head. “No. She *tolerated* you.”

Baltaak made another half-hearted attempt to lunge up at Tegus, but his rage was spent.

The portal’s distinctive swish caught Baltaak’s attention and he turned. A diminutive red-headed woman slowly entered the room. A small smile quirked up one side of her bow-shaped mouth. She strolled toward the center of the room, thick curls bouncing against her shoulders.

Baltaak's eyes were on the stun baton she held between her hands. She kept the multi-barreled weapon trained on both men.

The young woman first looked over Baltaak and then Tegos before she spoke in a soft but commanding tone. "Seems like that should be quite enough. Are you ready for your verdicts?"

Apartment 6B

from Seven Storied Houses

DJ GERIBO

There was a knock at the door. Geoffrey turned in his chair towards the door, wondering if whoever was there would go away. Solicitors often walked through the building, looking for votes, selling subscriptions, and making any number of door-to-door sales pitches to the tenants in the building. Although the entrance door to the apartment building was locked, somehow they always managed to get into the building where they would walk the halls knocking on doors hoping at least one of them would open, allowing them to go through their spiel. A small part of Geoffrey felt bad for not answering his door; he knew that the people knocking were trying to make a living. He thought that they either didn't have an education and so couldn't get anything better, not even a sales job, or they didn't qualify for any of the available jobs out there. Maybe they were even overqualified, but that was the most unlikely case. More likely was that this was a second or even a third job for some of them.

But deep down, it really didn't matter to him because he would never answer his door. He also knew that most of the people who lived in the building were at work, like the young couple in 3B, the cute, single woman in 1B, and the single mom in 5A. He never knew for sure if the bum in 1A was working or not since he seemed unable to hold down a job. And the older woman in 8A, most likely retired, was in and out of the apartment with her busy life. It seems she was involved in lots of different things and probably kept herself busy so she wouldn't have to think about how sad her life was. The only ones for sure who were probably around were the Switzers in 2A, an elderly couple who stayed in nearly as much as Geoffrey himself did. But just about everyone else in the building was at work.

Geoffrey, recruited by the government right out of college, did a lot of computer forensic investigation work. He preferred to think of himself as a spy but he would never tell anyone that, if he ever talked to

anyone. Spying on his neighbors was a hobby; spying on other countries was his job.

He'd lived in the apartment building longer than anyone else who was currently living there. Many of them came and left, except the Switzers who moved in just after he did, when the building was first built seventeen years ago. He got first choice for apartments and chose one as inconspicuous as possible, in the middle but close to the stairs. He thought about an end unit but figured those were the first to get broken into. And definitely he was living upstairs; he felt safer up there. It also gave him the opportunity to set up cameras in the hallways so he could watch the comings and goings of all the units. No one lived a very exciting life, from what he could observe, certainly not as fascinating as his life was. If they only knew they would be shocked, he was sure. And he was pretty sure that what he was doing was illegal and he could get into serious trouble. But he was confident they would never find out about the cameras. No one paid any attention to what was in the corners of the hallways. They left their apartments; they came back to their apartments.

The knock again. The solicitors, whoever they were representing, usually knocked only once and hearing no sounds inside would move on to the next apartment. This one was persistent. Geoffrey remained silent and waited.

Silence was his forte. He imagined that the single man who lived below him would guess that the apartment above him was empty. Geoffrey's persona was to remain invisible to the world, which allowed him to travel far and wide unseen and unheard. That was how he was able to be so successful and why the government gave him the most challenging projects. He was very good at his job.

A third knock came. Now Geoffrey was curious. He crept stealthily to his front door and up to the peephole. He was shocked to see the young woman from apartment 1B. Why was she knocking on his door? He really never talked to anyone and didn't think anyone in the building knew anything about him.

He peeked again out the peephole. She seemed to be holding a dish, a casserole maybe, in her hands.

"Geoffrey, are you there?"

He jumped back from the door, pushing himself against the wall as if she could somehow see him and he was now invisible. Not only was she knocking at his door persistently but she also knew his name. What

to do, what to do? He didn't think he could get out of this one. He had to answer.

He coughed and, after stepping away from the wall, walked up to the door as though he was coming in from the other room. Sliding the chain from the door, he opened it and found himself face to face with the cutest girl he had ever seen.

"Ah, yeah, hi." He wasn't sure what to say and just coughed and shuffled his feet, suddenly uncomfortable in his own place, feeling as if it was he who had just knocked on her door and she opened up to find him standing there.

"Hi, Geoffrey? Yeah, um, my name is Sherry and I live down the hall." She pointed in the direction of her apartment.

"Yeah, so, I made this casserole and I wondered if you might like some?" She seemed as uneasy and nervous as he felt.

"Oh, um, OK." He started to take it but she seemed reluctant to let it go.

"So, um, can I come in and I'll put it on your table? And maybe you could put it in something? Do you have a plastic container or something and then I can just take my casserole dish back? Or you could just bring it to me tomorrow? I mean, if you already ate tonight?"

Everything she said ended in a question. Geoffrey realized she was more unsure of herself than he was.

"I don't cook much, I don't have time to cook, I'm really pretty busy, and I write and work so I don't cook much. But I thought if I cooked a big meal I could eat it for several days and I wouldn't have to think about cooking and I would have plenty to eat but then I realized it was too much and I couldn't eat it all before it went bad. Oh, don't worry; I just made it so it's good, I mean not bad, I mean it isn't spoiled or anything. I don't get out much, I just work in the city and come home and write. I can't believe I'm telling you all this, you don't even know me, each other, I mean we don't know each other, do we?"

The more she talked the more Geoffrey liked her and just like that, he fell in love.

[DJ Geribo's short story collection *Seven Storied Houses* is available at djgeribo.com]

The Ghoul Job

from The Travels and Tales of Jarrett and Catalina:
The Girl with the Tiger Eyes

NICHOLAS JAMES

“Why would she go off on her own like this?” I muttered as my feet clomped through the deepening mud.

When I had awoken the bedroll she’d slept on the previous night was cold next to mine. She must have had at least a few hours lead on me. I hadn’t even stirred when she got up and left—she was becoming more stealthy and capable every day.

The swamp air was hot, humid, and sickly sweet with the various scents of the long day blooms accompanying the hot season. The scent of the blooms almost seemed to dance on the tip of my tongue as I breathed heavily through my mouth. But the aroma of the flowers, as sweet and present as they were, couldn’t in all of their efforts overcome the stench of death and rot that washed through the air like waves. The hot, humid weather was typical for this time of year: it was the mid-eighth moon, the wanderer’s moon, and the ghouls had left the trail of rot and death that hung in the air.

I moved faster than I usually liked to when stalking, and slogging through a muddy swamp made the noise harder to control. The increasing stench of death and the failing aroma of the flowers told me I must be drawing closer to the ghoul den. Scouting the perimeter of the swamp late the previous day had revealed six different sets of ghoul tracks. This wasn’t the time for her to start getting independent. With my head pounding in the hot humid swamp sun and my gut threatening mutiny, I pushed on.

The grass was getting taller now, and the mud had given way to stagnant foul water that washed up over my ankles. Images and memories of Eva started flooding through my mind. *Not again, I won’t lose again.* As I walked on, I began to hope that my estimate of the number of ghouls was on the high side.

“Why a swamp? I hate swamps. I told her that swamps are smelly things where stuff dies and fighting is more difficult,” I said aloud as the water began cresting the tops of my leather boots.

I hoped she'd at least brought the peppermint oil; when I'd checked my pouch upon leaving the camp I'd noticed it missing. Why it weakens the ghouls so much I have no idea, but it always seems to do the trick. One blast of peppermint oil sent all of their senses into an uproar.

I moved into another island of thick, dead brush standing a few feet over my head, obscuring my view of anything more than a few yards ahead of me. As I walked on further the water level went down again and the terrain returned to a mud that only left shallow boot prints. My pace hastened a bit more as I broke into a small, oval-shaped clearing about five yards around.

Ghoul footprints were scattered everywhere, along with their last meal. The increase in ghoul prints also swallowed up the trail from Catalina that I'd been following. Based on what was left of the clothing and body, I could tell it was an adult and not Catalina, and thankfully not the missing boy. Eating out in the open was very out of character for ghouls—a kill of opportunity, I supposed. None of the villagers had mentioned another missing person when we took this job, and even the posting board hadn't mentioned another potential ghoul victim.

Given that no one was looking for the man, he'd most likely travelled as a merchant. If he was, then I could claim a reward if I found his medallion. I didn't have any time for that, though, so I looked the area over and made a mental marker.

I continued my advance through the thicket, slowing my steps to a shorter, quieter stride. As I cautiously stepped on to the now mostly firm dirt, I navigated another one hundred yards through the thicket, eventually reaching the edge.

Here the thicket thinned out into a vast grove with patches of thin, waist-high grass. Since I'm just north of six feet tall, this grass was rather high.

There were three enormous boulders in the swamp grotto, two on my left and one on my right. One of the boulders on my left came first, followed by the one on my right, and finally the furthest about one hundred yards away again on my left. Two dead trees stood like skeletal hands, and from this angle it seemed as if they were grasping the den entrance.

The cave was fairly tucked away and not too conspicuous, a lovely spot as far as ghoul dens go. A ghoul's age can be determined by its tracks because the older a ghoul is, the more shriveled its feet will be. When I looked at the ghoul tracks surrounding the grotto I picked out

two more much older ghouls. Older ghouls won't venture far from their den, which was why I hadn't seen their tracks earlier.

As I inspected the cave front more closely, I saw the ghouls posted as guards in the high grass just outside the entrance.

A freshly transformed ghoul is almost indistinguishable from regular people when first turned: dark around the eyes, a little pale, but human-looking enough. The more time that passes after their turn and the more human flesh they consume, the more they distort and deform from their former human appearance into a hunchbacked, wrinkled pile of vile filth. An entirely degenerated ghoul will appear like a walking corpse; this makes it hard to fit in around a village.

Usually, the older ghouls will have the newer turns go out and snatch the prey. New ghouls with their almost average appearance can still manage to creep close to villages and the villagers themselves if it's dark and the new ghoul is cautious. Unfortunately, it's usually kids they pick off since a child won't notice the subtle changes in early stage ghouls.

Luckily, as long as the ghoul brings home the prey without killing it first, they'll leave it for a few days to weaken it. Generally, ghouls consume their food alive if they can, so they like to leave their future meals to starve and weaken up. As much as they like to eat live food, they don't like it when the food fights back.

"Dammit Cat, why couldn't you just listen to me this one time," I muttered as I went through a plan in my head.

Fighting ghouls out in the open is difficult, but fighting ghouls in their den is food service. I would need to kill the two guards and lure the rest out

I took my bow off my shoulder and felt excitement stemming from the feeling of impending combat combined with the nerves of the consequence of failure.

Whenever I loose an arrow my breath gets trapped in my chest until the arrow finds its mark. The bow has always been the weapon I'm strongest at—save for my tongue, some would say. As a general rule if you catch me with my bow in my hand and no arrow knocked, you've probably noticed me too late.

As I readied my bow I wiped the sweat off my hands; the mix of stress, sun, and general shit swamp air had left them in the same condition as after overstaying in a warm bath. As I knocked the arrow onto my string and laid the shaft on my left forefinger, I eased my

breathing and stared intensely at my first target. I drew back my bow until my pointer and middle fingers touched the right side of my mouth, focused my aim on the first ghoul, then pointed the bow almost straight up and let loose the arrow.

The arrow sailed high through the air in an exaggerated arc, much like a swallow flying higher only to dive back down again at an unsuspecting fly. Before the first arrow could even begin its descent I went through the same ritual with instinctual speed and took a second shot. My heart was beating faster, but steady: I knew both arrows were hits before I lowered my bow.

The high arcing shot of the first arrow came down hard. It pierced the ghoul's throat and continued into its chest, burying itself up to the fletching. The ghoul writhed as it fell to the ground, choking on blood and trying desperately to gasp.

As the second ghoul turned to view its ill-fated denmate the second arrow struck hard. The arrow bore into the ghoul's skull, making a knocking sound like an acorn hitting an empty wooden barrel. It also sent up a spray of blood that signaled the strike. The ghoul instantly slumped in a heap of unmoving flesh, and moments later the other ghoul also stopped convulsing.

Well, two ghouls down and now just six dangerous and confined ghouls left in a pitch-black cave, probably in possession of a little girl who for their sakes had better not be hurt. I started to rise when a snapped branch to my left caught my attention. I swung my head in the direction of the noise as my eyes widened, but before I could even reach down to the knife on my calf two ghouls had barreled over me, sending me into a backward summersault.

All three of us fell to the ground and immediately struggled to be the first to get up. The quicker ghoul won the race and wrapped me in its arms, hurling me back down as its weight pinned my left arm between its chest and the ground. I threw my right arm over my shoulder, feverishly grabbing for an arrow though my hand found only a broken arrow with no fletching. In a blur, my hand began furiously stabbing at the ghoul's face and neck. The stabs of the arrow head opened up its flesh and an artery in its neck and blood pulsed out, coming down like warm red rain on my face.

My arms shook as I threw off the dying ghoul and leapt to my feet, somewhat surprised to be alone. I kicked the ghoul's side to make sure

he was dead: the blood on my face was warm and thick like red molasses and stunk like a pig wallow.

“Where did it go?” I said aloud as I looked around the grass.

Examining the tracks was like navigating a dizzying maze; I’d lost my bearings in the scuffle and there were too many tracks for me to quickly figure out which belonged to the ghoul.

I reached over my shoulder for my bow but came up empty. My quiver was empty as well. The broken arrow that now sat in the neck of the ghoul who’d tackled me must have been the only one to survive my fall. After quickly checking over my shoulder I saw my bow lying next to the broken arrows that littered the ground where the two ghouls had collided with me.

Before I could grab the bow a blur in my peripheral vision caught my attention. The ghoul dashed out of a bush a few yards in front of me heading for the cave and I instantly started sprinting after it, leaving my bow behind. While I gained speed I reached for my short sword bouncing in its sheath on my hip and with a little effort pulled it free.

As I closed the distance between us the ghoul started to panic. Its head whipped around to look at me and it began to gasp and grunt, first lightly, then gaining steadily in volume. I worried that if he kept this up he would alert the others.

As I drew close enough to almost grab the ghoul I took two big strides to the right and made a push off of the last rock in the clearing. In the midst of the jump I gripped both hands together tightly on my short sword with the pommel up and the blade down. The blade looked like a giant cat’s tooth coming down on a mouse, and with all of my weight I collapsed on top of the ghoul, burying my sword into its back between the shoulder blades. The weight of my attack stole the ghoul’s breath and the grunts and noises stopped at once. The force of the impact caused me to roll onto my side and slide just past the ghoul’s head when we hit the ground.

I quickly regained my footing and pulled my boot knife from its tiny sheath on my leg. Without hesitation I dispatched the ghoul, cutting its throat before it could muster any noise with its final breaths. With my chest burning and my limbs shaking, I wondered how this rescue mission could roll any further downhill.

Seashell Dreams

KAREN PELLICANO

The brush was curved like an egg and designed to fit neatly into a mother's hands. The soft white plastic bristles tickled and irritated most people, but the doctors had assured me that the sensation would calm his anxious body and organize his mind. So every night at bedtime, we brushed. Five times on the top of each arm, five times on the bottom, then the back, the shoulders, and finally his bug-bitten, scraped-up, eight-year-old legs.

"I HAVE TOO MANY THOUGHTS!" It wasn't a complaint as much as a plaintive cry. "I CAN'T CALM DOWN! I CAN'T."

"Can you pretend we're on a beach?" I asked. This was a new distraction, and I knew he'd play along. You could always count on Roger to play along.

"What kind of beach?" He was still bouncing, taking the brush and rubbing it first on his face and then mine, then he'd force himself to lay down and let me try brushing again. One...two...

"Ocean beach, with lots of sand...and a palm tree." I tugged his joints softly, another trick the physical therapist had taught me to release tension in his rubber-band body.

"There's not a palm tree on my beach," he objected. "Just sand...and a big rock I can dive off."

"Ok. Are there any people on your beach?" I asked, hoping that there was room on his beach for me.

"No. I'm alone. I like being alone, so it's just me. There aren't even any birds, it's just me and a rock and sand and waves."

"Ok, you're alone on the beach with your thoughts."

"THERE ARE TOO MANY THOUGHTS!" The panic came back; the thoughts were always there and it was clear he wanted a thought-free beach.

"Every thought is a seashell. Are there lots of seashells on your beach?"

"A million. A BILLION."

"Ok, so the beach is totally full of shells, right?" I was working on brushing his back now, making sure to keep my voice low and level.

He'd stopped trying to take the brush and had settled into the story about the beach.

"They're all over. There's no more room."

"Ok. Well, remember when we were at the beach and the waves came in and pulled all the stuff away? We had to swim out into the water to get my flip-flops because the ocean stole them, right?"

His body was starting to relax. I couldn't see his face, but I could feel him smile at the memory of his silly mom chasing two-dollar flip-flops through the surf. The brush was leaving soft red marks on his back and his voice was slowing down. Normally fast and frantic, at this time of night the brushing brought him down to a relaxed murmur. He nodded.

"Well, that's what waves do," I explained. "They clean the beach."

"They'll never get all the shells. There are too many shells. They'll fill up the whole ocean."

My next thought was inspired. My son was obsessed with the Discovery Channel and we'd recently watched a show about the Marianas trench, the deepest spot in the ocean. On the show we'd learned that the trench is so deep it keeps creating itself; the sides are too weak to support themselves so it's constantly getting deeper. "What was the name of that thing we watched on Discovery...about the deep spot in the ocean?"

"Mariana's trench. NOTHING can fill up the Marianas trench." He craned his neck around to look into my face, his chocolate-brown eyes grasping at the idea that maybe there was something bigger than his thoughts.

"Marianas trench," I agreed. "So, the ocean pulls away the shells and dumps them all into the trench."

He laid back down, sighing at the feeling of my hand on his back. I'd abandoned the brush; the doctors had warned me not to overuse it or it would have the opposite effect, stimulating him instead of relaxing him. Neither of us was ready to say goodnight—we were on to something and we both knew it.

"So, are there any thoughts you want to keep before the waves take them?" I offered.

"No. I don't want any of the thoughts. They make my head too busy."

"Well, can I take some of the thoughts? I want the thought about when you and your sister helped me make bread. I like that thought."

“I like that thought. That one can stay.” His voice was sleepy now, the impulsive energy of the day was finally fading into night.

“Ok. Any other Pia thoughts?” I asked. His sister was his favorite playmate, and surely he wanted those thoughts.

“The ice cream, I like that thought. When Pia and I got an ice cream after we got shots. And mine was mint and looked like a monster and hers was a clown and she gave me her whipped cream.”

“That’s a good thought. You should pick up that shell and move it away from the waves so you can keep it. Any other thoughts?”

“You and Dad. I want you and Dad in my thought pile.”

“Of course,” I agreed, silently thankful we’d made the cut.

“Mom, does your brain get busy like this?” He was talking through a yawn, mumbled and slightly slurred.

“My brain gets busy, but not like yours. You have a very special brain.”

“Autistic, right?” He stretched and burrowed deeper into his covers.

“That’s part of it, certainly,” I agreed. “But that’s not all. You’re creative and brilliant and as you get older you’re going to understand your brain better and it won’t be so frustrating.”

“Will it always be busy?” The panic was gone now; it was clear he was still having lots of thoughts but was sorting out the seashells into the piles he wanted and those that could be lost to the Marianas trench.

“Yeah. I think so.” I was playing in his hair now; there was bark in it and I realized he’d need another shower in the morning. He had the dirt and sod smell of an eight-year-old in the summer and I sat quietly and let the smell fill my memory. “But as you get older we’re going to figure out how to make it work for you instead of frustrating you.”

His eyes were closed, his breathing finally slowed. The red marks from the brush were still on his arms and back. “I want to keep the thought about when we went to feed the goats” was the last thing he said as he drifted off into sleep.

“That was a very good thought.” I kissed the back of his head and left him on the beach as I slipped out of his room.

from I Have Nothing to Say, but I'm
Going to Say It Anyway

KEN SKOBY

If I am here,
I must not be there.
If I am there,
I must not be here.
I may not be anywhere,
though pieces of me are everywhere.



I have;
it is not mine.
I live;
it is not mine.
I love;
It is not mine.



When you're lost,
your own footprint
Is exactly what you need to find.

The fragrance of a flower is beautiful;
But the sweetest part is the nectar within.



Such is the splendor of a friend.



Change is like a hummingbird
In the stillness of night.



Many may touch your body.
Many might touch your mind.
Some may touch your heart.
No one will touch your soul without permission

We have become numbers,
without faces or names.
We are easier to harm without guilt.
Please!
Tell me your name.



Once again,
I saw another disaster many people died.
The knot in my stomach wasn't there,

The heat and flush
of my face was absent.
The tears were not in my eyes.
Has this become so familiar I have no emotion?
Am I feeling this all the time?



I shall sit on this rock,
while my thoughts take a walk
and let my surroundings talk.

Contributors

Claudia Altemus's folktale fantasy fiction is influenced by her past lives as an environmental educator, children's librarian, and professional storyteller. She also draws inspiration from the stories passed down to her by her parents, her grandmother, and her aunts. She and her husband grow vegetables in the rich soil of the Merrimack River Valley where Claudia also plays lots of obnoxious, traditional Irish music with her friends. You can find out more about her work at claudiaaltemus.weebly.com or contact her at caltemus@gmail.com.

Cheryl Barnhart is a confectioner, genealogist, photographer, and writer. She loves writing fiction and is currently working on her first historical novel. Her piece "The Other Side" received second place in the 2017 NHWP Flash Fiction contest. She can be reached at cheryl68@aol.com or through her website, psweet.com.

Kevin Barrett (K. Dalton Barrett) is an award-winning playwright who recently published his first short story and is actively working on a novel, the opening of which is included in this anthology. He is active in local theater, primarily as one of the organizers of the Hatbox Theatre in Concord, but also as a director and actor. He also plays bass in a band called The Sherpa Lizz Expedition. (The story behind the name is too long for this bio.)

Josh Bresslin is a New Hampshire native. A lifelong fan of the suspense/horror genre, his works feature settings based in the New England area, and he's currently earning his master of fine arts in creative writing. He lives in Concord with his wife Sara, and you can find him on Twitter @Josh_Bresslin.

Gary Devore is an archaeologist and author. He has written a novel, *Pantheon*, and a guidebook to Rome entitled *Walking Tours of Ancient Rome*. He is currently working on a murder mystery set on Hadrian's Wall in the third century. He has been a lecturer at Stanford University and the University of California at Santa Cruz and directed archaeological projects in Italy and the UK. His work can be found at garydevore.com.

Angela (or Ang, but never Angie) **D’Onofrio** first wandered across the borders of Aviaro, Connecticut over fifteen years ago. As she came to know the town and its people, she started writing down everything she could. Angela is excited to show you around her home away from home and hopes it will become a special place for you, too. When she’s not spending time in Aviaro, she lives in New Hampshire with her wife and their menagerie of critters amid endless stashes of craft supplies. You can find the rest of *In The Cards* and more at angeladonofrio.com or follow her on Twitter @AngDonofrio or on Facebook (facebook.com/AviaroCT) and Instagram (instagram.com/aviario.ct).

Daniel Ellison was born and raised in Southern California. He attended the University of New Mexico majoring in anthropology and received his master’s degree from the University of Missouri. He served in the US Navy and the Peace Corps and is a retired probation/parole officer. His credits include a newspaper column, articles in *Runner’s World*, *Mother Earth News*, and *Walking*. He currently writes literary fiction and has completed three novels: *Dogspeak and the People of the Light*, *Lonepine on the Far Side of Vegas*, and *On Parole: A Promise of Good Behavior*. He lives with his family in Concord, New Hampshire and can be reached at ellison.daniel01@gmail.com.

DJ Geribo, self-published author and fine artist, pursued fine art for many years before deciding to focus on her writing. She has completed several children’s books as well as a nonfiction book. *Seven Storied Houses* is her first short story collection, and she is currently working on another collection of short stories as well as a novel. To purchase any of her books, go to BBDPublishing.com or DJGeribo.com where her artwork is also available. Selected books can also be purchased through Amazon.

Jonathan Hall lives a simple life on a small farm in rural New Hampshire. Combining his interest in history, antique vehicles, and discovering the meaning of life, he writes to capture what he has learned. **Pamela Hunt** is a biologist specializing in the ecology and conservation of birds and dragonflies, but writes fantasy fiction to keep her mind from getting too bogged down in reality. During the warmer months you might also find her dressed as a pirate, faerie, or wench and cavorting with friends at a nearby Renaissance faire. She lives in

Concord, New Hampshire and can be reached at biodiva@myfairpoint.net.

Polly Ingraham has been published in *The Boston Globe Magazine* and *Tikkun* and read her essay about being a hockey mom on National Public Radio. Her memoir, *First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Church* explains what happens when a woman raised without any recognizable religion marries a man called to become first an Episcopal priest, then a bishop. While they raise a family together, she must figure out what she believes and how to be her own version of a clergy wife. In 2011 she launched a blog called *The Panorama of a Pastor's Wife* at pastorswifeblog.com where she posts regularly for subscribers.

Wendy Jensen grew up in the United States, India, and Iran, landing finally in New Hampshire with her husband to practice homeopathy, play violin, and raise her children. She received her veterinary degree from Cornell in 1987. She's authored two nonfiction books on homeopathic veterinary medicine and is currently writing a novel about a young woman in the animal protection movement struggling to survive abuse in her own life. Wendy would love to hear from you at jensenhvp@gmail.com.

Nicholas James Lydon has been writing for several years and is currently working on a multinovel fantasy adventure series, of which this excerpt is the beginning of the first book. For inquiries, questions, and general banter he can be reached at his Facebook page (facebook.com/NicholasJamesTheWriter).

Thompson Parker is currently writing *New Hampshire*, a novel of short stories that follows the development of the Granite State from pre-colonial times to the present day. "A King's Pine" is an excerpt from this manuscript. He is a member of the New Hampshire Historical Society in addition to the New Hampshire Writers' Project, and is also the author of the epic fantasy novel *The Phalanx of Faith*, available through Amazon. He lives in Bow and can be reached at thompson.g.parker@gmail.com.

Stephen Pascucci grew up inspired by the imaginations of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ed Greenwood, and R.A. Salvatore, among others. He

was convinced for many years that writing was for others and that his ideas weren't worth spending time on, then one day he took a chance and began pouring his imagination onto blank pages that became the Kesan trilogy. Readers can enjoy *Return to Kesan* followed by the emotional *The Star of Kaymren* and concluding with the intense *The Amaranthine Fire*. Stephen can be reached at stephen_pascucci@hotmail.com.

Karen Pellicano, originally from Spokane, Washington, currently lives in Hillsboro, New Hampshire. Karen enjoys baking artisan bread because of the care and time it takes to transform ingredients into food to be shared with family and friends. She has been writing for many years and has periodically published pieces in magazines, but primarily writes as a form of self-expression.

Ian Rogers believes in the power of art and literature to make people's lives better, and putting this anthology together is a small step toward making that happen. He's a graduate of Bennington College and the University of Nebraska, and his fiction and essays have appeared in *The Millions*, *Eastlit*, *The Drunken Odyssey*, and Blue Cubicle Press's *Overtime* series. Originally from Warner, New Hampshire, he currently teaches English in the Toyama region of Japan and blogs about the lives of creative people at butialsohaveadayjob.com.

Carole Soule is co-owner of Miles Smith Farm in Loudon, New Hampshire, where she raises and sells beef, pork, lamb, eggs, and other local products. When she is not chasing loose cows or pigs she can be reached at cas@milesmithfarm.com, and her weekly blogs about farm life can be found at milesmithfarm.com.

Piper Tallis has been developing ideas and stories based in the science fiction and historical fantasy genres since childhood. She is a member of the New Hampshire Writers' Project and is currently completing her first novel. Piper and her husband live in New Hampshire with their menagerie of animals, and she can be reached either through Facebook at facebook.com/piper.tallis.writer or via email at pipertallisnh@gmail.com.

Patricia S. Wild is an artist, writer, workshop leader, and retired professor. She has completed her first novel and begun work on her second, in addition to a series of nonfiction books on the artmaking process. She has been published in journals, newspapers, and a Boston arts magazine, and occasionally exhibits her own artwork. She is also a voracious reader, an avid lifelong learner, a rusty pianist, and an occasional traveler, and has exceptional napping skills. Her website is spiralartsforlife.com.

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